

K WEBSTER
J.D. HOLLYFIELD

CONHEARTISTS

He stole
the girl and her dog...
but they stole
his heart.

CON MAN

CAPTIVE

MR. BING



CONHEARTISTS



K WEBSTER
J.D. HOLLYFIELD

Conheartists

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*To Dennis—the real MVP—for showing us that top circles are real...
#aliensinkansas*

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Sheltered from the real world, Francis lives off Hollywood magazines, Lean Cuisines, and her secret obsession with romance novels. When her best friends set her up on an adventure of a lifetime, she's more than willing to play along. A trip cross-country with a super hunky guy who smells like sin and excitement.

Being a con man has been a way of life for Luca. But his swindling ways eventually catch up to him. He's been given a wicked task: kidnap a woman and deliver her to the villain.

Sounds easy. Until he meets her...

Captive: We're getting out of Kansas, Toto!

Mr. Bing: Yap! Yap!

Con Man: Why are the crazy ones always hot?

⋮

CHAPTER ONE

Luca

LIKE ROBIN HOOD

I failed.

I fucking failed.

For someone like me, it's a tough pill to swallow. I'm not the man who screws up. I'm the man who screws people over. It's what I'm really good at. Some would call me legendary. The best con artist of the country. Of the century. Had my life been different, perhaps I would've taken all those skills and become an actor. I mean, I had the opportunities at my fingertips. Los Angeles is my home. I've got the looks—killer smile and fit as fuck. I'm tenacious as hell. Goals...I smash 'em.

But I was never a patient man.

Waiting for that big break was like watching water boil on a stove or paint drying. Fucking boring. The inner fire inside me burns bright and endless. I can't sit still. When I want something, I take action.

So all this acting shit, I do it all right.

And I make a helluva lot of money depending on the job.

Problem is, it's illegal.

Dangerous.

Stupid as hell.

But, goddamn, it gives me a thrill like no other.

I was pretty sure I was going to retire early. Live in the lap of luxury—just like all the Hollywood stars. My dreams were like anyone else's.

Until I got greedy.

I wanted too much, too fast.

Because of her.

The center of my universe.

My baby sister Lindsay and my niece Cala.

Leaning my temple against the cold glass in the back of the squad car has a chill of realization seeping through me. I shouldn't be here. All the way across country in Atlantic City, New Jersey. I thought I could pull off the biggest con of my career.

It'd worked in Vegas last month. On a much smaller scale, of course. I'd suited up in my best clothes and worked over those casinos—the rich men and women were so easy to outsmart. It made me greedy. I thought I could travel to New Jersey where no one knew me, swindle those dumb fucks' money and jewelry out of their drunk and gambling hands, and be out of there before anyone knew what hit them.

But I fucked with the wrong guy.

Not just some mark with a glitzy Rolex and Bentley.

No, it had to be Arlo Rossi.

How the hell was I supposed to know he was a motherfucking mob boss?

I mean, the gold rings on his fingers could have been my first clue. Or, maybe even the entourage of suited goons who surrounded him. And if I'm really thinking about it, it could have clued me in when the entire casino and everyone in it seemed to bow at his Italian leather shoe-covered feet.

He was supposed to be some rich mark.

Someone whom I could easily rip off.

And, damn, I really wanted that car.

"I'm sorry, sir," the officer who arrested me grinds out to one of Rossi's henchmen. "He is in official police custody."

The henchman growls out the Rossi name as though this will have him handing me right back to him, but this young officer seems unimpressed. At least luck is on my side. If it weren't for someone calling the police when Rossi's men chased me through the casino, I'd be in a basement somewhere having my toenails pulled off with pliers—a vat of acid just waiting to consume my flesh and bones.

I let out a sigh of relief. Most men wouldn't be relieved knowing once this cop pulls up my mile-long rap sheet, I'll be in a heap of trouble. Most men would know they'd be facing some hard time in the pen.

I may have gotten caught, but I'm not stupid.

All I need is one call.

I'll tell Lindsay where the money I've stashed away is, and then she can stop taking off her clothes to feed her daughter. I do my best to help my sister, even though she hates accepting it. But sometimes she has no choice. When money is tight and her four-year-old needs to eat, my "criminal" money comes in handy. On those days, she doesn't argue. Once I get my phone call, I'll tell her the location in a bus station locker in New York City and she can take what I've earned on this trip. It'll help her and Cala get settled someplace. A fresh start. Maybe even a little house with a yard. She can stop dating assholes who like to rough her up, and she can keep her fucking clothes on.

The money won't last forever.

I just hope it lasts long enough for my sister to get out of the hole life thrust her in and give her a fighting chance at something better. It's a fucking shame I won't be around to see it.

The officer climbs into the squad car grumbling. He ignores Rossi's men, much to my relief, and takes off. The Armani suit I'd swiped from one of the shops near the casino feels stiff and unwelcome on my body. I long for some sweats and a hoodie. I long to crawl into that crummy bed with the lumpy mattress back at the motel and sleep for a week. I long to pick up a woman to get lost in for the evening and then eat the hell out of the endless buffet breakfast at one of the casinos I'd passed by earlier today.

None of that will happen.

Soon, I'll be booked in the county jail. And then...then it only goes downhill from there. I'm sure the FBI will be all over this case. I've only been toying with them for the past seven years. When our mom OD'd on heroin and left my fifteen-year-old sister without a home, I'd started my life of crime. At just twenty at the time, I did what I had to do to provide for her. I've been a wanted fugitive with the FBI ever since.

It's annoying, really.

It's not like I hurt people.

I just relieve them of their extra shit.

Kind of like Robin Hood. Except, I rob to stay out of the hood. I take from the wealthy and give to the poor. The poor being me, Lindsay, and Cala.

My chest aches thinking about Cala. Sweet Cala with the biggest green eyes in the world. Her skin is the color of caramel and she has the kinkiest dark brown curls I've ever seen. Now that kid can make it the legitimate

way one day in Hollywood. She's going to grow up to be more gorgeous than her mother. And Lindsay, she's a looker. I'm her fucking brother and I've beat enough asses to keep them off her tail to know this. When she had a fling with a rapper staying in LA for a few days as part of a tour, he left her with a present. Knocked my sister up at a party before she was even able to buy alcohol. Lindsay didn't bother chasing his ass down and demanding child support. Instead, she had Cala and then did what she had to do to take care of her.

If she'd ever tell me that motherfucker's name, I'd pay his manwhore ass a visit. Unfortunately, that's something she has never revealed to me. I don't think she ever will.

I'm lost in thoughts about my niece and how her giggles are good for the damn soul when a squeal of tires demands my attention. I jerk my head around to look behind us in the glass. A black, discreet SUV barrels behind us.

Oh, shit.

"I think that's Rossi's guys," I tell the cop.

His brows furrow in the rearview mirror, but he doesn't respond. He gasses the squad car and I'm thrown back against the seat. When he reaches for his radio, the SUV slams into us from behind. The cop barely has time to recover before we're hit again. My head bounces off the headrest and when the car makes a sharp turn, I'm thrown against the door, bruising my shoulder. We're slammed into again, harder this time, until we start spinning.

Screeching tires.

Crunching metal.

My head pops the glass and darkness floods my vision.

Seconds, maybe minutes, of confusion blur by. I'm just coming back to enough to realize the vehicle has stopped. The side door gets flung open, but instead of the cop standing there, it's one of Rossi's goons.

Fuckity fuck fuck fuck.

"Long time, no see, asshole," I say, swinging my leg out to kick him right in the gut.

My move takes him by surprise and he stumbles away, heaving for air. The cop bursts from the front, swinging his gun toward the two men who've come for me.

"Stop right there!" the cop bellows.

But they don't stop.

They're fucking mobsters, for fuck's sake.

The one behind the guy holding his stomach reaches into his front pocket.

Pop! Pop!

He goes down, clutching his chest as blood blooms from the bullet holes. Stomach Guy recovers from my kick and whips a gun toward the cop.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Bullets fly everywhere and grunts can be heard. I clamber out of the vehicle and survey the scene. The goons are fucking dead. Cop has good aim.

"Unhhh," the cop groans.

He's fallen to his knees and clutches his neck that gushes with blood.

"Fuck," I cry out. "Fuck."

Running over to him, I attempt to assess the damage, which is really hard to do with my hands cuffed behind me. The guy was only doing his job. He doesn't deserve to go down like this. And, goddamn, he's going down. His hand falls away and I cringe. The bullet tore through the side of his throat and his carotid spurts blood like a damn fountain. There's no saving him.

But I can save me.

He slumps over as he bleeds the rest of the way out. Awkwardly, I turn my back to his belt and feel around for his keys. Once I yank them from his belt, it takes some finagling, not to mention almost popping my shoulder out of its socket, them being tied behind my back, but I manage to locate the handcuff key and free myself.

A phone rings nearby and I realize it belongs to one of Rossi's men. Quickly, I rush over to him, steal his gun and phone, and then get the hell out of there.

It's not the first time I've had to run from a bad situation.

In fact, it's what I spend a good deal of my time doing.

It's what keeps me in shape.

But at twenty-seven, I'm starting to feel my age. My lungs scream in protest as I run as fast as I can through the city streets. I duck behind cars, take pitch-black dark alleys, hide in the shadows. Sirens can be heard in the distance, but I ignore them. They won't find me now. I'll grab my shit from

the motel and then I'll be on my way back to LA within an hour. In forty-two hours, give or take, I'll drag my exhausted ass into my bed and sleep for a week.

Goals.

That's mine.

Fucking sleep for a week.

I'm nearly to the motel when the phone in my pocket rings again. Pulling it out, I answer on the first ring.

"Rossi," I growl in greeting.

The voice on the other end is deep and husky as he chuckles. "No, Luca, this is not Rossi."

"Who is this?" I demand. One thing's for sure, no one knows my name. The police would have found out eventually when they fingerprinted me, but my fake IDs—and as far as Rossi's men were concerned—all say I'm Levi Greene.

"You may call me Mr. Death."

What the actual fuck?

I scrub my palm down the front of my face as exhaustion seeps into me. "Wrong number, asswipe."

I hear some shuffling on the other line and then I hear something that freezes every part of my body down to the marrow in my bones.

Chattering.

Cute, adorable chattering.

Familiar chattering.

My niece.

"Cala here says I have the right number."

A beat of horrible silence.

"How did you get this number?" This feels like a fucking setup. *I* don't even have this number. I picked it up off a dead guy.

"I have my ways," he snarls. "I know everything about everyone. Including you. Especially you."

"What do you want?" I demand, my grip on the phone nearly crushing it.

He chuckles, haunting my fucking soul. "I want you to do exactly as I say. You give me what I want, and I give you what you want."

Lindsay cries out in the background. "Do what he says, Luca! Please!"

"Name it," I growl. "Just don't fucking touch my family."

“I’m going to text you an address and a phone number. Get rid of this phone. They can trace it. Once you have a burner phone, call me back. You have three hours to make this call or I start cutting fingers off a certain little girl.”

Bile rises up in my throat and my world spins around me. “I have a burner phone in my motel room. I’m almost there.”

“Good. Save the address and save the number.”

“That’s it?”

His laugh is sinister. “Of course that’s not it. This is just the beginning, con man. I have a very important job for you and it needs to happen quickly. I want something Arlo Rossi wants. And you’re going to acquire it for me before he has an opportunity. You have three hours to go to the address and get me what I want. Before those three hours are up, I want proof you’ve got what I asked for. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

“And if you fail—”

I don’t let him finish. “I won’t fail.”

The line goes dead and then the phone buzzes in my hand with a text.

An address—just over a two-hour drive from Atlantic City. A phone number. And a name. He wants a fucking person.

Holy shit.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to talk myself out of what I’m about to do. But Cala’s big green eyes are forefront in my mind. Her little caramel-colored fingers as she counts to ten make me cringe, because the thought of them covered in blood sickens me.

I’ll be goddamned if I let this motherfucker hurt one hair on Cala’s head.

Even if it means kidnapping someone.

CHAPTER TWO

Francis

MAYBE IT'S NOT THE SIZE THAT MATTERS

His strong hands, ruthless and hungry for her virgin flesh, work their way up her silky-smooth leg, his calloused fingers finding her bare of any undergarments. “Naughty little girl, aren’t you? Makin’ it easier for Daddy to get to that puss—”

“Dear Lord.” I slam the book closed. My breathing hitches, and I’m embarrassed to feel the spike in temperature on my cheeks. What kind of book did Beatrice lend me? I raise my head and look around the storage room of Corleone’s Trinkets and Treasures, my antique shop, making sure no one’s watching me. A little bit ashamed, but more intrigued, I reopen the book.

Christina knows she should push his hand away. Fight him and run for her freedom. But her desires swirling deep inside her override the urge to be set free from her captor. “My pussy has been bad and needs to be punished. Filled and beaten—”

“Oh holy heavens!” The book is once again shut. How does one beat up a...pussy and enjoy it? Confused, and overly concerned for the poor girl and her lady parts, I flip the book back open.

“Make me beg, Daddy.” An evil darkness blares from his dark hazel eyes, casting a cloud of nerves around her. Her pussy throbs as he stares down at her, the hunger in his gaze causing a wave of moistness between her young, quivering thighs. She thought about how big he was. Would he fit in her tiny opening? In her small heart-shaped mouth? Would he taste like male dominance and forbidden fantasies? Her lust for curiosity wasn’t going to stop the fact that he was an outlaw. Wanted for the murder of—

“Frannie!” Mabel’s—my grouchy employee, and oldest friend—voice echoes through the small storage room and I panic, dropping the book. I say oldest because she’s hitting seventy. “Put that smut book away and get back up here! We have customers!”

“Oh, crudsville.” I bend down to pick it up and sigh, knowing that I’ll have to wait to see what happens to the poor girl and her soon-to-be beaten lady business.

I stuff the romance novel back into my satchel and make my way into the front of my shop. Up until a year ago, Corleone’s used to be my momma’s shop, but last year ovarian cancer swept through our lives like a hurricane and took her life. Now, I run it with the help of Mabel. Never in a million years would I have guessed at the age of twenty-two I’d be an owner of my own store, but I also wouldn’t have guessed I’d be a wallflower, living in a borough with a population of sixty-nine—not including animals—in a lonely house once filled with laughter when Momma was alive and pining over romance books and Hollywood gossip stories. But as Momma used to say, “we have our health and our brains. Be thankful and rejoice.” If *I* had a saying, it’d be “we have our Gucci dresses and Valentino pumps. Be thankful we’re so darn stunning, just like what the famous actresses wear in the tabloid magazines.”

Instead, I brush off the crumbs of my peanut butter and jelly sandwich I just devoured from my worn flowered dress and get back to work. As usual, there are a few people wandering the store. I wave at Beatrice, Mabel’s twin sister and the one to blame for my addiction to reading inappropriate books. She’s in her usual section, right by the glass figurines.

“Anything come in this week that fits your fancy there, Beatrice?” I walk around the register, stuffing my bag underneath the counter.

“Oh, you know, I have my eye on this parrot thingy. Ain’t seen a parrot in ages.”

Considering we live in Teterboro, a tiny crevice in the middle of nowhere, New Jersey, I can’t say she’s *ever* seen a parrot. We certainly don’t have them in *this* small, nonexistent spot on the map.

I always wondered why we lived where we lived. Anytime I ever asked Momma why she chose Teterboro, her answer was always the same, “Bergen County is safe, practical, and not even a blip on a map. A perfect place to be forgotten.” Sometimes I wish we were a blip so we’d have just one ounce of excitement around here. I don’t want to be forgotten.

“Well, that’s just fantastic, Bea. We’re running a special today, too. Buy two glass figurines, get ten percent off your next visit.”

Her eyes widen with delight. Normally, our Thursday sale is five percent, but Mabel convinced me giving a little bit more off wouldn’t hurt and would help bring in more customers. Not that it matters since she’ll still ask for Mabel’s employee discount on top of the sale and get it for less than what I bought it for at cost.

“I see a few new cat ones, too, on the other side. Let me know if you need assistance, okay?” I smile and grab my clipboard and start making my evening rounds around the antique shop.

We seem to be running low on ceramic bowls. *Write that down.*

Overstock on comic books. *Take off order request.*

No one’s even glanced an eye at the miniature die-cast classic cars. *Stop all future orders.*

Ding-a-ling.

“Welcome to Corleone’s Trinkets and Treasures. Make me an offer I can’t refuse and it’s yours.” I pull my eyes away from my clipboard, while checking off another *do not order* item, to see Henry Weatherstone, our local barber, walking in.

“Well, what a lovely surprise,” I chirp. “What brings you in today, Henry?” Not that I even need to ask. He’s had his eye on Beatrice since they were high school sweethearts fifty years ago. Beatrice, young and naive, gave in to her weak heart and married while Henry was off to war, breaking his. When he returned from Vietnam to find her married, he never recovered. He never married himself, and since Beatrice’s husband died some years ago, he’s been giving it his all to win her back.

“Just lookin’ for something to keep me cozy at night, Frannie.” He peeks over at Bea. “You got anything that would soothe an old man’s heart?”

I take a glance at Bea, who’s blushing like a schoolgirl, even though she’s hitting seventy.

“Well, Henry. I *did* get some old romance novels in. A classic. Jane Austen.” I say it loud enough for Beatrice to hear, which does the trick, because I watch her ears perk from an aisle away.

“Now wait,” Bea grumbles. “If you got any Jane Austens, those are mine. Henry over there don’t need none of those.”

Henry laughs, knowing Beatrice and her love for books, and uses it as his opportunity to make conversation. “Well, well. Maybe I can lend it to you sometime. Or, you can come over tonight. I make an amazing meatloaf. We can read it together.”

My heart warms at the two of them. I know Beatrice has it bad for Henry. She doesn’t come in Corleone’s twice a week, maybe three times, asking if we have any military plaques in because she is actually interested in them. She does it to impress Henry. To be honest, I’m not sure why they haven’t just come together already.

“Oh, here we go. I know that look. What cheesy daydream you into now?”

I turn to Mabel, her red lipstick gaudy, but looking fantastic on her. “And what possibly could I be doing?” I wink at Henry and scribble on my chart that our need for ceramic pigs is nonexistent.

“Oh, you know! That look. The one you get when you’ve been readin’ them romance books. The saving. The matchmakin’. All that nonsense. My sister don’t need that. She needs a knock over the head.”

“A knock? I’d think maybe she would need a push? They seem perfect together. A lifelong separation finally bringing them together.” I sigh happily.

“Oh, dear baby Jesus, not this again. You’re so warped in those books you read. Leave my batshit crazy sister alone. What she needs is new batteries to her 1950s vibrator and to stop filling her head with nonsense books.”

I laugh, brushing off Mabel’s refusal that her sister may have found happiness, worried she’ll ditch her and be all alone. “Whatever you say, Mabel,” I joke, just as Beatrice joins us.

“Someone say my name?” Bea asks, holding the cat figurine.

“Yeah, been telling Frannie here to stop falling for all those fairytale books you give her.”

Beatrice’s eyes light up as she stares at me. “You start the outlaw one?”

I’m embarrassed to admit I have, but the way my cheeks warm up, she knows.

“Thatta girl. What part you on? He get all up in her yet?”

“Beatrice!” I slap her shoulder.

“Who’s getting up in what?” Henry walks up.

“Nothing!” I yelp before Beatrice sells me out.

“Gave Frannie a real smut book. The bad guy does a number on the girl’s—”

“Heart!” I squeak out. “Such a romantic—”

“I was going to say—”

“That meatloaf sounds amazing. You going to accept Henry’s offer, Bea?” I blurt out, cutting her off. That shuts her up. Her face falls and that schoolgirl blush sets in.

The sound of the door chime echoes throughout the shop and I look up to see Jude, our weekly delivery boy, picking up orders to ship and drop off. Mabel is still shaking her head at me as I greet him.

“Hey there, Jude. Got anything good for me today?” I ask as he sets a few small boxes down.

“No, but I do have a large order that came in for you, and this...” He hands me a rectangular package. “I saw it at a video shop a town over last weekend while visiting my girlfriend. Thought it could use a good home.”

My brows go up, feeling the package. He nods for me to open it and I do. The cover to the VHS has me smiling instantly from ear to ear. “Is this...”

“It’s one of his most recent videos. Well, at least the ones before they went to DVD.”

I stare down at the tape, my heart doing a double flip at Richard. “Jude, this is... How much do I—”

“Don’t worry about it. Consider it a gift.” He smiles back at me. I can’t seem to hold in my excitement, and I throw my arms around him, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you. I’m going to pop this in as soon as I get home.”

“What you gonna pop in?” Beatrice comes out of nowhere, that mischievous smile taunting me.

“Nothing, I was just saying—”

“‘Cause if you’re poppin’,” Bea suggests to Jude, “Frannie over here can use a good beatin’ in the—”

“What we talkin’ about over here?” Henry pipes up.

“Nothing!” I cry out. “Jude was just leaving and Beatrice was—”

“Trying to get Jude over here to put his—”

“Am I the only one workin’ here today?” Mabel steps in.

I hurry and spin Jude, pushing him toward the exit before he gets more than he bargained for. I thank him for the video and with a light shove, he

stumbles down the front step. I slam the door, throwing my back against it.

“Well, that was rude. There was potential there,” Beatrice grumbles.

“Bea, for starters,” I argue, “he has a girlfriend.”

“Pfft. Means nothin’. He wants you. He brings you gifts every week. He wants to hit that.”

“Bea!” I snap.

Mabel shakes her head. “First off, this one would have to get her nose out of those books. Can’t do it with a book.”

I cover my eyes with my hands.

“Well, then she should do it with Jude,” Bea says. “I bet he has a big one.”

Henry grumbles next to us. “Maybe it’s not the size that matters.”

Oh heavens.

“Maybe the girlfriend wants in too,” Bea says, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Fulfill that ménage fantasy of yours. You know, in that outlaw book he gets with—”

“Wait, you have a ménage fantasy?” Mabel turns to me, asking.

I shake my head. How did this get so out of hand? “No! It’s the book Bea gave me.”

“Oh goodie, so you *are* reading it!” Bea cheers. “It’ll have you in a cold shower or finding anything and everything in your house that vibrates.”

“Wow, *everything*?” Mabel chimes in with sudden interest.

“You know there are men who would help do that if you wanted,” Henry grumbles.

“That’s it! This conversation is over,” I snip at them. “I need to get back to work. Customers need help.”

We all look around the empty shop, minus the four of us.

Darn it.

“Okay, well, I need to finish inventory and Jude said we got another huge order in.” I wave my hand around at the big shipment, which are two small boxes, and throw my hand down. Huffing, and still gripping onto my VHS, I start walking away when Beatrice grabs my attention.

“Honey, he’s into you. Ask him out. Do something crazy for once. You can’t just live your life being cooped up in this shop, in this town. Your best friend is fifty years older than you and watching paint dry is more exciting than hangin’ out with her. This can’t be your entire life.”

I turn around to see all three staring back at me. I want to ask them who died, since they all look so sullen, but I figure it out myself. My life. My social life, love life, anything life. It's dormant. It might as well *be* dead.

"Guys, I'm fine. I'm happy. I love the shop. I love you all. And I have Chandler. He keeps me company and warm at night."

"What, you plan on fulfilling that *ménage* with Chandler and Richard?" Beatrice asks and Mabel laughs, but catches herself and shoves her elbow into her sister's arm. "*Ouch*, ya old hag! You might be older by a minute, but I'll still drop kick your ass. I'm right. She needs to get out. Take an adventure. Enjoy life. Be spontaneous. Shit, she needs to get laid!"

Three mouths drop. Mine being one of them. "Bea, my sex life is none of anyone's business."

"Girl, fine, but *have* a sex life. You're a twenty-two-year-old spinster. Ever since your momma died, you've been on auto drive. It's like you just took over her life."

"That's not true," I argue.

"Isn't that your momma's dress?"

I look down. It is. "This was her favorite."

"Hers! Not yours. I get it. You miss her. We all do. But she would not want this for you. She wouldn't want you to be alone. You're still so sad all the time. We see it. Even Henry sees it!"

I turn to Henry and with sad eyes, he nods. Traitor.

"Listen, girl. Use that money your momma saved for you. Go take a cruise. Rent a car and drive to another state. Do something crazy. Just get out of here and stop spending every waking minute with us old people!"

"Hey! Speak for yourself, I ain't old," Mabel snaps.

"Sister, you're old. No matter how red them lips are." She swats her sister's snarl away and turns her attention back on me. "I don't give you those books for you to lose yourself in them. I do it so you'll know what to do when you finally get yourself under a man."

I gasp at her vulgar words. "Bea!" I warn her.

Henry turns to her. "What exactly *do* you learn from those books?"

Another head shake. I can't take any more.

"Everyone. It's time to go. Mabel, thanks for closing up the shop."

Mabel gives me the *I wasn't planning on closing the shop* look, and I turn my attention to Henry. "Henry, Beatrice would love to have meatloaf with you and read together tonight. She's a sucker for a good Manhattan,

and naughty talkin' is her favorite foreplay. With that note, I'm heading home." I dismiss the shocked, yet angry eyes Beatrice beams at me, and I turn around, a smile creeping on my face. I feel a small victory for myself as I grab my bag and leave for home.

The four blocks it takes me to walk home, my mind slips away to thoughts of Momma. Her death was sudden. She'd not been feeling well and finally after some pushing from us all, she went to the doctor. She was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer. The kind they can't save. She died just shy of my twenty-first birthday. We had been saving up to take a trip. From all the large orders that came through the shop, Momma would save, and when I turned twenty-one, she promised to take me to New York since I'd been begging for as long as I could remember. I'd read all about the Big Apple and all the celebrities who lived there. Just a hop across the Hudson River. So close, yet so far away. I'd dreamed about walking through Manhattan, shopping and eating fancy food that wasn't fried fish or tomato pie. But that never happened. She kept putting it off, promising a glamorous trip one day. Go big or go home. The trip would always be a silly dream. Her health took a turn so fast, we didn't even have time to prepare.

She died a month later.

And at the young age of twenty-one, I was an orphan. My dad died when I was a baby. That's how we ended up in Teterboro. When I was younger, I'd always grill her on stories, anything about my dad so I could feel as if I knew him. But the older I got, the more I sensed how sad it made her to talk about him. So, eventually, I stopped.

After she died, I got ownership of the antique shop. Mabel had been working there since Momma bought it back in '99 and never left. I was thankful since she knew the shop like the back of her hand.

The comment Bea made about my clothing has me looking down and frowning. I've always loved this dress. My momma looked so beautiful in it. Her dark brown hair, lying to the middle of her back. Wearing it always made me feel closer to her. But now, glancing over the material, I just feel...feel... "Frumpy."

Darn it! Is Bea right?

I rehash the last twenty-two years of my life and try to pick out the best parts of it. They've all been with my momma. She loved me so much, but now, it's just me, my stupid romance books, and Chandler. Just the thought

of him makes me smile. He's been with me for four years, and I can honestly say he's the love of my life. He's sweet and gentle and caring. I couldn't picture my life without him. *Well, him and Richard.* I laugh to myself.

I walk up my porch steps and stick the key in the door. Not that I ever need to lock it, since there hasn't been a crime in this town in like ever. They'd have to find it on the map first.

The second the bell I have wrapped around the doorknob jingles, Chandler is up and out of his chair, greeting me with the spunk and happiness of a pampered king.

"Hey, my little man. Miss me today?"

Chandler wags his tail, eagerly awaiting my arms. I bend down and scoop him up, letting him lick my entire face.

"That's a good boy. Has my baby been a good boy?"

He yaps twice, telling me he has, and continues his lick fest.

"That's good. Lookie what I have. Mr. Jude gave us the best gift today," I say and put Chandler on the ground, pulling out the VHS and showing the cover to the most precious black and white Chihuahua to ever walk this earth. His tail wags faster and he yaps three times, letting me know he's just as excited to watch.

"I know. Dinner first, though, okay? Then we can watch the tape. Richard doesn't want us to have an empty stomach when he works us." I pat his back and he follows me into the kitchen. I open my freezer and get that excited feeling when I take in my fully stocked freezer. I read once in a tabloid magazine that the newest craze was microwave healthy meals. They didn't sell them at our local grocer, but when I told Jude about what I'd learned, he told me I could order them online. And lo and behold, I could.

Thankfully, he wasn't in a hurry that day and came back to the office and helped me order. Lean Cuisines. They came in so many different flavors and meals, I was beside myself. I was going to eat just like the celebrities did. When they finally arrived, I panicked realizing I didn't have a large enough freezer for them all. Thank God Mabel offered to store the rest in her basement freezer.

Tonight is mac and cheese night. My favorite. I pull the little container from the freezer and follow the directions. Tear corner seal, but I think it tastes better when you poke it in the middle instead, and then heat. Voila!

While dinner cooks, I head back into my room and change into my workout leotard. It's a used one from the thrift shop down the street, definitely from the eighties, but it fits, and I actually love it. Heading back into the living room, I can't hold in my excitement as I tear the plastic from the VHS. "You're a beauty," I say to the box, shocked it's never even been opened. I pop the tape into my recorder and the moment Richard appears, Chandler jumps onto the couch, ready and waiting.

Just as I press play, a loud sound explodes from the front porch. I drop the remote, startled, and look at Chandler, who's growling at the front door.

"What in the heavens was that?" I ask the dog as if he's gonna tell me. "One bark for hot outlaw dropping from the sky. Bark twice if it's just those darn squirrels taunting you again." I laugh. It seems quiet again, so I take it as squirrels, and I pick up the remote to rewind what we missed. Can't have us missing the intro of Richard's motivational speeches.

The next sound is of splintering wood. That being my door. Chandler goes berserk, baring his teeth as he jumps off the couch and prepares for battle. I'm not sure what to do since I have no idea what's happening. My door is clearly being beaten down, but how? Why?

Snap out of it, Francis!

"Umm, hello?" I say out loud, like a nitwit. I don't get a response and the door continues to get attacked. "Um, hi. Are you sure you have the right house? I wasn't expecting anyone." This seems a little much since I could have just opened it. Another loud slice and I jump back, hitting the side of my dinner tray, knocking it over. I throw my hands over my heart and exhale, thankful my meal wasn't already on it. I'm down to my last two mac and cheese—

"Oww!" I yelp, when the frame splinters and the door comes flying in, nearly breaking it from the hinges and just about killing my dog in the process. My head whips to the giant man now standing in my doorway, holding a crowbar and a murderous expression.

"Are you Francis Connor?" the scary man growls. He's not only scary, but huge. The guy seems super angry, but it suits him. Makes his cheekbones stand out. His black shirt is fitted. Tight around his pecks and his shoulders—

"I asked you a question."

Shoot! I pull my naughty eyes from where they shouldn't be to meet his intense green eyes. My skin crawls with goose bumps at the way he's

staring at me. “Yes, yes. I’m Francis. You can call me Frannie. Would you like to come in?”

What? I want to smack myself in the head. Clearly he wants to come in, he just broke down your door to do so! And hello! He just. Broke. Down. Your. Door!

Right. I should run. Call for help. Why aren’t my legs moving?

“No,” he growls. “But you’re coming with me. Fight me, and I hurt you. Do this my way and no one gets hurt.”

Now I’m confused. Why would anyone get hurt... Wait, is he *kidnapping* me? I smile, then start to giggle. “Did Beatrice put you up to this?”

“The fuck?”

“I get it. The whole outlaw coming to take me on an adventure. She put you up to this!”

His expression darkens and I jump again when he tosses the crowbar onto the floor. “I don’t know who the hell Beatrice is, but you’ve got the wrong idea.” He runs his fingers through his jet-black hair and uncertainty flickers in his gaze. I knew it. She did!

“Let’s go, lady,” he grinds out. “If you don’t do as I say, I’m going to tie your ass up and gag you. Now let’s fucking go. I don’t have time for this shit. I’m on a deadline.”

His foul language is a bit much for me, but I like it. It reminds me of the outlaw in my book. And just like him, the man in front of me is large, angry, and looks like he can give a good hoo-haw beatin’. I throw my hands over my giggling mouth at the extremely inappropriate thought.

Jesus, Francis. Get ahold of yourself!

Beatrice’s words start to repeat in my head.

Take an adventure. Enjoy life. Be spontaneous. Get laid.

Maybe this is where I finally give in. Do something out of my norm. Live. I look back at the man who’s really doing a good acting job because he sure does look seconds away from tying me up and gagging me. I decide yes. I’m gonna go for it.

“Okay! I’ll do it. I’ll go with you!” I smile. He still looks scary angry, but confused. “But we need to pack a few things... Oh! And Chandler comes with or no deal.” He looks around, wondering what I’m referring to, until his eyes land on my dog.

“Oh, fuck no.”

CHAPTER THREE

Luca

I'M THE VILLAIN

I need to call this motherfucker—*Mr. Death*—in less than twenty minutes. My time is running out. A wreck on the highway held me up and I went apeshit, driving over the median and giving my stolen car a flat in the process. I barely made it to this crappy little town and to this chick's house.

But I did.

That's all that matters.

I'm going to snag her and get the hell out of here.

That creep won't hurt my family.

Problem is, I've never done this before. Stealing someone. I didn't expect the girl to be so...compliant.

And weird.

Whatever, I'll gag her and tie her up just like I said if I have to. I'll do anything to save Lindsay and Cala.

"Is it sunny where we're going, outlaw?" she asks, scrunching her pert nose up and cocking her head to the side.

I don't know what dimension in hell I've stepped into, but I'm so fucking over it already.

"California. We're going to LA."

She gasps and picks up her dog. "We're getting out of Kansas, Toto. Our Hollywood dreams are just around the corner." She winks at me as though we're sharing an inside joke.

The bird clock on the wall squawks, alerting me we have fifteen minutes until I make that call.

"Pack, now," I snap. "Make it quick. Do you have a car?"

She puts her hands on her hips, shaking her head. “Oh, no. Gig’s up, mister. We are not taking my momma’s Cadillac. A cab will do.”

I rake my gaze down her front and really take in her outfit. Her brown hair is in messy waves and her face is pale, accentuating her big brown eyes. But it’s her hideous baby blue spandex nightmare she’s wearing that has me faltering.

“You can’t wear a swimsuit. Eh, change that shit.”

Her mouth pops open. “It’s my leotard and it’s—”

“Enough!” I bark out, grabbing her by her tiny arm. “Come on.”

I’m the bad guy here. She doesn’t seem to understand.

She drags her feet as I haul her to the back of the house and into a bedroom. I release her and give her a little shove. “Make it happen. Two minutes.”

Her brows furrow and she rubs her arm where I grabbed her. Instantly, I feel like a dick. This isn’t what I do. I steal, I don’t hurt. If Lindsay were here, she’d kick my ass for this. But she’s not here. She’s the whole reason I’m breaking my own rules. Frustrated with my entire situation, I run my fingers through my messy hair and point at her. “Please hurry.”

“Well,” she huffs. “Since you asked nicely...”

The girl prances around the room, yanking mismatched suitcases from the closet and under the bed. I don’t know what Mr. Death wants from this girl, but I can’t imagine why he’d want her. She’s a little fucking crazy.

I watch her cram all kinds of clothes and random weird shit into the suitcases. When the two minutes are up, I start grabbing suitcases up and hauling them through her small house and into her garage.

The car is old.

Really old.

Like 1985 Cadillac Biarritz Eldorado old.

Hopefully I can get it started and we can use it until I can ditch it to find something better. It’s unlocked, so I reach inside and pop the trunk. I toss in some bags and then head back inside to get this bargaining chip of mine. When I see some rope hanging from the garage wall, I snag it and throw that in the truck. Just in case.

Nine minutes left.

“Mr. Bing!” she cries out from her bedroom.

I jolt as fear races down my spine. She’s nuttier than a squirrel on an acorn farm. I’d even thought maybe a bit slow. If she’s calling for help, I’m

fucked. When I round the corner, I find her with her back to me holding up two different nightgowns. The dumb dog is yapping at the red, silky number and squirrel girl is arguing her case over how practical the floral print flannel one is.

You have got to be fucking kidding me.

“Pack them both,” I bark out. She did *not* name her dog after Chandler Bing. Jesus. “Let’s go. The caddy is packed. Where are the keys?”

Her mouth drops. “No! I told you we can’t take my momma’s car! It’s a classic!”

“It’s a piece of junk,” I argue, flinging my arms in the air. “It’ll probably barely make it out of the driveway.”

“I beg your pardon,” she screeches. “Miss Russet does not take kindly to being called junk—”

Six minutes.

To hell with playing nice.

I pounce on her and pull her tiny, wiggling spandex covered body against my chest. With my hand slapped across her flappy lips so she’ll shut up, I bring my mouth to her ear so she doesn’t misunderstand a word. Her body stills, but she’s breathing heavily. Little Ross or Joey or whatever the fuck his name was is yapping endlessly at our feet.

“I need you in that car when I make that call. Do you understand?”

She nods, so I peel my hand from her mouth. “I’m totally not into this anymore. I had a quiet night planned with Richard and then you came in here wanting to play your freaky sex games because my seventy-year-old BFF’s twin put you up to this, but game’s over, buddy. I’m tired and I’m hungry. And Richard awaits.”

Who the fuck is Richard?

If it’s a boyfriend and he’s on his way, I’m screwed.

“This isn’t some game,” I growl. I hate having to do this, but she won’t shut up. Dragging her now flailing body over to her dresser, I fumble around in her drawers until I find some scarves. First things first, I shove one into her big mouth. Then, I set to tying her wrists behind her back with another. “Let’s go.”

She hollers and argues behind her scarf, refusing to move. I hoist her little ass up over my shoulder and carry her out like I would my damn niece. When she moves so much she nearly squirms out of my arms, I swat her nearly bare ass in her leotard to make her behave. As we pass through

the kitchen, I see a burgundy rabbit's foot keychain with a Cadillac key hanging from a peg by the garage door.

Bingo.

I snag it and toss my captive into the back seat. Her little doggie friend yaps at my feet and I shove him away with my foot so I don't squash his scrawny ass in the door. She screams through her scarf the moment the door closes. I fold myself into the front seat, closing the door before the dog can get in, and push the key into the ignition.

When I catch her eyes in the mirror, I flinch. She's fucking crying. I don't do crying.

I have two minutes to call this fucker.

"What?" I roar as I start the ignition.

"Mydogff," she says around the scarf, followed by the saddest damn sob.

Reaching back, I tug the scarf from her mouth. "What?"

"Please. I need Chandler. Don't forget his dog food. It's by the refrigerator. And my tape! I need my tape! It's in the VCR. Please, mister, I'll behave. Just grab those things."

My head is throbbing, but a compliant captive is the kind of captive I need to get all the way across the damn country and not get hauled in by the cops.

"Fine," I bark out as I fling the door open.

Chandler bounces into the car, yapping the whole time, and I stride into the house, grabbing all this shit. I'm just popping out the video tape when the bird clock chirps. It's time. I tuck the bag of dog food under my arm and shove the tape into the back of my jeans. On the way back to the car, I dial the number.

"You have what I want?" Mr. Death asks in way of greeting.

I toss the items into the back seat and growl as I slam the door shut. "Is my family okay?"

"We're not answering questions with questions, Luca. Put her on the phone."

Oh, this asshole's going to regret that.

I climb into the front seat and twist around, putting the phone on speaker. "Mr. Death requests to speak to you."

She cocks her head in confusion. "So we're still going with this whole outlaw gig?"

Mr. Death chuckles, deep and sinister. “Francis Connor?”

“That’s me. In the flesh. Are you the boss of this roleplay company? Because if you are, I’d like to file a complaint. I’m pretty sure when Beatrice or Mabel set this up, they didn’t realize I’d be manhandled so roughly.” She turns her scathing glare my way. “I bruise easily. Don’t I, Mr. Bing?” The dumb dog yaps in agreement. “Mr. Death? Mr. Death? Did we get disconnected? What’s the safe word? No one told me what the safe word was!”

“Two hours,” Mr. Death growls.

“Two hours? What kind of safe word is two hours? Technically, that’s two words. I think a better safe word would be onomatopoeia.”

Onomatawhat?

“Call me in two hours. Philly. If not, they die.”

Click.

“Ugh,” Francis groans. “What a rude dude! He’s even ruder than you.”

Ignoring her, I push the button to lift the garage door up and start backing this big, burgundy boat of a car out of the garage. She yammers behind me, making my head throb, but I stay focused.

Two hours.

I set a timer on my phone as I pull onto the road. She grows quiet and I meet her stare in the mirror.

Damn if I don’t feel like a big dick.

“I can’t believe I packed for my own kidnapping.” She lets out a crazed laugh. “I mean, I’m for an adventure and all, but this is something like what that heroine from my book would do.” She leans forward between the seats. “She makes terrible decisions.” Then she whispers something about beating a hoo-haw. “Why? Because the guy is hot. Women,” she grumbles.

I ignore her and plug in Philadelphia in my GPS app on my burner phone. She’s quiet for all of three minutes.

“What’s your name, Mr. Kidnapper?”

Rolling my eyes, I sigh. “Thorman Iron.”

She snorts and I can’t help but smirk. “Thorman Iron. That’s the oddest name I’ve ever heard.”

Looking over my shoulder, I narrow my eyes. “My friends call me Thor.”

Her cackle fills the car and her little black, mouthy monster starts barking along with her like they’re sharing a joke. “Thor? Seriously?”

She yammers on some more, but I tune her out as I try to figure out who this Mr. Death is and why he wants her. It's all too weird. I mean, why would anyone want this thing that's in the backseat and— "Oh, God, what are you doing?" I snarl.

Her legs are squirming their way into the front and I get an eyeful of her leotarded ass. She slides into the seat beside me and then wiggles her free hands at me, wickedness gleaming in her brown eyes. "Look, magic."

"Noted. Tie you up better next time."

Chandler bounces into the front seat and takes to running around like a fucking lunatic.

"Keep your beast on your side of the car or he'll be walking home alone," I warn, glowering at them both.

Chandler cowers and Francis gapes at me.

"You're a psychopath."

"I'm a villain," I deadpan.

She purses her lips. "I used to think the villains were hot in my books. But not now, Thor. Not now. Villains are so last year. I'm a hero girl now. In fact, you should change your dumb name to Mr. Grumpy Kidnapper. Right, Mr. Bing? He's super mean."

The dog yaps. I rub at my temple as I look down at the dash. We have enough gas to get us to the state border, but then I'll need to fill up. We'll make it in time to call him back. I just hope I don't kill this chatterbox and her sidekick first.



"I need money," I tell her as I put the car into park under an awning beside the sole gas tank just outside a run-down convenience store. We crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania a short bit ago, but we still have to travel I-95 for another half hour or so until we reach our destination.

She rubs away the sleep from her eyes and blinks at me in confusion. "What money?"

"Your money."

A giggle escapes her and she scratches her dog behind the ear. His blue collar with a silver heart jangles as though it has a bell inside. "He's a wise guy," she tells the dog.

“Francis,” I snap. “Stop with the crazy shit. I need to fill up the tank. We have to be in Philly and we don’t have time for this. You heard Mr. Death.”

Her brow lifts and she shrugs. “Someone *rushed* me and I didn’t get to grab my purse.”

Fuck.

I scrub my palm down my face. The cop took my wallet and the Rossi mob took everything I stole at the casino. The rest of my stash is hidden away in a locker that I didn’t have time to grab. I’m penniless.

Glancing into the store, I let out a sigh. “Stay here.”

She starts to argue, but I slam the door shut, ending her chattering. I stroll into the dinky store and nod my head in greeting to the old lady chain smoking at the register.

And so the con begins.

Glancing at her nametag, I quickly grab her name and flash her my All-American boy smile. “Velma?”

She stubs out her half-smoked cigarette and blows out a plume of smoke. “Who’s asking?”

“Thorman. Thorman Iron. You remember me, right?”

Her nostrils flare. “I’ve never seen you before. What can I help you with?”

“You know my grandma,” I insist as I approach, my smile widening. “Edna.” Before she can argue, I start smooth talking. “I was coming back to visit. She’s real sick. Did you know that? Of course you do.” I let my smile fall and adopt a sad look. “They say she’s only got days left. You should pay her a visit.”

“Son, I don’t know—”

“She misses you, Velma. I heard so many stories about the two of you.” I feign a shy look. “Which is why I need a favor. My girlfriend and I are driving through the night. I dropped my wallet at the last restaurant we were at and—”

The door chimes and Francis comes rushing in, one scarf wrapped around her waist like a skirt and the other one tied around her hair. Chandler is tucked under her arm as she prances right up to us. Sparkling ’80s looking tennis shoes she must have found in her suitcase. Looking crazier than hell.

“As I was saying, I dropped my wallet and—”

“Gangsters,” Francis cries out, her bottom lip wobbling. “The gangsters stole my purse.” She lets out a fake sob. “And my baby.”

“Your baby?” Velma croaks, shooting me a confused stare. “I thought you were here for your grandma.”

Francis lets crocodile tears roll down her cheeks. “Grandma is going to be devastated if we show up without the baby.”

“I’ll call the police,” Velma coos. “You poor things.”

I shoot Francis a withering glare. “That’s not necess—”

“Detective Stanley is already on the case,” Francis assures her, swiping away her tears. “We just need to fill up the tank and be on our way. We’ll pay you back, Velma. One woman to another.”

“I can’t take from the register,” the old woman relents, “but I can give you sixty bucks to get by. You poor thing.”

Francis and Chandler lean over the counter to hug the elderly woman. When the lady walks over to her purse to find her wallet, Francis leans into me and whispers, “I’m really good with old folks.” She gives me an obnoxious, exaggerated wink and then falls back into character.

Who the fuck is this girl?

“Here, hon. Sixty dollars. You find that baby, Miss...”

“Anastasia Rockefeller, heir to the famed Rockefellers of New York. Perhaps you’ve heard of them?”

The old woman blinks. “*The* Rockefellers?”

“The one and only,” Francis says shyly. “I like to remain out of the limelight. I’m a bashful one. Lovie here pulls me out of my shell.” She bats her lashes at me in a loving way.

Bashful, my ass.

For a moment, I stare at this woman in astonishment.

My captive is a con artist too.

A really fucking weird one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Francis

DRIVING MISS DAISY BULLSHIT

“What the fuck was that back there?”

I open the bag of nuts he rudely tossed at me while walking out of the convenience store.

“You mean that nice old lady who just gave us sixty dollars to get gas?” I slide into the passenger side of Momma’s car. “Oh, yeah, and these nuts you threw at me? They’re actually tasty.” I pop another corn nut into my mouth, proud of my impromptu acting.

“Yeah, well, being as squirrels love nuts and all,” he mumbles and throws himself into the driver’s side, starting the car and peeling out of the gas station.

“What do squirrels have to do with these tasty little treats?” I wonder, turning back and feeding one to Chandler. He yaps and crunches one between his little canines. “See, even Chandler Bing likes ’em.”

He shakes his head and pulls back onto the dark highway.

A few minutes pass while we sit in silence. My mind is so full of questions, I can practically see them pouring out my ears. I turn to Thor, but even before I open my mouth, he grumbles at me.

“What?”

“How do you know I was going to ask anything?”

He turns to me, his brow creased, giving me his menacing stare.

“Okay, fine. I was going to ask a question, but don’t you think it’s important we figure out what we’re doing?”

He turns back to the road. “I know what we’re doing. I’ve kidnapped you, and I’m taking you to someone.”

“Hmmm... And are you *positive* my friends didn’t put you up to this? They sure know how to meddle in my life. I mean, to send me an angry outlaw like—”

Another low rumble cuts me off. “For the last time, I have no idea who your friends are. This is all real, sweetheart. You think this is some sort of *Driving Miss Daisy* bullshit? I’m not here to take you on a joyride or fulfill some fantasy. I’m a bad guy. I am not here to sweep you off your feet. Speaking of...what the hell *are* you wearing?”

We both glance down at my shoes. They’re my bedazzled high-tops I got on EBay. “They’re my limited-edition high-tops. They actually glow in the—”

“Jesus Christ, never mind.” He pulls his attention back to the road.

Not sure what got shoved so far up his butt, but I decide not to push it. I’m more offended he doesn’t like my shoes. They were recommended for working out and Richard Simmons said in an interview once, they were his favorites. I throw my back into the seat and cross my arms, bringing my eyes outside. It’s dark and nothing but field and highway, so boredom hits me almost immediately.

If Mr. Grouch isn’t going to talk to me, then I’ll entertain myself.

I start tapping my foot on the floorboard of the car.

Unfolding my arms, I drum my fingers on the armrest on the side of the door. The theme song to *Happy Days* pops into my head and I start humming. Just as I’m at the chorus the car swerves to the right, coming to a complete stop on the side of the road. My hands are grabbing my chest in fear of a heart attack when I look at Thor. “Oh my word, did you hit something?”

He doesn’t say a word. He jumps out of the car. I watch him through the darkness, but he’s gone to the back of the car.

The trunk opens.

And shuts.

Then I’m again startled when my door flies open. Thor is at my side, holding rope and my scarves.

“Oh no, do we need to drag something out of the road?” I ask, worried we hit a poor animal.

“Open up.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, confused.

“I said open up, sweetheart.”

He's the one losing his marbles. I open my mouth to ask him if he's feeling well when in goes the scarf. I fight him, trying to pull it out, but before I can do any retracting, he has his big bear arms around me, tying my wrists. I squeal through the thin lace, but my nose catches a faint scent of a man.

Very rude, but seemingly very nice smelling man.

Before I catch myself, I'm bound and gagged. Again.

Darn it!

"There. Now be a good little squirrel and sit there." He slams the door shut and walks around. The headlights shine on his silhouette and boy does he sure know how to hold that scowl. Not to mention he has a perky tush.

He jumps in just as I start to giggle through my gag.

"Seriously?"

He looks at me and I laugh harder.

Trying to ignore me, he pulls back on the road. We drive for a few more minutes until my boredom gets the best of me again and I start to hum the theme song to Three's Company. That's when the car takes another swift veer onto the shoulder. I turn to him, curious why we're stopping this time.

Thor reaches over and rips the scarf from my mouth. "What is wrong with you?"

"Wrong with *me*? You're the one with no manners. Tying me up. Gagging me so I can't talk."

His hands toss to the sky. "I'm a bad guy! And your kidnapper. You should be scared of me, not want to chitty chat and sing horrible eighties theme songs. This isn't fucking camp!"

He sure does have that scowl down pat. Possibly may be the only look he has, since I haven't seen any other. His brows may also be stuck frowning. And he does make a terrible conversationalist. "Fine. At least tell me why you're kidnapping me. I can't sit here in the dark the whole time. Maybe if you tell me, I can prepare. Anticipate the conversations on weather or something."

He sighs loudly, scratching his fingers down his stubbled face.

Stubble I don't mind on him. Maybe I can just feel it. All women in books love stubble.

"Some bad guys kidnapped the people I love. To get them back, I have to give them you."

Stubble that— "Wait, I'm sorry, what?"

This time his hands thrust through his dark, messy, slightly overgrown hair. “I fucked with the wrong person. Heist gone bad. Now they have my family...” He trails off, clearly wanting to say more, but when his eyes meet mine, he seems to change his mind. “And the more you stall with this dumb shit, the more you put them in danger.”

Oh no, his poor family!

Why would anyone be so cruel to hurt someone’s family? I want to ask a million questions, but the look in his eyes says not to dare. “Okay. I’ll behave.” I nod until his facial expression that screams, *I don’t believe you*, fades and now only says, *I partially don’t believe you*.

“Good. You start that humming shit again, the gag goes back in. You hear me?”

“Okedokee Hoke.” I hold in my breath as long as I can. Which is three seconds, until I burst out laughing.

“Jesus, what now?” he says.

“Get it? Hoke?” Still staring at me. Boy, does he have that murderous glare down pat.

“No. I don’t *get it*.”

“Hoke Colburn, Miss Daisy’s driver!” I boast, my smile from ear to ear at my funny joke. Thor, on the other hand, doesn’t move a muscle. I gaze into his deep green eyes for any sort of humor, but nothing. How was that not funny? I would have had Henry rolling on the—

And there it is.

Barely there, but it happens.

One side. Just one side of his lip curls into a small smile.

“For starters, Miss Daisy rode in the back. Maybe you should take a spot back there with Bingo.”

“His name is Chandler Bing. And I saw what you just did. Your smile works after all.”

His face goes blank, Mr. Bad guy back in place. “I didn’t smile.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell any of your bad guy friends.”

Just then, Chandler jumps into the front, his tail wagging as he makes a little spot in my lap. I want to cuddle him, but my hands are still tied behind my back, which is going to be a real problem since Chandler can be really needy when it comes to getting his ears scratched.

“If you untie me, I promise to behave. I’ll do as you say.”

He looks at me hard, as if he doesn’t believe me.

Thankfully, after a loud huff, my hands are free, and I'm scratching away. Thor pulls back onto the road and this time I do my best to behave. It also gives me the time to take in everything he's told me.

For starters, I've really been kidnapped? But who would want to kidnap me? *Why* would someone want to kidnap me? Maybe he meant just bring me to someone. An old friend or relative sent for me and it would be like a visit!

Okay, even someone as introverted and reclusive as myself isn't that naive.

I turn to ask, but quickly change my mind.

Maybe give him a little more time to cool off.

I think about his poor family. He probably has a wife and kids. I'm ashamed to have mistaken him for a naughty outlaw. Imagining him swooping me off my feet and rubbing his sexy stubble in places, when he already has someone to do all that stuff with. His kids are probably beautiful like his wife, handsome like him. In a grouchy kind of way, of course.

"You're mumbling."

"Huh?" I twist, pulling my eyes away from the window.

"You're mumbling. That's not being quiet."

We stare at one another, until he breaks the connection and brings his eyes back to the road. I'm tempted to ask him what his problem is, but I believe I know the answer. He still carries his rugged expression, but behind his angry eyes, I can sense his worry. He's worried about the people he loves.

I gaze down in my lap and see Chandler is now fast asleep. Whispering a small apology, I turn back to the window and think about the people I love.

Mabel, Henry, Beatrice.

Momma.

I wish she were still here. My heartache hasn't dulled since the day she left me, nor each day that's passed knowing I'll never get one of her special hugs or her beautiful smile. Tell her my corny jokes and watch her fall over in her chair laughing.

If she were still here, I wonder what adventures we would have taken. Or if my dad were still alive, would he love me just as much? I don't know Thor well, but I imagine he would do anything for his family. I rest my head

on the back of the seat, hiding my face as I wipe away the stupid tear that's fallen.

Time gets away from me and the sound of Thor's phone alarm has me shifting in my seat.

"I need to make a call."

I don't say anything, but nod compliantly. He looks me over and pulls out the black phone and punches in seven digits, bringing it to his ear.

"Your timing is impeccable, Mr. Crawford."

My brows crinkle in confusion. I thought his last name was Iron.

"I want to speak to Lindsay."

"I think you're forgetting who's calling the shots here. I am."

A loud female shriek blasts through the phone.

"You motherfucker! You hurt her and I'll gut you one bloody organ at a time!" Thor howls into the phone. I grab the steering wheel to avoid us from crashing. He swats my hand away and gathers himself. "Please. Don't fucking hurt her. I'm doing everything you ask."

I hear a low chuckle. "Then do as I say. As soon as day breaks and the girl doesn't show up for work, they'll get wind she's been taken. Gonna need you to play it smart. It won't just be my guys after you if you get caught. Do you understand me?"

I surely don't. Whose guys?

"Loud and clear. Let me speak to Lindsay now," Thor responds.

"Consider this a favor. Ten seconds." The line goes quiet until I hear the sound of a weeping feminine voice.

"Luca?"

Luca. I like that name. Luca Crawford.

"Fuck, Lindsay, are you okay? Is Cala okay?"

"We're both fine, but please do as the man says. I'm so scared. Please!" Lindsay begs tearfully.

Thor's—or Luca's—eyes squeeze closed. "I will. Listen. I'm coming for you. I love you both. Don't be scared. I'm coming—"

He's cut off when the deep voice comes back on the line. "The next checkpoint is in Pittsburgh. You have twelve hours until you have to make that call. No funny business. And stay off the radar. Don't be late or I'll cut off a finger for every minute you are." Then the line goes dead.

"FUCK!" Luca yells and drops the phone, slamming his hands on the steering wheel.

I jump in my seat, startled at his outburst. The sound of his crying wife has my heart hurting for him. His poor daughter. I reach out and rest my hand on his shoulder. He's shaking.

"It's going to be okay. We're gonna get your family back. I promise."

He turns to me, frustration and doubt clear in his hard stare. His eyes find the road and without removing my hand, I bring my eyes to the window and stare off into the blackness of the night until exhaustion hits me and I fall asleep.



"Tell me what you want, beautiful."

His penetrating stare into my wanting eyes has my insides swirling with need. My belly tightens as his hand skims down my bare thigh, teasing me with his gentle touch. "Don't be shy. Tell Daddy exactly what you want." His deep voice seeps into my already sensitive skin, pulsating between my wet thighs. I attempt to squeeze them, but his hand stops me, forcing my legs to remain open. "Tell me now, or I'll take your silence as invitation to eat this sweet pussy raw." My entire body spasms at his vulgar threat. Imagining his tongue in my most intimate place. Sucking on me. Licking me. "Francis," he calls my name and I give in to my temptress needs.

"Kiss me, Thor," I plead, anticipating his lips on mine. My first kiss at the hands of an outlaw. His rough stubble grazing against my lips as his tongue parts me and I get a taste of him.

"Francis."

I'm squirming in my chair. I look deep into his eyes, the fire I've set in his stare. "Kiss me, Thor. Kiss me now," I demand and he does as I ask.

His tongue is warm.

Licking all over my face.

This feels wrong.

"Francis, wake the fuck up."

My eyes flutter open. The fog dissipates, and I realize I'm not in a chair, being held by an angry outlaw, but in fact, curled up in Momma's Cadillac with Chandler on my lap licking my face. My left cheek is pressed to the headrest as I stare at the empty driver's seat.

"Oh my word. Chandler, I was just having a—"

“Sex dream—*Fuck!*”

The voice from behind me scares me right out of my panties, and I throw my head back, hitting what sounds like a face. Nose maybe? I whip around, my cheeks blazing with embarrassment, to Luca holding his face.

“My goodness, I’m so sorry.”

“For what? Taking forever to wake up because you’re busy dreaming about hot sex with your kidnapper? Or that you may have just broken my nose?”

“I was *not* having a sex dream.”

“Sweetheart, you were moaning my name and asking me to kiss you,” he growls, looking at me with disgust.

“I certainly was not.” Tell me I was *not* doing that. “And who would want to dream and kiss a grouch like yourself? May I also add rude!”

He brings his large frame into my personal space, leaning down and blocking the now glowing streetlamp behind him. “You’re telling me you weren’t dreaming about me?” he asks, dipping lower into the car. “Begging for Thor.”

Boy oh boy. What state are we in? It’s hot in these parts.

“Not a chance.” I huff. “Besides, you’re Luca anyway.”

He leans in closer, his mouth just inches away from mine. Oh, mother goose, I think he’s going to kiss me. He’s so close, I feel the warmth of his breath on my cheeks. *Do it. Don’t do it! Do it. Don’t—*

He leans past me to grab the rope that’s shoved in between the seats. He pulls back and speaks. “Whatever, we’re here. I have just under seven hours to make that call. I need to find a way to con us some stuff and get checked into a hotel so I can shower and sleep for a few hours. You’re to stay here until I get back.” He dangles the rope in front of me, indicating he’s going to tie me up again.

“I don’t think so, mister.” I grab the rope and toss it outside the open car door.

His eyes follow the rope until it hits the ground. Turning back to me, the anger returns to his tone. “Knock it off. I can’t have you running.” He bends down to grab the rope.

*Don’t look at his butt, don’t look at his—*boy oh boy, he must work out.

“Now give me your hands. I’m not asking again.”

“And I’m not telling you again. I want to help. Let me in on your plan. I can be useful.”

“No. Absolutely not. After that bullshit you pulled at the gas station, you can sit here and let me do what I do best.”

“Which is what? Be a grump?”

“No. Be the con.”

“Well, I’m a con too!”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am! The gas station. I conned that woman out of sixty dollars. Which I wrote an IOU for to pay back. It’s only fair since she—”

“Enough! Do you not understand the severity of what will happen if I don’t meet this deadline?”

“Well, no actually, you haven’t really told me—”

“My family will die. Do you understand that?”

My smile fades at his words. “I wasn’t... I understand that part. I just don’t understand why *I’m* here. I don’t know who would want *me*.” I understand clearly that the ones he loves are in danger. I just don’t know why I’m someone’s bargaining chip.

Luca huffs and throws his hands through his hair. “I don’t know either. But that doesn’t change things. We need to eat, and I need a few hours of sleep. Just fucking do as I say so I can make that happen and get us back on the road.”

I wish he would let me help. He has no idea just how useful I can be. “Fine.” I forfeit, which actually shocks him.

Looking relieved, he sighs. “Good. Now hands.”

Now it’s my turn to huff and puff. “This is unnecessary, you know,” I say while he wraps the rope around my wrists. He doesn’t seem to care.

He tightens the knot and then pulls back. “No funny business.”

I nod again and he’s shutting my door and heading across the street toward the crappy looking hotel. I watch as he slows, nodding to someone coming out as he disappears inside the building.

Once he’s out of sight, I wiggle my hands loose and untie the knot.

I thought about telling him I was an expert at rope escapes, but I didn’t want to wound his ego. With Henry being a veteran, he’s spent many hours at the store teaching me survival tricks in case I ever needed them. I chuckle as I free my hands and take in my surroundings. We seem to be parked in a small shopping plaza. The hotel across the street looks nice. Way nicer than the motel we have in Teterboro or the one he’s at. I watch some people going in and out of the hotel until I spot a woman. My eyes widen at how

beautifully dressed she is, her diamond heels, glittering in the overhead lamplight.

Bingo.

“You stay here and be a good boy,” I tell Chandler. “I’ll be right back.” He yaps and wags his tail—Mr. Bing’s way of assuring me he’ll behave. Good boy.

I slide out of the car and look both ways as I cross the street. A few cars honk at me, one yelling, *nice leotard, loser*, which I wave back. I make it to the parking lot and watch behind a tree as the woman tosses her finger around ordering the valet to pack her bags, before she disappears back into the hotel.

With her back to him, the older gentleman gives her the finger and begins lifting her heavy suitcases into the trunk of their Mercedes.

That’s when I make my move. I run up to the car, and first thing I do is open the front seat and grab the woman’s purse. I duck down as the valet throws another bag into the trunk and heads back for more. My adrenaline is pumping so violently through my veins I can hardly contain my excitement. I tuck the purse under my arm and when the valet goes back for yet another bag, I slip to the trunk and grab the one on top, dragging it back out and hiding it on the side of the car. *Man, I’m good at this!* I praise myself, but then the sound of a woman’s unhappy voice breaks my internal cheerleading.

“Does everyone in Philadelphia take this long to load a vehicle?” She snaps, whipping her hair behind her dainty shoulders. “You should be fired. If there wasn’t a ridiculous line in your less than satisfactory hotel, I’d march back in there and complain and have your job. You’re lucky it’s the middle of the night and there aren’t any managers around!”

Oh shoot! I need to get out of here! I look to the front, but there’s a couple walking up, and I certainly can’t crawl to the back or I’ll be discovered. *Shoot shoot shoot...*

“Will you hurry! Oh, now look what you’ve done!”

It must be my lucky day. Maybe not the poor valet’s because her suitcase breaks, opening along the entrance way.

That’s when I scurry back the way I came, dragging the suitcase with me. When I get back to the car, I pop it open.

My eyes go bright with excitement.

“Oh, it’s showtime.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Luca

JUNIOR SCHWARZENEGGER

The great thing about showing up at a hotel at three in the morning is the staff—what little of them are on duty—are usually half asleep. Makes conning a helluva lot easier.

“Which room again?” the woman asks, stifling a yawn.

“Three-eleven.” I have no fucking idea, but it’s the first number to pop into my head.

She coughs and I’m assaulted by the scent of stale cigarette smoke. This motel is shitty as fuck, but those are usually easier to get into. The woman taps something on the computer and squints.

“Mr. Harrison?”

Shit.

“I meant three-twelve. Fuck, I’m tired.”

“You and me both, buddy,” she grumbles. Then, her brows scrunch. “That one’s not assigned to anyone. You must have meant another room.”

Perfect.

“No, I’m positive it’s three-twelve. I misspoke earlier.” I flash her my winning smile. “I promise to go right back to bed and not bug you anymore tonight, ma’am.”

She shakes her head. “These computers always glitch out.” She enters in some info and then swipes a card before handing it to me. “Enjoy your stay, sir.”

“Thanks, ma’am.”

I loiter around the corner until she goes in the back room and then slip back out the front to fetch my captive and her fussy fucking dog. The night air is warm and sticky. After the hellish night I’ve had, I’m looking forward

to a long, hot shower. Showers in a roach motel aren't ideal, but it's better than the alternative...no shower. Fuck that.

As I reach the big ass burgundy boat, I hear Mr. Bingaling or whatever the hell she calls him yapping his head off. He better not get our asses kicked out of this hotel. I need a good night's sleep so I can regroup and figure out this whole Mr. Death situation.

He wants Francis.

Fine, he can have her.

But *why* does he want her?

Not my problem.

Lindsay and Cala are my problem.

My thoughts are stopped short when I realize the dog is alone. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I whip around, looking for Francis. She can't have gone far because she wouldn't leave her little dog. No way.

When I look up, a nice building with neat landscaping and white awnings beckons at me. The Dempsey Hotel. Oh Jesus. That woman better not have...

I take off in a sprint across the street and nearly get run over by a Mercedes as it pulls away. A doorman nods at me but doesn't stop me from entering the building. He looks as worn out as the lady I just dealt with.

"The penthouse, dahling," a woman purrs in a foreign accent, her voice echoing down the corridor as I enter. "Chop-chop!"

"But, ma'am—"

"Ma'am? Ma'am? Boy, I'll have you know I'm twenty-two years old. Do I look like an old woman to you?" Her voice is shrill...and familiar. "Hmm?"

A woman in a black mink coat and red heels stands at the counter with her back to me. Long, dark brown hair hangs in waves and her designer purse is held delicately in one hand while her other hand waves furiously in the air.

I dart my gaze all around, hunting for Francis. My attention is whipped back to the conversation when the well-dressed woman speaks again. I know that voice.

Oh, fuck me, here we go again with this nut.

"Don't make me call my father," she warns. "He's a French spy. He knows people."

“Um, miss,” the flustered hotel clerk says. “I’m just trying to tell you that it’s been booked.”

“By moi!” she screeches. “Moi! *Me* for you dumb Americans who can’t speak French. *I* booked it!”

His face burns bright red as he nervously taps at the computer. I smirk and stay back, watching Francis in action. I’ll never admit it to her, but she’s kind of a natural at this shit.

“We have a presidential suite that’s just been vacated...” he says, “but that’s going to take at least an hour to clean.” He frowns, a worried look in his eyes.

She slaps her hand down on the marble countertop, making him jump. “I need my eye cream, boy. Not an hour from now. *Right* now. Because apparently, I look *old*,” she says dramatically.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Whatever,” she snaps. “Make it happen before my husband gets here or you’ll be in for a world of hurt.”

“Of course, er, *mademoiselle*.”

“I beg your pardon, Poindexter,” she growls. “What did you just call me? If my husband finds out you’re calling me filthy French names, boy, you’re gonna get it!”

The young man’s face pales. When his eyes dart to a man standing nearby wearing a security shirt, I know it’s time to step in. I nod at the security guy and make a circular motion with my finger at my head to indicate the woman is crazy.

Crazy but mine.

My captive, that is.

“There’s my little French tart,” I croon, swooping in behind her and curling an arm around her waist. “Always such a naughty little minx. Please tell me you put something on under this fur coat. You know what it does to me when you go nude, my flaky croissant.”

She snaps her head my way and gapes at me in surprise. With her dark hair down and her big brown eyes wide as she acts the part of startled French bitch, I can’t help but notice how pretty she is. Her pink lips are full and pouty. Dark brown lashes bat against her apple cheeks as a rosy blush colors them. Is this part of the act or is she suddenly shy? After that performance, she has nothing to be shy about. Hell, for a second there, even I was convinced.

“You’re so beautiful,” I tell my fake European wife, cradling her cheek with my palm. “Sometimes it hurts to have to share you with others.” I lean in, inhaling the perfume that’s coming off her stolen clothes. “You smell like a fantasy.”

She gasps when I brush my lips delicately against hers.

“I might have to kiss you in front of your admirers,” I murmur loud enough for the security guy and the hotel clerk to hear. “To claim what’s mine.”

“Oh,” she says breathily. “I mean...*oui, monsieur.*”

I smile at her as though she’s my whole world because the performance is key in any successful con. Then, I go in for the kiss. She parts her lips, a tiny mewl escaping her, as I press mine to hers. She tastes like lunacy and corn nuts, but hell, I like it. My tongue swipes across hers in a teasing way. I slide my hand into her hair, tightening my hold so I can kiss her harder. Like a possessive husband would. With just my mouth, I own her. She soon gets out of her stupor as she gingerly presses her palm to my chest, caressing me as well. Her fingers may as well be on fire because I practically burn at her touch.

Act.

This is an act.

And an annoying reminder that I haven’t gotten laid in fuck knows how long.

Just thinking about carrying this *act* upstairs and peeling off the mink coat has my dick thickening in my jeans. *Not the time or the place, man.* With a groan, I pull away—but not before nipping at her bottom lip—and flash the clerk my laziest grin.

“All we need is a bed, a bottle of champagne, and a few hours.” I wink at him, my gaze heavy with insinuation. The insinuation that I’ll fuck her the moment I get her alone.

“Here,” the clerk says, pushing a keycard my way. “It’s our best available room.”

“Thank you,” I say as I take the keycard. “I must say, this is the best service we’ve ever received. What’s your manager’s name? I’d love to call in the morning and give you the glowing review you deserve.”

“Joey,” he says bashfully.

“Like Joey Tribbiani from *Friends*?” Francis asks, her French accent thick. “The best American show ever made.”

He smiles. “How you doin’?”

Francis cackles—real and not an act. “Oh my French fries! You sound just like him!”

The guy beams even wider. Amazing how far praise will get you in a con.

“I just need a credit card and you two can be on your way,” Joey says, his smile faltering.

Ahhh, shit. I knew this was coming.

I slap at my pockets. “I must have left my wallet in the car. Surely you can let us settle in and I’ll bring it by in the morning when I tell them about what a great job Joey from The Dempsey Hotel is doing. Do you think they have any management positions open, Joey, because I think you’d be stellar in a position like that? I mean, it takes a certain kind of guy to handle my wife and you handled her beautifully.” I hug her to my side and kiss the top of her head. She smells sweet. Of course she’d smell like fruit considering she’s a fruitcake.

“I, uh, don’t know, Mr.—”

“Schwarzenegger.”

His eyes grow wide and his mouth parts.

“You caught me,” I say in a fake bashful tone. “Arnold is my father. My agent doesn’t like me telling people that, though. Our secret. It’s better if I make my own way in Hollywood, you know, man? Otherwise, I’ll always be compared to my father. Who can compare to *The Terminator*? Tough shoes to fill.”

The boy is dumbstruck.

“That’s how we met,” my fake wife purrs. “I was on set for a movie myself and he thought I was just a fan.” She snorts. “He offered to sign my breasts. Scandalous!”

I smirk at her and squeeze her ass, making her squeak in surprise. “And one thing led to another. And another. And another. You feel me, kid?”

His face burns bright red. “Y-Yes, Mr. Schwarzenegger.”

“Call me Junior. Mr. Schwarzenegger is what we call the old man.” I wink at him.

“Right,” he says, flustered. “I’ll get your information in the morning. My boss will be here then too. It means a lot you’d be willing to put in a good word.”

“A *great* word,” I assure him. “Don’t worry.” I nod at him and lay on the accent. “*I’ll be back.*”

He beams at us and gives us a wave goodbye. I guide my wife out of the hotel lobby, kissing on her neck and holding her close. The moment we step outside, I release her and glower at her, the act dropped at our feet.

“What the fuck, Francis?”

“Me? Me what the fudge? Are you serious? You...you...” Her face blazes with heat.

“I what?” I demand, stepping closer.

She chews on her bottom lip that’s red and swollen from our kiss. “Nothing.”

I stare at her pouty mouth for a beat longer before pointing at her. “Stay while I go get the damn dog and then we’re going to bed.”

Like a dutiful wife, she stays put while I fetch the yappy-ass beast. It’s happy to see me and crawls into my arms. I set him down so he can go to the bathroom while I grab his dog food. After he’s done his business, he jumps at my legs, eager to be held. I groan but pick up the beastly critter. When I return to the fancier hotel across the street, I find Francis with a suitcase that doesn’t belong to her waiting patiently.

“Where the hell did that come from?”

“The bushes.”

“The bushes gifted you a designer suitcase?”

“Yes.”

I arch a brow at her. She lifts her chin in challenge, her brown eyes gleaming with mischief. This girl is bad news for me. Distracting as hell. I need to focus on my goal.

Save my sister and niece.

Kill Mr. Death.

Yeah, kill him because he sure as hell doesn’t get to keep Francis.

When she doesn’t say anything else, I break our intense stare to saunter back inside. No one says anything about the fact I just strolled in with a little rat dog tucked under my arm like a football. Nope, they all mind their fucking business because I’m Junior Schwarzenegger and my wife’s a psycho French bitch. Once in the elevator, she lets out an exaggerated sigh.

One.

Two.

Three.

Oh, fuck me.

“What’s wrong?” I demand after the fourth sigh.

“Nothing.”

No man in his right mind believes a woman when she says “nothing.” I grew up with a little sister and nothing usually means war.

“It’s just...”

“Just?”

“You can’t go around kissing random women like that. It’s not right.”

I frown. “Okay...”

“In the historical romance novels,” she says in a breathy voice, “if you kissed a woman like that, you’d have to marry her.”

Marry her?

“What?”

“What?”

Her eyes are wide and innocent, dark lashes beating against her cheeks.

I make the mistake of glancing at her lips once more. Thankfully the elevator opens and I walk us to our room. Once inside, I am pleased to find a giant comfy bed in the center of the room. Sure as hell beats the roach motel. Francis wins this round. As she prances around the room, looking at every single thing there is to look at, I set the dog down and head for the shower.

“Don’t leave,” I grind out over my shoulder. I peel off my shirt and toss it along the way. I close the door behind me and I can hear her bitching about me to her damn dog. A smile tugs at my lips. Real as hell, which is scary considering the predicament I’m in with this girl and my family and Mr. Death. I shouldn’t be smiling at all.

The shower ends up being long enough that I almost fall asleep standing up. I’m too tired for a hand job, though my unsettled dick kind of hates me for neglecting him. I throw on my jeans but leave the rest of my clothes in the bathroom. Once inside the room, I find a mountain of pillows dividing the bed and the two nut jobs sound asleep.

Thank fuck.

I hit the lights and then pass out.



Licking. Licking. Licking.

Jesus, who needs a morning wakeup call when you have a fucking dog to do it for you? A dog that climbed over Pillow Mountain and slept on my face most of the night might I add, irritating the fuck out of me. I hear Francis chattering about early birds and worms and pancakes and broody outlaws. But frankly, I'm too tired to care. Pulling off the peak of Pillow Mountain, I smash it against my face and fall back asleep.



I wake with a start. Awareness slicks through me, coating every inch of my body. It's quiet. Too quiet. Oh shit. What time is it?

Locating my phone on the bedside table, I curse to discover I have thirty minutes until I need to call Mr. Death. And my captive and her freak dog are nowhere to be found. I storm through the hotel room, tripping over the trail of discarded clothing this woman somehow managed to explode all over the place. Quickly, I use one of the complimentary toothbrushes and scrub the film off my teeth before splashing water on my face.

In ten minutes flat, I'm dressed and on my hunt for Francis...and her little dog, too.

My nose takes me to the dining room. A grumble in my stomach distracts me. I'll just hit a McDonald's after my call to Mr. Death.

I'm inwardly bitching at myself for sleeping in so late that I'd miss out on what smells heavenly when I see her. When I see them both. Fucking King and Queen of The Dempsey Hotel.

Wearing a silky pink dress that dips low down her front and shows off her nice tits that were otherwise smashed behind baby blue spandex last night, Francis sits at the head of a table with her dog in her lap looking like royalty. She's holding a champagne flute filled with orange juice as Bing Bong is eating tiny squares of what looks like pancakes from his own little plate.

And they have admirers.

Three or four older men just hanging on her every word while she preens.

Oh, fuck me, here we go again with this nut.

CHAPTER SIX

Francis

TRUCK STOP OUTLAWS ALWAYS HAVE BIG ONES

“If these pancakes aren’t the fluffiest little creations I’ve ever tasted, Chandler Bing, I just don’t know what is.” I stifle another moan as I devour my last bite of heaven. Chandler yaps three times, and I reach over to cut him a few more tiny puppy pieces. “Do you think they make their own syrup here? I must say, it’s nothing like the Log Cabin we have at home.” Two more yaps. “You think? I wonder if we could purchase some.” One yap. “Oh yeah, we don’t have any money. Hmmm...”

I pop a small piece of sausage in my mouth, also wondering what kind of cows they have in Pennsylvania. Specialty cows, I conclude with how tasty this is. I savor another bite when I look at the table next to me. An older couple is getting up to leave, and I spot a few unopened miniature bottles of syrup.

“Aren’t those little things cute as can be?” Chandler yaps three times. “Shame, they just left those. Hmmm.” I look around, my eyes landing back on the little trinkets. “Who would leave such yumminess?” I tap my fork against my lip, feeling horrible they were just left and not properly enjoyed. “Well, we can’t just leave them there.” Two yaps. “If I just write an IOU, it wouldn’t be stealing right?” One yap.

My eyes search the fancy dining room again, until they return to the poor abandoned syrup. Confident no one is paying much attention to me, I place my fork down and elegantly, just as they do in the movies, I stand with confidence.

Then trip over my long gown.

“Oh fiddlesticks!” I catch myself, thankful the tables are so close and steady myself. A young man sitting with his girlfriend takes note of me.

“*Bonjour*, nothing to see here.” I wave them off. Chandler growls in their direction but goes back to eating his pancakes. The three little bottles find their way tucked into my palm and I snag them. I don’t expect to see a beautiful fruit tarte sitting untouched on a shiny white plate. “Well, shoot, who leaves a perfectly uneaten tarte? Someone spent a lot of time putting love in this scrumptious little thing.” Making mental note to IOU for the tarte, I snatch it, unable to wait until I’m seated and sneak a little bite. “Oh, that’s simply made from heaven.” Two yaps. No doubt I’ll have to share this with Chandler. I pivot and hurry back to my seat. Two quick steps and I’m about seated, when I trip over my dress once again. My poor tarte goes flying and skids on the table next to me, knocking over a glass of champagne. At least my other hand is smart and keeps a death lock on the bottles. Sadly, my feet don’t know what to do with themselves, so they twist, and I prepare to ruin a lovely breakfast by smacking my face against the fancy tiled floor.

Thankfully, two strong arms encircle around me before I make a face mold in the pretty floor and have to write another IOU for the tile. Warmth hits the side of my neck and Luca’s deep, seductive voice seeps into my virgin eardrums. With a slowness to his tone, he says, “What the ever-loving fuck are you doing?”

His voice is smooth like buttercream frosting, giving me that gooey feeling. “I was having a pancake breakfast.”

His grip around me tightens and something funny happens to my belly. His chest smashed against my back has the hair on my arms standing at the sudden acknowledgment of how hard he is pressed so close to me. Well, I’ll be. He must do more than any Richard Simmons work—

“Yeah, got that. But what the *fuck* are you wearing?”

Easily forgotten is the way he’s holding me or the tingles spreading down to my toes, in its place the reminder of the elegant morning gown I found in the suitcase, *which* I already have an IOU written down for. “Isn’t it just lovely? It’s Gucci. Did you know a lot of A-list celebrities wear Gucci? And—*Whoa!*”

I squeal at the feel of his teeth scraping at my earlobe.

“Don’t care, *madame*. Grab your nuts and little dog. We gotta go.”

Nuts? There are no nuts in my pancakes—

“Now,” he growls, and I snap into action. He releases me, which I’m a bit disappointed by, and I stand tall and confident and put my game face

back on.

“You’re absolutely right, my love, this food is *repugnant*! We will not be paying for a single scrap of this distasteful dog food!”

“Jesus Christ,” Luca mumbles and grabs Chandler, tucking him under his armpit and locking his large fingers around my wrist, before tugging me toward the exit.

Trying to keep up with him, I walk past the last table to see another delightful bottle of syrup, all alone and unopened. I lean into the table, forcing Luca to halt for me, and address the couple who stare at my strangely. “You’re not gonna use this, are you? *Merci!*”

I snag the bottle of syrup.



Luca dumps me into Momma’s car and Chandler wiggles out of his grip, leaping into my lap. He slams the door, and his shoulders tense as he jogs around the car and throws himself into the driver’s seat. With the key jammed into the ignition, he tosses it into drive and speeds out of the parking lot and back onto the highway.

He doesn’t look my way, keeping his creased eyes on the road.

“You know, breakfast is the most important part of the day.”

“Great.”

“Well, it would have done you some good to eat something. They had some wonderful selections. Chandler was enjoying their vanilla crumble—”

“Enough.” He huffs, his knuckles turning white as he grips the steering wheel.

I also huff and throw my back against the seat, my arms crossing across my chest. I decide to give him some space, because clearly, he doesn’t understand the mental benefits of eating breakfast. My eyes take in the scenery passing us by. A whole thirty seconds of it until I turn back to Luca. “Eggs are great for brain activity and protein helps the—”

“Got it.”

Geez! I sigh and turn my eyes back to the window. *Somebody* woke up on the wrong side of the bed. When I woke early to let Chandler tinkle and search out breakfast, I found our pillow wall disassembled and Chandler snuggled in his arms, playing little spoon. After getting up and going to the

bathroom, I took inventory of the items in the suitcase and came across the most exquisite morning gown. It was a bit tightfitting in the front, but the pale pink color and lace was love at first sight. Light on my feet, I tiptoed back to the bathroom, trying not to wake Luca, and slipped into the dress. The moment I saw the reflection in the mirror my eyes expanded almost out of their sockets. I admitted, it was a wee bit revealing, but I looked... beautiful. Just like those famous actresses. With my chin high and my confidence even higher, I grabbed Chandler's leash and off we went.

Now sitting in the car, with Grumpy driving way too fast, I look down at the dress, where Chandler is already fast asleep in my lap. "I hope you at least nicely folded those gowns back in the suitcase. They probably cost a fortune," I say, staring off at the open road.

Luca doesn't even turn to speak to me when he says, "Didn't grab them."

My mouth drops and my head whips in his direction. "What do you mean you didn't grab them? We have to go back!"

"Not happening."

"We must! Those dresses cost a fortune!" I stop for a second. "Well, they cost someone a fortune, *which* I've all written IOUs for and—"

The car goes flying to the curb.

The tires screech as he makes a hasty stop, causing us both to jerk. I grab for Chandler so he doesn't go flying off me, when Luca throws the car in park. And then he turns to me.

Oh boy.

Those eyes.

Very pretty green. But I believe on fire. With something the opposite of happy.

"Listen up, princess. I'm not concerned with my dietary benefits nor your stolen dresses. We have seven minutes until I have to make a call and confirm my family is still alive. How hard is it to just simply be fucking quiet for two goddamn seconds so I can think and figure out our next move?"

There have been very few in my life that have ever talked to me the way Luca just did. My momma always taught me to be kind and smile. Give to others in hopes to be given the same respect in return. And now, being in this car, with this man, who I have no idea how I've been thrown together with, I struggle to allow my emotions not to get the best of me. I bite the

inside of my lip to stop the tears threatening to expose my hurt feelings. I've done nothing but be talked down to.

He must sense my change of mood.

"Listen. Fuck... I'm sorry."

I inhale a deep breath to gather back some strength. "I get the feeling you don't like me. And that's okay. Momma said there'd be Sundays like Mondays. Sundays like Mondays. That's what my mother said."

His brow goes up. "Ehhh... That sounds like a song you're butchering. Awfully familiar, but totally wrong."

Confused, I shake my head. "I mean, she *did* sing it, but I remember the words clearly and those were it. She said someone like you would look at someone like me—"

"Still wrong. I think you're trying and failing to quote Dusty Springfield's song." He sighs in exasperation. "'Mama Said'."

And that's what *I* already said! "Momma said it, so don't fret about it, 'cause Momma said there'll be Sundays like Mondays," I assure him in the singsong way Momma always would assure me.

"I remember the song, but this—this isn't even close. Besides, what does that even mean? Sundays like Mondays?"

"Sundays are good. Mondays are bad. Some Sundays that are supposed to be good turn out to be bad like Mondays." Duh. "Just know that I get it. I'm worried about your family too. I don't understand why people want to hurt others like your family. I believe that's simply terrible. But I also don't know why someone would want me either."

The flame in his angry eyes dims as he takes in my words.

"So, as you can see, I'm just as confused and I may not express it in the same way. I do want to help. And I also would like some answers. If by expressing my feelings I still try to keep this positive, well, I'm sorry."

I struggle to hold his attention, so I rip my eyes away from his and stare off into the distance as I pet a snoring Chandler. It's when his hand reaches out and gently grabs for my chin, bringing my eyes back to his, that I feel the warmth of his touch blast through my entire body.

"You're right. I haven't done much considering of your feelings during all this. I've been selfish and focused on what's important to me. I'm sorry. I have no fucking idea who Mr. Death is and why he wants you, but I think it's about time we start trying to find out. Okay?"

Like being swept away at sea, the depth of his sincerity, I get lost in his stare. His jade green eyes have me drowning, my gaze falling to his lips. Those lips that gave me my first real kiss. His stubble that brushed against my skin, feeling wonderful. His tongue inside my mouth, feeling foreign, yet exotic. Remembering the way I felt so light on my feet, as if I had floated away. My fairytale mind, one that lives behind the pages of my romance books, silently prays for him to kiss me again. My second kiss, being just as magical as the first. Maybe leading into a third and fourth. If I am still wishing, everything else that comes after kissing...undressing and under the covers where—

“What are you thinking about, little squirrel?”

“That I want some nuts.” *Gah, what? Shoot!* I throw my hands over my mouth, knocking his hand off my chin. “I mean, I agree. This *is* nuts. We need to get to the bottom of this.”

He stares at me, trying to diagnose me, until he gives up and sits back in his seat. I take a silent breath of relief when the timer on his phone goes off. Just as the relief sets in, the car instantly refills with tension. It’s time for him to make the call.

I’m compliant and sit back while he dials and listen while the phone rings.

“Right on time. Good boy,” I hear the man, Mr. Death, say.

“I want to speak to Lindsay,” Luca barks.

“Tsk tsk. Still don’t understand who’s calling the shots, do we? Maybe this will help you.” There’s a bit of silence until the shriek of a woman’s voice travels through the speaker of his phone.

I cover my mouth, while Luca slams on the steering wheel, his jaw tense. “Don’t fucking hurt her! I understand fully who’s in charge!”

“Good. How’s your captive?”

He looks over at me, his brow arched. I nudge him, silently telling him now is the time to ask questions.

“Fine.”

“Fine? Explain. Or I’d hate to—”

“Fuck! She’s fantastic! Difficult. Doesn’t listen. Feisty and—*ouch*. Hits. But just great. What do you want with her anyway?” he asks and my ears perk, waiting for the answer.

The phone goes silent for a short pause until Mr. Death speaks. “You have five hours to check in. Be in Indianapolis when you make that call.”

Then he hangs up.



We drive for a few hours in silence until we're forced to pull off for gas and Chandler to potty. My legs are achy, and I look forward to stretching them and seeing what kinds of goodies they have in the candy section of the convenience store.

Luca jumps out and before I have a chance to follow, he points my way. "Stay put."

He doesn't even wait for my answer, which was to tell him we had enough money for at least a package of candy, but he's off and storming into the convenience store, before I have a chance. I put Chandler on his leash and walk him to the small patch of grass and wait for him to find the perfect spot. While he's doing his business, I notice a payphone off to the side of the building.

"I wonder what Mabel is up to." I pull my eyes away from the phone to Chandler. "You think Beatrice had meatloaf with Henry?" Two yaps. "Hmm. I mean I *could* call." Chandler yaps again. "I know, but remember? That one time we received that weird magazine on hacks, it taught us how to make free calls on payphones." More yapping. "I agree. Let's try it."

I tug on Chandler's leash and seeing Luca inside, his back to us, we make our way to the payphone. Picking up the receiver, I conjure up the trick I learned by pressing the pound key twice and the number five three times, followed by the shop's number and before I know it the phone starts to ring.

It takes four long rings before someone picks up.

"Corleone's Trinkets and Treasures. Make me an offer I can't refuse and it's yours."

"Mabel, hi, it's me."

A gust of swearing sounds through the phone, causing Chandler to bark and me to pull the receiver away from my ear. "I see you've learned a whole lot more naughty words since I've been away," I say, rubbing at my wounded eardrum.

"Honey, where in the hell are you?"

I look around, not even able to give her a proper answer. “Not quite sure. The weather is lovely and Chandler found a wonderful patch of—”

“Sweetheart, focus. I need to know where you are. Are you okay? Has anyone tried to... Never mind... Something’s happened.”

My attention is back on point. “What happened? Is everything okay? Did Beatrice—”

“No, honey, it’s not Beatrice. It’s your house. It’s been—”

“Shit, is that Francis? Give me the phone, woman!” Grumbling of two sisters having it out echoes through the phone until I hear Beatrice’s voice. “Dammit, girl, you okay? We’ve been lookin’ for ya. Where you at? Take my advice and go on an adventure?”

I shrug. “Well, you can say that...”

“*Whooo hooo!* Thatta girl! Stop at any sketchy truck stops and meet a man? Those are where them outlaws hang out—*ouch!* Damn you, woman!”

I hear Mabel in the background yelling. “This ain’t the time!”

“It’s always the time. Women have needs too! You should go find yours!” Another whack and I hear more scuffling.

Mabel wrestles back the phone. “Where are you?”

“Pennsylvania. Do you know how many cities are in Pennsylvania?”

“Gonna skip the caring, child. Are you hurt?”

That’s strange. “Why would I be hurt?”

More wrestling until I get Bea back. “’Cause you got it good from some stranger. Big? Small? Was he a hair puller? *Dammit!* You hit me again, Mabel, and I’m gonna become an only child.”

I giggle, missing my best friends. “Well, actually... I did have my first kiss.”

What sounds like the phone dropping then shuffling can be heard before Beatrice wins again and breathes heavily through the phone. “Tell. Me. Everything!”

I blush, starting to relive the best and, well, only kiss I’ve ever experienced. I feel shameful gossiping, but a smile stretches across my face. “It was absolutely magic—”

My words are sadly cut short when I look up and catch Luca storming toward me. Wow. That’s a new level of anger I haven’t seen before.

“For the love of God, I’m old. I don’t have time for stalling. Spit it out!”

“It... It was... uh...”

“What. The. Fuck.”

I open and close my mouth to Luca, who's close enough for me to hear his octave growl. "I just wanted to make a call. I..."

Mabel's voice grabs my attention. "Honey, you gotta listen to me real quick." I press the phone to my ear. "Your house. It was burnt to the ground last night."

My worry of Luca's anger disappears at her words. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah, honey. We've all been worried. They said it was arson. Officer Callahan told me they tried to save what they could, but..." She chokes up. "The house is gone, sweetheart."

Words. Emotions. Disbelief. It's all stuck in my throat as I try and comprehend what she just told me. My house. My momma's house. It's gone. The memories. Her memories. Gone.

"Frannie, say something."

"I...I...the yellow dress. Did anyone grab the yellow dress?"

Mabel's sorrowful sigh gives me the answer I refuse to hear.

"That's not all. A strange man came in asking about you. Where you were and who you were with."

"Why would someone want to know where and who I'm with?"

"Not sure. My ignorant sister told them you were off on an adventure getting your thrills."

"'Cause she is!" Beatrice yells in the background.

I'm still stuck on the information she just shared. My life. The only thing I had that kept me close to my parents. Gone.

I barely fight it when Luca snatches the phone out of my hands and slams it on the receiver. "What the hell are you thinking making a call?"

I want to tell him I was missing home and wanted to hear the voices of people who made me happy. But he goes on his rant, not allowing me a word. "Shit like this could get us killed. You're not being smart. They could be tracking us."

They?

At that, I snap out of my mournful daze and roll my eyes. "Oh, give me a break. No one's trying to kill—"

My argument is cut short when a bullet whizzes past my head, pinging off the payphone behind me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Luca

MAFIA QUEEN SHAKEDOWN

Fuck.

What the actual fuck?

Without thinking, I snag Francis up and run. She's light tossed over my shoulder and doesn't fight too much, thank God. Bongo is running after us, scared as shit, his leash dragging behind him.

We're being shot at.

More importantly, *she's* being shot at.

"Who's trying to kill us?" she shrieks, panic in her tone.

"Not us, sweetheart," I growl, giving her thigh a quick squeeze. "You."

"What on Earth? Me? No way! You're the bad guy here! They're after you!"

Ignoring her rant—because she has them fucking continuously and I don't have time for this shit—I toss her into the driver's side of the car before shoving her the rest of the way in. Bongie jumps in after her and settles in her lap as I start the car.

Ping! Ping!

Bullets hit the side of the mauve boat, sending worry trembling through me. We have to get the hell out of here and away from these people. I peel out of the parking lot without a second glance. Once I'm out on the main road, two SUVs pull out after us.

Fuck.

Who are these people?

Rossi's men or Mr. Death's?

Surely Mr. Death wouldn't be trying to kill us if he wants Francis brought to him unharmed. He goes through great lengths to continually ask

for proof of life when it comes to her. There's no way he'd try and have her killed.

So it has to be Rossi.

But they should be after me, not her, right?

Why in the fuck are they trying to take her out?

Over my dead body.

"They're getting closer!" she whines. "Why are you driving so slow, Outlaw?"

Ignoring her, I gas it, but the boat just makes a groan of protest. If I'm going to have to be outrunning goons, I'm going to need a better car. A faster one. One a little better at protecting my precious cargo.

Bam!

Something slams against our rear bumper, making Francis fly forward. I'm not quick enough to stop her from banging her head on the dash.

"Owww," she whines, her voice high and on the verge of a meltdown.

"Fuck," I hiss, reaching across her and snagging the seat belt. I pull it over her and Bingo and snap it in place. "Stay down, sweetheart."

She shoots me a look I can't decipher, but it's one that speaks to a part of me deep inside. One that makes me want to protect her. Not because my family depends on it or Mr. Death commands it to be. Because I want to. Because I got her into this mess, and one day I'll get her out of it.

"Do you know Arlo Rossi?" I ask as I gun it and pass a slow truck, momentarily losing the SUVs.

"Yes!" she exclaims. "Older guy with a gentle voice. Afro. He's famous!"

I frown at her. Rossi is old as fuck, but he doesn't have an afro and he sure as hell doesn't have a gentle voice. I know that from experience.

"Are you sure? How do you know him?"

"Well, I don't know him personally, but I'm a huge fan. So is Beatrice. In fact, she loves him." She smiles prettily at me. Why are the crazy ones always hot?

"Elaborate. You've been in his casino?"

"Mr. Ross has a casino?"

"Rossi, and yes. In Atlantic City."

"I'm pretty sure it's Ross," she says in exasperation. "And I think you've been reading Wikipedia. That site's wrong, you know. I learned the

hard way once when looking up the authenticity of one of the trinkets from my shop. Did you know just anyone can put something on that site and—”

Pop!

The back window shatters and Francis screams.

“He broke Momma’s window! First they burn down my house and now they’re destroying my car? Ohhhh, these monkeys are so going down!”

Biggie the small dog yaps in agreement and then growls.

These two are fierce as fuck...*not*.

“They tried to burn down your house? Why does Rossi want to ruin your life?” I demand, swerving around an eighteen-wheeler.

“The paintings!” she cries out. “He wants his paintings back!” She whines and looks over her shoulder. “Between us, they’re ugly. I wasn’t trying to be rude!”

What. The. Fuck.

“If his men would stop shooting at us, I could just explain that I sold them to Beatrice for a discounted rate not because I didn’t want them, but because pond scenes aren’t really my thing. You know, Outlaw? Like, the birds are beautiful and all, Chandler agrees, but it just didn’t go with my décor. Now Bea? She loves Mr. Ross’s paintings. They really did go to a good home. He didn’t have to burn down mine!”

Time pauses for a moment as she distracts me. Francis is fucking crazy. The end. And Mr. Death must be into some really kinky shit if he wants this woman. Here she is rambling about who the fuck knows with her damn dog clearly agreeing with everything she’s saying as though we’re not being shot at by mobsters. As though we can pull over and sort out this misunderstanding. Either she’s crazy or really that sheltered from the world.

Ping!

A bullet bounces off the dashboard just inches from where she was before. Shit! I snag her by the hair and drag her down, her face to my thigh.

“Stay down,” I growl. “Please, Francis. Let me focus.”

Her hand clutches my thigh and the denim grows wet from what feels like tears. Guilt infects me like the fucking plague. Despite being chased by these motherfuckers, all I want to do is comfort her and promise her I’ll keep her safe.

“I’m going to get us out of here,” I vow as I stroke her silky soft hair. “Do you trust me?”

“Do you have a gun?” she fires back at me.

“No.”

“What kind of outlaw doesn’t have a gun?”

Bingieboo yaps as though he’s pissed I don’t have one.

“I’m a fucking con, Francis, not an outlaw.”

She makes a loud huff. “Sorry, dude, but I haven’t read any con books, so I’m no help there. But mafia books? I’m your girl.”

I pat her head. “Mafia, huh?” I’m smiling because only Francis makes someone smile while they’re getting shot at.

“If I were the outlaw, which I’m not because clearly I’m the stunning damsel in distress who gets her clothes torn from her trembling body in the story, I would make the bad guys crash.”

I’m too distracted by the visual of me tearing off her clothes to free her full tits that are all too enticing in her pink dress.

“What?” I ask dumbly.

She tilts her head up to look at me. Fuck, with her in my lap, with her plump lips in a pout, I’m way too fucking distracted. “See if you can make them crash, dummy.”

“Crash dummy?”

“No, you’re the dummy!”

I scowl as I speed up the car. In the rearview mirror, I can see the goons keeping up closely behind. I scan my eyes up ahead. Another eighteen-wheeler is in front of me, but on the horizon, another is barreling our way.

Gunning it, I haul ass to tailgate the big truck in front of me. The SUVs catch up, the first one bumping me in the rear, making us jolt forward.

“Hang on,” I growl, my hand once again stroking her hair.

If I’m going to die, it’ll be doing something enjoyable. Like petting a crazy squirrel.

Veering to the left, I notice the other truck is close. I just need it closer. Closer. Closssssserrrr. Clos—now!

I whip out to the left, slam my foot on the gas, and then fly past the truck. I’m barely swinging to the right and into my lane when the eighteen-wheeler screeches past us.

CRASH!

Crunching metal resounds behind me and I see a tire fly up over the eighteen-wheeler I passed. I speed on past the scene, but then the other SUV makes it around the crash before hauling ass our way.

“One down, one to go,” I tell Francis. “Any more tricks?”

“You could always pull into a police station. Bad guys hate the police station,” she offers.

Bonkers growls in her lap. He doesn’t like that idea.

“Yeah, terrible idea,” I agree with the dog. “How about we try something else?”

The dog yaps in agreement. I give him a little pat on the head.

“Hold on tight,” I warn before slamming on my brakes.

The SUV is going so fast that it has to turn hard to avoid a collision. As it swerves past us, gravity takes over and it starts rolling. I pull off onto the shoulder and watch in awe as the vehicle rolls and rolls and rolls until it stops upside down.

“Stay here,” I order.

“Where are you going?” she cries out, sitting up.

“To get answers. Stay.”

I storm out of the car and jog over to the crash site. When I squat down to look inside the vehicle, one man is dead, but the other is struggling to untangle himself from the seat belt.

“Who sent you?” I demand.

“Fuck you,” the guy says.

“You work for Bob Ross?” Francis barks out, sounding like a tough bitch as she squats beside me.

I glance over at her in shock. Her tits are barely staying inside her pink dress. The first chance we get, I’m making her change. A man on the run needs to focus...and not on what her tits would look like in his mouth.

“I told you to stay in the car,” I growl.

“And you admitted I’m the better outlaw.”

“They’re going to kill you, bitch,” the man growls. “I hope they make it hurt first.”

She gapes at him. “Why does Bob hate me? Is this about Bea?”

“What the fuck?” he utters.

“Oh, don’t play the victim now, buttwipe,” she snips, flinging a handful of dirt into his open window. “I know he sent you. I know he burned down my house.”

“Who the hell is Bob?” he demands.

“I’m the one asking the questions around here,” she yells back. Binky yaps in agreement and then growls like he’s ferocious as fuck. I roll my eyes at them. “Why did Bob Ross send you?”

“Lady,” the guy grumbles. “I don’t know who the hell Bob Ross is.”

“Arlo Rossi,” I snarl, reminding him who truly sent him.

“I’m pretty sure he means Bob,” Francis says in exasperation. “Let me handle the mafia matters, Outlaw. You just sit there and look pretty.”

I snort. “Francis...”

“You send Bob a message,” she screeches, sending more dirt in the guy’s face. “You tell him we’re going to paint birds with your blood! What does he always say? ‘We don’t make mistakes, just happy little accidents.’ You, buddy, are an accident we’re going to paint a bloody bird over!”

Right. So she’s lost her fucking marbles. Again.

“Bob Ross, the famous painter, is dead,” I tell her gently. “He died like thirty years ago.”

She widens her big brown eyes and her plump lips part. “Then who’s this guy?”

I’m about to answer when I get a whiff of gasoline. It’s pooling out of the SUV, growing by the second.

“Francis...” I start when I notice the guy pull out a lighter. “Oh shit.”

Once again, I snag the girl and take off running. Her little fella is right at our feet as I run.

Boom!

We fly forward from the force of the blast and I crash to the dirt, covering Francis with my body. Heat billows from behind us, singeing my clothes and hair. My heart does a flip of relief when I hear the Bingster yapping from up ahead. Looking down, I swipe the dark hair from Francis’s face and check her over. Her brown eyes are wild with fear, but she’s okay.

Not even thinking about it, I brush my lips across hers, thankful she’s still with me.

Apparently, I like crazy.

Enough that I want to protect it. And fucking keep it.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice husky as I pull away.

“I have to say I’m relieved that Bob Ross isn’t trying to kill me. He seemed like such a nice guy.” Her chin wobbles as she says strange words. I’m learning her babbling is a way to deflect from fear and nerves and sadness.

I run my thumb over her chin to stop it from shaking. “Bob’s a good guy. Arlo Rossi is the bad guy trying to kill us. Now what do you say, mafia

queen? Want to try and shake down Mr. Death for some answers when we speak to him again?”

Her nostrils flare. “I get to help?”

“I’m no outlaw,” I admit with a crooked grin. “And you’re pretty fucking resourceful. Besides, we need to find out just what you mean to this Mr. Death. He wants you and we need to know why he wants you. He’s clearly an enemy of the Rossi gang, though, which makes him less of an enemy to us. What do you say, partner?”

She rewards me with the most breathtaking smile I’ve ever seen. A smile that makes my dick twitch. Reluctantly, I stand and help her to her feet. Her dress is dirty and askew, slightly showing me a hint of her rosy pink nipple. Reaching forward, I slip my fingers into the top of her dress and straighten it for her. But not before copping a little feel with my fingertips. Small, hard, perked to attention. A nipple I’d quite like between my teeth. I jerk my hand away from her, trying not to revel in the way her neck turns bright red from my touching her.

“Right,” I grumble. “We need to get to Indianapolis. We’ll make a plan when we get there.”

I look past her at the ball of flames. Fuck, we barely made it through that. It’s long past time for us to start working together. It would seem our lives have been woven together somehow, and I’ll be damned if I keep fighting it.

We’re going to get answers.

And we’re going to do it together.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Francis

HOLLYWOOD'S BEEN FEEDING ME LEAN CUISINES AND LIES

“Okay, my turn. I’m going on a picnic and I’m bringing apples, barbed wire, Chandler, doodie bags, elephant, fake ID, *Gone with the Wind* book, hot-wired car, instant potato mix, jackknife, a kite, and Lean Cuisines!” I shriek, overly excited that *L* landed on my turn. If we make it, I’ll be able to bring Richard when I get to the letter *R*.

Luca’s lips turn sour with disgust. “Lean Cuisines? That shit tastes like dog food.”

I gasp in utter horror. “They most certainly do not! They’re the most delicious little packages of food! Did you know it’s what celebrities eat to stay thin and healthy?”

He certainly knows nothing about Lean Cuisines and it’s obvious he’s never had the macaroni and cheese one. His head tilts just slightly to sneak a peek my way and I begin to blush at how flustered his simple smile makes me. Those lips—I swear those lips kissed me after the explosion, but that’s not right because he’s married.

“You realize all that shit is fake, right?” His brow lifts.

Another gasp. “It is not. I’ve tasted them and they’re—”

“No, the advertisements. Those rich snobs aren’t eating those shit boxes. They get paid to be spokespeople for them.” Confusion washes over me. “*Really?* Come on... You don’t think those famous people are sitting around eating microwave meals, do you? They’re eating fancy shit like raw fish and kale, if eating at all.”

“So, you’re telling me...” I twist in my seat so I’m fully facing him. “All that stuff celebrities use in those fashion and fitness magazines are just spokespeople pretending?”

“Yep.”

“The hair color that comes in that convenient box?”

“Lies. They go to Rodeo Drive to get their hair done.”

Devastation floods through me. “Luscious Locks Shampoo? Because I’ve been specially ordering it—”

“Guaranteed they wouldn’t be caught dead using that cheap shit.”

My brain is struggling to process. This whole time, I was living a lie, thinking by using the same products, eating the same glorious meals that I was just like them. I can’t—I *won’t* bring myself to ask about Richard. That one *has* to be true. Who wouldn’t want Richard to get them in the best shape of—

“What’s going on in that little squirrel brain of yours?” He’s eyeing me curiously again. I get lost in the way my skin pebbles with a layer of goose bumps when he blesses me with his quirky side grin for a second time. It’s rare I see the laidback side of this man, and when I do, I want to savor it.

Married. He’s married. *Don’t look at him, Frannie!*

“Earth to Francis,” he says, urging me on.

My lips part to conjure up some lie, far from my actual thoughts, which are denial that famous people don’t also love tuna in a can and how my mind suddenly wonders how delightful it would be to have those full lips pressing against my own.

My stomach decides in that moment to growl something fierce. My hands fly to my belly, also waking a sleeping Chandler. “My goodness.” My cheeks flush with embarrassment that such a horrific sound came from inside me.

“Shit, you’re hungry,” he says, the seriousness back in his voice. Long gone is the easygoing smile I truly hunger for. Wait, no. I don’t hunger for it because he has a wife. That’s her smile to salivate over.

“No, it’s fine, we can—”

“We’re stopping. I need to feed you. Plus, we need to find a place to clean up and rest. Our next call is in an hour anyhow.”

I don’t argue because, now that I think about it, I am truly starved. We missed lunch since we were too busy fighting off bad guys and time must have gotten away from us, with all the road games he surprisingly was compliant in playing.

Luca pulls off at the next exit and takes a left into the parking lot of a decent sized hotel with a fancy steak restaurant attached. He parks at the

end of the lot, away from other vehicles, and turns off the car. "I'm going to go finagle us a room. Can you do what I ask for once and just sit tight?"

I nod, but my legs are already itching to get out of the car and roam. I spotted a cute little antique shop next door. Chandler is doing circles in my lap, needing to go piddle. "Am I able to take Chandler to do his business?" *And take a peek into that shop*, I say in my head.

"Yeah. Just don't go far. Cool?"

"Cool." I nod. I can do that. Don't go far. He watches me for another second or two before nodding back and taking off toward the entrance.

"Luca?" I call for him and he halts, turning around as I climb out of the car. I should have stayed seated because when his eyes capture mine, I sway on my feet. My heartrate picks up, but I manage to ask, "Did you need a wingman for this one?"

His brows lift with amusement, but he shakes his head. "Nah, I got this." And turns around and disappears through the revolving doors.

I sigh, disappointed he didn't say yes. I'm starting to quite enjoy these little games. My list of IOUs is getting a bit out of control, though, as I look down at my battered dress and gasp. How did I not realize how ruined it was? My intimate parts are barely covered! What would his wife think of me running around with him in this state?

"Oh dear heavens. Chandler, what a minx I've become!" I earn two yaps. I try pulling at the front of the dress to cover my nearly naked breast, but it doesn't help. My cheeks blast crimson at the thought of poor Luca having to sit there while I looked so brazen and unkept. I tug on Chandler's leash and walk to the back of the car and pop open the trunk. It takes a few tugs since a bullet hole damaged the lock and search through my suitcase for a change of clothes. My heart stops a beat when I move aside the extra leotard I grabbed and spot a yellow patch of material. My lungs constrict and a single tear forms and falls over my lid, cascading down my sun-kissed cheek. Reaching inside my bag, I pull out Momma's yellow dress.

"I grabbed it. I..." I can't finish my own thought, bringing it to my chest and hugging it as if it were my own momma in my arms. Memories of her twirling around in it, holding my hand. Us laughing and being ridiculous. Singing, playing. All the simple things in our life that still managed to bring us both so much joy. In this dress, she was always happy. On those unlucky days when sadness would make its way into our home, those days she fought to get out of bed, I'd find the yellow dress. I never

knew what the symbolism of it was. But it made her happy. Sometimes it made her just as sad. But when she wore it, an aura about her shined. It was as if it gave her life. As if she was wearing a happy memory.

I never did ask her why she loved it so much. I felt it was something that was meant just for her. Kind of like how Mabel used to always tell me her secret cookie recipes were her own business and not for anyone else to steal. When Momma died, I wanted her to be buried in it. I felt it would give her peace as she made her way to heaven. But when the day came, I couldn't let it go. I remember Beatrice begging me to let her in. It was time to go and they needed the dress to bury her. But I lay in my bed, wrapped up in it, refusing to let it go. If I let them take the dress, I'd be letting them take away everything I had left of her.

And selfishly, I never did. Mabel, being Momma's best friend too, chose a replacement. One Momma always wore to church and promised me God's door would open wide for her, no matter what she wore. Because she was a true angel.

And when we said our goodbyes and they lowered her into the ground, I hugged myself, tears fogging the last moments I'd ever see her again. And I stood there, wearing her yellow dress, feeling the sun warm my skin. Knowing she was looking down on me. She was proud. She wanted me to feel the happiness she always felt in it.

The thought of my house burning to ashes carried no weight compared to the loss I'd feel of losing this dress. My grip tightens and I press my face into the worn, yet still soft material and I cry. Of grief or joy, I'm not sure. Time takes no pity on the aching heart. It doesn't allow us to heal, before resuming our everyday lives. It's already been a year, but it always feels like just yesterday she left me. I wonder if she crossed over those gates okay. If she's with my father. If together, they're watching over me. Are they proud of me? More tears shed at the ache inside my chest. The emptiness. The loneliness. I miss her so much. I even miss a man I've never met. If I could just turn back time. Maybe catch the signs sooner, I could—

"Hey, little squirrel. You okay?" Luca's soft voice breaks into my pleading thoughts. I lift my head away from the soaked dress and quickly gather my wits.

"Of course. Something's in my eye."

He doesn't fall for my con, but surprises me when he steps forward, raising his open palms to my shoulders. His touch is light yet comforting. "I

know this isn't easy. But I won't let anyone hurt you. I fucking promise. I'll find the answers you're looking for. We won't stop until we get them, okay?"

It's almost impossible to fight the urge to throw myself into his arms and shed any tears that remain. Just like the damsel falls into the arms of her knight in shining armor as he prepares to save her. But I steady myself and slowly take a breath, knowing this is far from a fairy tale. He's someone else's Prince Charming. Instead, I nod and take a step back, needing the space between us.

He waves a plastic card. "I got us a room." His expression is kind. Gentle. "You can go in and shower first. I'll walk Bingo and wear him out so we can grab some food."

A small smirk fights its way through my sadness. "His name is Chandler Bing."

"Sure. Whatever you say. Go change." There's a struggle in his eyes, but they lose, and his vision drops, a small grumble erupting up his throat. He covers it up with a fake cough. "I'll, uh, just be outside."

My cheeks flare, reminding myself of my state of dress. Chandler yaps and without making any more eye contact, I grab the key and head toward the rooms.

"Frannie?"

I turn, hearing him use my shortened name. Is he going to ask me why I was really crying? Ask me to allow him in the room with me? Kiss all my sadness away? Possibly take my virginity, which I would be willing to offer him? "Yeah?"

"One-oh-four. It's the other way."

Confusion. "What?"

He stares at me, as if he's trying to crack open my soul. His hands now shoved into his jeans pockets, he also seems fidgety. As if he wants to make the same requests. Instead, he points in the opposite direction I was currently heading.

"The room. It's the other way."

Right. Room. Me going to it. Alone and with my virginity intact. *Lordy, Francis. Get it together. He's a married man.* I nod, and without further self-embarrassment I turn the other way and scurry to our room.



Making my way outside, the sun is still high in the sky, feeding the humidity and heat. I cover my eyes to search out Luca, when I see him. He looks handsome with his hands shoved into his pockets and a crooked grin on his face. His hair is wet and he smells nice.

“Wow, you clean up nicely,” he says, taking longer than a true gentleman would to admire a lady. “The dress looks beautiful on you. Really brings out your eyes.”

“Thanks,” I kindly reply. “It was my mother’s.”

“You, uh... Wow, look great. Certainly not like someone who’s been kidnapped by a con and on the run.”

I can’t help but smile. Even after laying our cards on the table, he still manages to crack a joke and make me laugh.

“You too. Do I want to know how you showered since I was in the room the whole time?”

His shoulders rise in a carefree shrug. “A true con will never tell.” My lips perk up and a small little giggle slips out. “Now, let’s go get some dinner.” He sticks out his hand for me to take it, and with a short pause, I entwine my fingers through his. *For the con, of course. Not real.* He leads the way toward the restaurant.

As we get closer, a small wave of excitement starts to swirl inside my belly. “So, what’s the plan this time? Are we stealing a credit card? Holding up a waitress to give us someone else’s food? Maybe pretending we’re the cooks and making anything we want?”

Luca’s chuckle is food for the soul. I could just feast off that alone. “No. I haven’t thought of it just yet. Figured we get seated first.”

“What can I do? Should I make a scene? Pretend I’m choking and you can steal someone’s plate?”

He tugs at my hand, causing me to fall into him. His fingers slip out of mine, only to wrap his arm around my waist. “How about you just look pretty as you already are and let the con do the con work?” He winks at me, and I barely hold my posture as I trip over my own two feet. He catches me, his grip tightening and cocooning me into his chest. My nose presses into his chest, and shamefully I inhale, the smell of fresh soap assaulting my nostrils. “Forget how to use those two feet?” He chuckles, steadying me on

my feet. I want to continue to hide my face so he doesn't see my flushed cheeks. Ever since he walked through my door, or bashed through it more like it, my body has been introduced to so many unfamiliar emotions. The tingles, flutters, hot, cold. I'm confused at what it all means. One thing is for certain, I think I'm attracted to my kidnapper. And it's all his fault because he's a shameless flirt.

"Cat got your tongue?"

I forget he's waiting for a response. I muster up the strength and ignore the feelings I may inappropriately be having and step out of his warm, inviting hold. Mentally I sigh in disappointment, because it felt nice to be so close, but then smack myself for slipping back into my improper thoughts. "Actually no. You said we were in this together. Which means I'm also a con." I double regret pulling away when the sound of his laughter reverberates across the parking lot, wanting to feel the vibration against my nipples. *Lordy, pull it together.* "Laugh all you want, but I'm a con too. I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well."

His arms cross over his stone chest, his lips spreading into a curious grin. "Do you now? And what's your plan, little squirrel?"

I'm unsure if I approve of this little nickname, but certainly approve of the way his eyes eat me alive as he stares at me waiting for my answer. Visions of him doing things, such shameful things with those eyes, his hands, Lordy, that tongue that just stuck out of his mouth wetting his sexy bottom lip. Wait. No. He has a wife! "*Stop it!*"

"Stop what?"

Shoot. I'm losing it. I'm hungry. It's because I haven't eaten that my mind has gone rogue. *This is not a romance book, Frannie. Get it together. He does not want to devour you piece by piece because he has someone already.* "Stop trying to take control, is what I meant. If we're in this together, we do the cons together. Or I'm out." More laughter. Shoot, I need to stop that tingling thing.

"You know you're my captive, right? You can't be out."

"Well, I won't be compliant." *I would be if—*

"Babe, you have yet to *be* compliant. What would be the difference?"

Babe? I pretend I didn't hear that pet name—for his wife's sake—and completely ignore the flutters in my belly. Ugh. He's winning this. I stick my chin up with confidence in my tone. "I want to do the next con."

"Which is?" He smiles.

“Dinner. And I get to choose how it happens.” I’m not sure what will happen next. He may laugh at me and allow it. Or he may drag me back to the room and tie me to the bed and go feed himself, which would be a shame because I’ve never eaten outside of Teterboro diners and I would love to try something new.

To my surprise, he unlocks his arms and puts his hands in the air in surrender. “Fair enough. You win, *Con Master*. Show me the way.”

Wow! “Really?... I mean. Yes. Let’s go.” This time I grab his hand and continue to walk. Luca doesn’t say a word but maintains his humorous smile as I drag him through the doors of the steakhouse.

Once we enter, I’m thankful that no one is at the hostess booth. Releasing Luca’s hand, I sneak behind the booth and scroll through the reservations sheet. Memorizing a few last names and table numbers, I take note of the time they arrived and which ones should soon be completing their meals. Three tables are hitting two hours. Bingo.

I step out of the booth and peek my head into the main dining area. Table one is still eating dessert. Table two sipping on final drinks. Table three. Voila! I wait for them to retrieve their jackets and walk away when I hurry over to the table and take a seat, grabbing the billfold holding the receipt and tip. I quickly skim the room for a waitress in another section and grab her attention.

“Excuse me, miss, my parents just left, but we forgot to place an order to go for the rest of the family. My brothers refused to get off their butts and stop playing videogames to come eat. Boys, ya know? Anyhow, I need to place an order to go, and just throw it on the same card.”

She eyes me annoyingly. I slip the fifty-dollar bill stuffed in the billfold out and wave it at her. “A huge tip is in it for you if you hurry. My brothers can be tyrants if not fed.”

Her eyes light up at the money.

“Sure thing, what can I put in for you, miss?”

Shoot. I grab the menu and hurry to give her some items. Unfortunately, all items on the menu are unfamiliar to me. Nowhere in Teterboro serves chateaubriand steak or lobster frittata. “Umm... I would like...”

“Sister, there you are. Chandler is getting really aggressive. You need to hurry.” My head whips to Luca, who’s now next to me taking the menu out of my hand. “Hmmm... Let’s make this fast and easy. Two Guinness burgers, fries. Throw in an order of your Prosciutto and pea farfalle.” He

turns to me. “Do you think they want duck? They may be sick of eating duck.” I open my mouth to attempt an answer, but he doesn’t wait for my reply. “Yeah, you’re right. No duck. Let’s just stick to the calamari and bruschetta. Oh! And let’s not forget dessert. Chandler sure gets yappy when he doesn’t get dessert. Right here. We’ll take a slice of the chocolate ganache cake.” Luca hands the girl the menu. “And please hurry. I’ll write in a fatter tip if you make this quick.”

She nods and rushes with our order straight back to the kitchen.

I turn to him, my voice hushed. “This was *my* con.”

“And *I* know the signature look when someone gets stuck. You were stuck. I saved you.”

My eyebrows crease, ready to give him some lip for interfering, but he in turn wiggles his brows back at me. “Partners, remember?”



The waitress sure wanted that big tip because she was handing us two hefty to-go bags in under twenty minutes. Luca adjusted the tip on the receipt, giving her a hundred-dollar tip. This allowed her to forget the fifty I was holding, which we pocketed. I took a mental note of the name of the receipt to write an IOU for, and we walked hand in hand out of the restaurant.

When we finally make it back to our room, I’m famished. I have no idea what he ordered, but it smells divine.

While I grab the plastic cups by the coffee maker for drinks, Luca lays out our feast.

“This looks amazing. Too bad I have no idea what this all is.”

He gives me that quirky side eye. “You’ve never had a burger before?”

“Pfft, I’ve eaten a burger, mister. It’s a household staple. But what is that?” I point to the little fried rings.

“These? Calamari? You’ve seriously never had fried calamari?”

Clearly not. “What is it? Like a mini onion ring?”

He shakes his head but takes my hand and pulls out the chair of the small table shoved in the corner of the room. He sits me down and with a plastic fork, pokes at a piece of food, dipping it into a red sauce and bringing it to my lips. “Open.” I’m hesitant because Lord knows what he could be feeding me. “Frannie, do you trust me?”

I don't know, do I? *Just a half an hour ago you were willing to allow him to take your virginity despite his marital status.* Okay. Good point. "Yes, I trust you."

"Then open."

And I do. The tasty morsel slips off the fork into my mouth and the first bite sends me into a euphoric state of bliss. "My goodness, what *is* that? It's delicious!" Just as I swallow the bite, he's ready with another waiting. Three bites in, he opens another container.

"Squid." He pauses to smirk at me when I stop mid chew. "And don't think about it too long or it gets weird. Tell me you've had bruschetta?"

I shake my head. Squid does taste delicious, though I'm not going to ponder on it for long because then I think about the tentacles and—ack! Bruschetta. Focus on that. It looks good, but who would have thought to put small little tomato bits with cheese on a toasted piece of bread. When I take a bite of it, a strange moan filters up my throat and my eyes flutter just a bit. "How in heavens have I not had this before?" I ask while taking another bite.

"No idea. But I swear I'm getting just as much enjoyment watching you eat if for the first time."

At that we both laugh. We go through each meal, not realizing that we're now both holding forks feeding each other bite after bite.

"Frannie, can I ask you a question?"

"As long as you don't stop with the pasta bites."

More laughter. "Deal. How is it you've been so sheltered? I don't say that in a bad way. Just... How the fuck have you been so sheltered?"

"Well, to be honest, I guess I never really knew I was. Teterboro is all I know. I was raised there and never went as much as a foot outside the town lines. I followed in the same footsteps as everyone else. Which are all into retirement so..." I take a minute to gather my thoughts. "I just, didn't know really there was an outside world, besides what I read in my tabloid magazines. No one new or young came through our town. Everything was the same. So, I guess... to answer your question, I just didn't know."

"Hey." He grabs my chin to meet his gaze. "There's nothing wrong with it. I didn't ask you to poke fun. I asked because for some fucking crazy reason, I enjoy watching you explore new shit. And if something as simple as calamari puts that smile on your face, then for the rest of our time together, I'll work to keep it there."

We stare at one another, sharing a moment. An unspoken understanding. Even though we come from two different worlds, in this moment, we're the same.

"Well then, if that's the case, I want to introduce you to Richard."

Whatever I've done right to deserve that smile. I thank the Lord above.

"Richard," he says, his voice smooth like butter on a warm morning biscuit, melting my heart.

"Yes. If we're going to continue on this journey, it's a must you get to know Richard."

"Now?"

"No time like the present." I scoot my chair back, eager to show him. "Get up, mister. Quoting Richard's famous words, move those buns!" With a smile as wide as the sky, I hurry to my suitcase and rummage through until I find the tape. Pulling it out, I pivot toward the TV, thankful to see a VHS recorder. I pop the video in and turn on the television. "Get your tush over here and prepare to have Richard change your life." The intro portion starts and my adrenaline spikes. How I missed Richard. "You know, I watched an interview once. He said that no one is perfect. Like precious stones, we all have a few flaws. But to not focus on that. Focus on what we like about ourselves and *that* will bring us happiness and peace." I look over at Luca, now standing next to me. "He's very philosophical," I say with a serious smile. Richard comes on and I begin to clap along with him. "Come on. Follow him—oh wait! Should I change into my leotard—"

"NO... I mean nah. We don't want to keep Richard waiting."

Good point. I turn back to the video. "*Now, before we get started, we should get familiar with our heartrate...*" Richard goes through his intro, making sure we're ready for his workout. "*Sweatin' to the Oldies* is my favorite. I bet it becomes yours too." I offer him my energetic smile, lifting each foot up and down. Chandler yaps a few times, his tail wagging as though he agrees wholeheartedly.

"Oh, I'm sure it is. I can see why," he says. He may possibly be making fun, but he begins to lift his legs up and down, following Richard's lead. It doesn't bother me, because I know it takes just one full video to get hooked.

Thirty minutes fly by and before we know it, we're both laughing as Richard instructs us to swing our hips. Luca is even snapping his knuckles to the beat of the music. "See! Isn't this fun!"

“I’m loving it,” he says, laughter coding his sarcasm. But he is. He’s been smiling and following like a perfect little student since the tape began. Once it’s done, we both exhale and fall onto the bed laughing. “Wow, who would’ve known I’d actually enjoy me some Richard.”

I position myself up on my elbows to lean toward him. “I told you. He’s magical. My favorite quote of his was from an article, ‘Love yourself for all of you, and everyone else will too.’ He just makes you feel beautiful—”

I swallow the rest of my words when Luca’s head is off the bed, his mouth capturing mine. I don’t have time to prepare. Or remind him he has a wife. His hand cradles behind my head, trying to deepen our kiss. So unexpected, yet I find myself submitting to his touch, my lips fusing to his. With just a swoop of his tongue, I’m parting my lips and allowing him to explore. I’ve never officially kissed a man like this before, so I’m lost in what to do. He doesn’t take notice in my inexperience and takes my mouth slow. He tastes like chocolate. I muster up the courage and move my tongue around his, which earns me a subtle moan. His hand grips my hair, squeezing and pulling me even closer. This kiss is everything. I want to focus and memorize every little part of it. My hands lift from the bed and travel up his chest just as his phone starts to ring.

Luca becomes rigid instantly, his grip no longer pulling me toward him, but now pushing me away. “Fuck!” He jumps off the bed, causing me to roll over, almost falling off. “Fuck!” he roars again and goes for his phone on the table. “What time is it?” he growls as my eyes hurry to find the time. Oh God. It’s thirty minutes past five. We were supposed to call Mr. Death. He has his wife. I’m a rotten person.

“Luca—”

I say his name with worry just as he grabs his phone, taking a deep breath and answering Mr. Death’s call.

“I’m fucking sorry. I lost track of time. Please tell me they’re okay.”

“Ahh, Luca. I can’t do that.”

CHAPTER NINE

Luca

THE GOATFATHER

My heart stops beating in my chest as pure terror floods through me. I don't know this guy or his intentions. All I know is he has my family and he can't promise they're okay.

Fuck.

"Death," I growl, hoping to put some fire behind my words. "Tell me she's okay or so help me I'll—"

He chuckles, dark and wicked. "Or you'll what? In case you've forgotten, young man, you are working for me."

I dart my gaze to Francis, who wears a worried, guilty expression. I'm such an asshole. She doesn't deserve the shit I've put her through. The fact she kissed me and seems to like me is fucked up. This girl deserves so much better. Bottom line.

When she bites on her bottom lip, she seems so fucking innocent and pure. What will this Death bitch do to her? Hurt her like he's claimed to hurt my family.

Fuck no.

He wants her so bad?

Two can play this game.

Play along. My words are mouthed to Francis, but she gets me. This girl is clueless as fuck most days, but when push comes to shove, she always comes through.

"If my family is hurt, then I suppose I'll have to damage *your* goods. Only fair, hmm?"

The line is deadly quiet. "You wouldn't dare."

"You don't know me, Dr. Death—"

“Mr. Death,” he interrupts, sounding snooty as hell.

“Yeah, what the fuck ever. You’ll wish you were a doctor when I finish with her.” I stalk over to Francis and grip her throat. “Let your Death sugar daddy know how loud you can scream.” I gently throttle her so she gets me.

“Oh God,” she rasps out in exaggeration. “Don’t c-choke me. W-Who will take c-care of Chandler?” She coughs and chokes.

“YOU RELEASE HER OR I WILL SKIN YOU ALIVE AND FEED YOU TO MY FUCKING GOATS!” Mr. Death screams.

Francis’s eyes grow wide and then she grins wickedly. Her hand reaches up to grab the phone from me. I clutch onto it for a moment, worried, but then figure what do I have to lose. She turns it on speaker before she launches into her interrogation.

“You have goats?” Francis asks. “What kind? Like fainting goats?”

The line is quiet. “Pygmy,” he says. “Three Doelings and three Nannys.”

“Any Billys?” she ponders.

“Pardon?”

“What are their names, Death? Come on, give it up.”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “Gladys, Juniper, Crayola, Hendrix, Steve, and...”

“Billy?”

“How do you know this?”

“I have Intel, Death. And we’re on to you.”

I widen my eyes. She’s squirrely as fuck, but it seems to confuse the madman on the other line. Confusion is better than rage. We need answers.

“Impossible,” Mr. Death grumbles. “I’m a ghost.”

“A ghost with goats.”

“Your point?” he urges.

“My point, Death,” she bites out, looking sassy as hell, “is I know you have goats. Six of them. That means you live on land. We’re headed out west according to our MapQuest trajectory, so you totally have a farm. Am I right?”

“What? A farm?”

“Admit it, Death!”

The line goes silent again. “Well, it’s not a farm by Nebraska’s standards by any means. It’s more of a tract of land,” he rambles. “I’d love

to grow some crops, but that motherfucker just west of me sprays pesticides like it's his job. I nearly lost Juniper last spring!"

Crazy.

Death is fucking crazy too.

Thank fuck this girl knows crazy. Speaks the language—hell, she even teaches it. The girl has a PHD in LOCO. She has this shit in the bag. I nod at her to encourage her and earn a wild smile in return.

Crazy mode: activated.

"Juniper!" she shrieks. "He's my second favorite to Billy! What the corn dodgers, Death? I thought you were a hit man! Go take *him* out for trying to take little J out!"

"It's not that easy," Death growls.

"Sorry, Mr. Whiner, I couldn't hear you from all that crying you were doing," she sasses. "Are you or aren't you a hit man who destroys the lives of the innocent around you?!"

"Listen, sugar," Death says impatiently. "I'm not a hit man, I'm a mobster. *Capiche?*"

"I thought mobsters killed people," she argues.

"They do, but Gordon is—"

"Gordon is a monster!"

"But I can't just kill him—"

"Because Juniper doesn't matter to you? Seriously, Mr. Death! Listen to yourself!" Her neck is turning red. Holy shit. She's totally pissed about this made-up bullshit. I always knew I secretly enjoyed her crazy.

"Juniper matters to me!"

"Then why are you going to let him die?" Francis's lip trembles and fat tears well in her eyes. "Why?"

"Oh, sugar, don't cry," Mr. Death says, his voice cracking. "I don't like it when you cry."

She snuffles. "I want to talk to Lindsay."

Ahhh, good girl. My sweet little con artist.

"I can't let you do—"

"I want to talk to her right now or I'm not coming to see you! And Juniper needs me! How could you do this, Death?!"

He curses and then sighs. "They're out back."

"They're at Outback? You sent your prisoners to Outback?" She looks at me in confusion. My heart races in my chest.

They're okay?

"Not Outback. The backyard."

"With the goats?" Francis asks, hopefully. "Are they looking after Juniper?"

I hear a squealing laugh in the background and then my sister chiding my niece for getting too close to a water trough. He's telling the truth. The fucker really has goddamn goats, and my family is safe. Gripping Francis's jaw, I lean in and give her a chaste kiss before pulling away.

"Juniper is fine," Dr. Death assures her. "I just...I need..."

Despite my elation at having heard my sister and niece, I'm not keen on the way this fucker seems so desperate to have my girl. *My girl?* Whatever, I'm going with it.

"What do you need?" she asks. "Why do you want me? Will I be your new captive? Will I be the goatkeeper? Get it? Like gatekeeper but for goats?" She's nervous and rambling. I take her hand and squeeze it.

"We'll talk about your responsibilities when you get here," he grunts out. "You have two days to get to Tulsa and then I want a phone call at this time two days from now."

"Whoaaaaa Nelly, hold the phone," Francis bites out. "No can do, fella. I heard about that place. Bad news."

I shake my head at her. "Stop," I mouth.

There's no stopping this lunatic, though. When she gets the ball rolling, she just tumbles along until she's wrecked everything.

"Are you talking back to me?" he asks in astonishment.

"I certainly am! You may be The Goatfather, but I'm terrified of tornadoes. You're sending your precious jewel goat whisperer into tornado alley! Dr. Death—"

"Mr. Death—"

"You have no idea what you're doing! No wonder Gordon is lording his power over you—you, the mobster! Because you make terrible decisions! I can't go to Oklahoma! I'll die! Do you want me to die? Of course you do because you're Mr. Death." She changes her voice to a deep sound to imitate him. "Hi, I'm Mr. Death and I am super dumb sending my valuable golden goose egg into the state that had one hundred and twenty tornadoes this year! I'm not ready to die." A sob rattles from her. "Please don't let me die, Mr. Terrible Mobster. Please."

I scrub my palm over my face. I'm not stupid enough to get in the middle of this shit storm. Death clearly hates me, but he has a weakness for Francis. We need to weaken him if I have any hope of pulling off the biggest scam of my life—switching my family for the girl, but then stealing the girl right back.

“Frannie, sugar,” Mr. Death coos. “Don’t cry, love. Listen. Head over to Kansas City, Kansas, instead. It’s still on the way. Call me when you get past the city.”

“Kansas...” she says. “Like *The Wizard of Oz*?”

The line goes silent. “Minus the giant fictional tornado.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll *think* about it?”

“Yes,” she bites out, pacing the floor now and chewing her thumbnail. “It’s still creepy. You have to realize, Goatfather, that I rarely left my nest back home. My mother wanted to keep me safe. Teterboro is the safest place out east. You hear me, Mr. Death?”

“I hear you.”

“And now you have me gallivanting all over the United States, outrunning tornadoes because you need someone to set Gordon Buttface straight.” She huffs. “Fine. I’ll do it. We’ll go through Kansas City, but I’m only doing this for Juniper. Not you, Goatfather.”

“Ehhh, thank you?” Mr. Death says.

“You’re darn tootin’ thank you!” she exclaims. “At least sound excited about it!”

“Thank you,” Mr. Death says, this time with more enthusiasm.

“Now text me a picture of Juniper. Proof of life. One with Juniper and the girls, too. Oh! And one with Billy by the fence looking pensive. And by golly if you send me a picture of Gordon, I’ll see what I can do.” She winks at me. “I know people, Dr. Death.”

“Mr. Death.”

“I want those pictures texted in one hour,” she sasses. “Or else.”

The line goes silent and my heart stops.

“Or else what?” Mr. Death asks.

“You can say goodbye to Crayola.”

“You won’t kill my goat, sugar.”

“No, but Gordon is halfway there already. All it takes is one phone call, Dr. Death—”

“Mr. Death.”

“And the little *kid* will be hosed down with the pesti-juice. *Capiche*, Goatfather?”

“Ehh...”

I take the phone away from the crazy girl and growl into the line. “I think you meant to say, ‘Yes, Francis, I’ll get you your pictures.’”

A long pause.

“I have more demands,” Francis chirps. “Is there a Toto and Dorothy museum in Kansas? Asking for a friend.” She winks at Chandler, who yaps at her.

“I’ll have your pictures,” Mr. Death barks and then hangs up.

Two days.

We have two days to make an eight-hour trip to Kansas City.

Best of all, she knocked that fucker off his axis.

Time to celebrate.

“Come here,” I growl, pouncing on her. “We’re getting drunk and I’m going to reward you for being fucking amazing, partner.”

“Partner?” She beams at me.

I grab her hand and haul her over to the mini fridge that’s stocked with a nice selection of miniature liquor bottles.

“Can we play a drinking game?” she asks. “I always wanted to play a drinking game, but Beatrice has diabetes, so she’s not supposed to drink, and Mabel has that ulcer that’s been bothering her since ’94. Henry, though...I bet ol’ Henry would love to play.”

I thrust a mini bottle of vodka at her. “You fucking talk a lot.”

“And you curse a lot,” she sasses, unscrewing the bottle and sipping. “Holy Tulsa tornadoes, this stuff is wretched!”

Scratching at my jaw, I lift a brow at her. “Drink.”

“I’d rather lick the wallpaper.”

We both glance over at the hotel wall and cringe.

“Fine, I’ll drink your nasty juice!” She huffs in exaggeration and then downs the whole thing.

Oh boy...

“Grosssss,” she shrieks, scrunching her face up and shuddering all over. “It burns! Ack!” She shakes her head and scratches at her tongue with her fingernails. “Wait. Oh. Waiiiit a minute.” She smiles at me, beautiful and

bright. "It's warm now. In my belly." She pats her stomach. "Can Chandler have some?"

He yips with excitement.

"No," I bark out and give the dog a pointed look. The fucker pouts, running in a circle at our feet, and yaps at me in irritation.

I drain down my own bottle of vodka before grabbing her hips and hauling her to me. Burying my nose in her hair, I inhale her sweet scent.

"Know what else is warm?" I kiss the side of her neck below her ear. She lets out a tiny groan when I nip at her earlobe.

"W-What?"

"My mouth." I suck on her earlobe.

"You w-want to p-put your mouth on my belly?"

"Mmmhmm."

"That's weird, con man."

"Is it weird that I want to put my mouth other places?" I suck on her neck hard enough I'll leave a mark. The thought gets my dick incredibly hard.

"You do?" she whispers. "I mean...you shouldn't." Then a moan that makes my dick ache. "Where?"

I nudge her thighs apart and rub her with my leg.

"You want to put your mouth there?!" she squeals, scandalized.

"I do."

"That's gross," she argues. "And highly inappropriate considering your situation!"

I pull away to look at her. My fingers bite into her jaw and I ravish her plump lips with mine. I suck on her bottom lip and nip at it. I tongue fuck her mouth with my own. I devour every mewl and breathless whine. When I pull away, her eyelids are hooded and her cheeks are pink.

"Feel good?"

"Yes," she breathes.

"I want to do that," I say, nodding to her mouth, "here." My thigh presses against her pussy and her eyes flutter closed. "And it's not gross. In fact, I can guarantee it'll be goddamn delicious."

"I think I'm going to need to get a little warmer for that to happen." Her big eyes pop open. "Hit me again, Sam!"

CHAPTER TEN

Francis

NEVER HAVE I EVER USED A VEGETABLE FOR...

Hit me again, Sam? Really, Frannie?

And what did I just agree to? Not that. Certainly not *that*. Wife and all...

His brow goes up, that deviant smile causing more havoc to my belly and malfunctioning brain. I try and lock my lips, but I know what's coming.

"Not that you're Sam, the bartender from *Casablanca*, all-time best romantic film. You're Luca. Totally different. Though, you *could* be Rick Blaine. Very edgy. Cynical. Handsome. Did you know *Casablanca* was his first romantic role? Stole the show. "*Here's looking at you, kid.*" Did you know that line wasn't originally in the—"

He's suddenly in my face, his index finger pressing to my lips.

"Why so nervous?"

"Nervous? No way! Why would I be—"

"You turn into your dog, yapping a mile a minute about nonsense."

Chandler, upon being spoken about, begins his own yapping tirade. I turn my creased eyes on him for helping prove his point. "And while I have no interest in the movie you're going on about, I do want to know one thing." He takes the remaining space between us and eliminates it with one large step. "You think I'm handsome, huh?" His smile lifts on one side. My cheeks blaze crimson and my mouth opens to vomit more nervous chatter. "No need to explain. I get it. You're into bad boys. Handsome cons, gamblers. If I told you I owned a nightclub once, would you instantly fall to your knees?"

I gasp. "So, you *have* seen *Casablanca*?" I perk up.

“Who hasn’t? Rick was a badass. He ruled that town and everyone who entered his nightclub. He also had magic hands on the betting table.” He leans in and I swear he’s going to kiss me again. And, gee willikers, I want that. That’s the alcohol speaking on my behalf. The alcohol has forgotten all about his wife. My heart threatens to explode as it beats like a drum in my chest. I beg for his lips to touch mine, his hands back at the base of my neck, empowering me to do the same. My hands itch to touch him. Feel the strength of his muscles against my small palms. I’ve only read in books about the sexual desire of masculinity, and with Luca in front of me, his entire presence, as macho as they come, I can’t deny the strange awareness I feel between my thighs. *Oh boy do I want this.* I shouldn’t, though! He’s married with a family. *But we’ve already kissed several times. What’s just one more...*

I mentally scribble down an IOU to his poor wife for stealing another kiss that doesn’t belong to me. My eyes shut waiting for his touch, but it doesn’t come. I peek through one eye to see him lean past me to grab two miniature bottles off the table.

When he straightens, he looks cool and collected, unlike myself who feels as if my face is on fire. How extremely stupid of me to think he would want to kiss me again.

Gathering up my wits, I say, “Well, what about this drinking game? The night isn’t getting any younger.” As if I need any more to drink. Just the small amount has me too loose in the mind and tongue.

“Sure.” He takes the cap off the bottle and twists one open and hands it to me. I go to throw it back, when he stops me. “Whoa there, killer, take it easy. How often do you drink?”

“Pfft. All the time!” I go to take another big gulp, but he stops me, his inquisitive eyes not accepting my answer. “Okay, a few times with Bea, even though it’s terrible for her diabetes and Mabel can never know. Oh! And Henry took me out for my birthday once and I had a martini. It was quite tasty. They put a cherry in it and small little ice chips.” He shakes his head, taking the drink away from me. “Hey!” I whine and he downs the bottle himself.

“Let’s take it slow. I can’t have my little squirrel getting sick while on her big adventure.”

“I thought this was a kidnapping,” I remind him.

“It is. You’re still my captive, but it doesn’t mean we can’t have a little adventure in the meantime. We do have two whole days to get to Kansas.”

I can’t hide the grin forming across my alcohol induced warm cheeks. Even though all the stress and worry he must be going through, he’s not only willing to help me get answers, but wants to give me those thrilling life adventures I crave. The ones I’ve only yet read about in my books. I want to throw my hands around his neck and hug him. Thank him for being so generous and even though he’s still grumpy most of the time, he’s kind and accepting. I hold back from assaulting him and write an IOU in my head for another wrongful thought of where I wish this moment would lead to inappropriate things.

“Okay. Adventure it is. How about that drinking game?”



“Never have I ever mixed ketchup and mayonnaise together.” I giggle, feeling the three mini bottles of liquor I’ve drunk since we started our drinking game. We’ve since made ourselves comfortable as two can be, sitting face-to-face in the two fancy desk chairs, our knees every so often brushing together.

Luca doesn’t take a drink and I throw my hands up in shock. “Are you serious? It’s the best concoction ever! I learned about it in a food magazine. Beatrice and I tested it out. It was magnificent!”

He shakes his head. “Some condiments are meant to be eaten by themselves. My turn. Never have I ever stayed out past midnight.”

Shoot!

I can’t drink to that one.

Luca laughs loudly. “Seriously?”

My hands fly up. “It’s just that it’s important that I open the store on time. So, bedtime is essential. Plus, Chandler likes his sleep, so we... Ugh. I’m super boring, aren’t I?”

He bumps his knee into mine. “I wouldn’t say boring. Maybe one of a kind is a better description.” I snort and slap his knee. I take a sip from the bottle I’m holding, forgetting it’s empty. “Well, shoot, I’m all out! Maybe we should go out and get more! I can try a con at the bar. Maybe pretend I’m a waitress and you and I—”

“Slow down, Bonnie.” He laughs. “No need to leave the room.” Luca gets up and pulls out his burner phone and dials a number. “Yes, good evening. I’m calling from room one-oh-five.” He glances at me and gifts me with the sexiest wink known to man. “Every time I call or speak to someone, you pronounce my name wrong. I pay enough to get proper treatment here... That’s right, *Moreau*. About time someone shows some respect. Now, I need someone to bring me a bottle of your best tequila. And leave it by the door. I prefer your staff not bother me. And make it quick. I’d really hate to add horrible service to the other complaints I’m wavering on speaking to the manager about. Thank you. Same to you.”

He hangs up and tosses the phone onto the bed. “Now, where were we?”

“We were pretending I wasn’t a bore. And you’re pretty good at that!” I beam, way too excited about my kidnapper’s con skills.

He sits back down, resting his ankle on his knee in one of those typical cool guy, relaxed poses. “I think while we wait, we should spice up this game.”

“I’m not really much for spicy food.”

He puts his hands behind his head. “Not the spicy I’m talking about, babe. Just a few minutes ago, I had my mouth on your neck. You seemed to enjoy it, then out of nowhere you hid right back into your shell. Why?”

Why? Because he’s like a shark. I’m a minnow and I can’t decide if he wants to eat me or, well, eat me! I accidentally giggle, throwing my hands over my mouth.

“Wanna elaborate on what’s so funny?”

“Well, certainly not.” Silent thoughts are best kept silent.

We hear the sound of a concierge knocking on the door of the room next to us and Luca gets up to peek out the peephole. A few seconds pass, and he opens the door and returns with a bucket of ice and a bottle of liquor. He uses the two crystal glasses on the dresser and pours a hefty amount in each. He hands me one and sits. “Drink.”

I’m already light on my feet, so I skip the sniffing and take a large gulp. Bad idea.

I cough and almost choke the fiery liquid back up. “What in the heavens is this poison?”

“It’ll help loosen that tight tongue of yours. Now, let’s get back to our game.”

God bless it, my chest is on fire. I cough once more and pull myself together to think. “Never have I ever gone back twice to refill my plate at a salad bar.” While I’m at it I should probably write an IOU for that one time too—

Luca drinks his entire glass and jumps right into his. “Never have I ever had a man go down on me.”

I choke.

He stares at me, waiting for me to drink.

Clearly, I don’t, since that would be cheating.

“No? For real?”

My mouth opens and closes. Shame and embarrassment flare across my face.

Luca’s rare laugh is infectious, sending a tremor of goose bumps down to my toes. “Babe, you’ve never had a man’s mouth down on your pussy?”

Dear Earth, may a meteor slam into this exact hotel and save me from answering—

“Francis—”

“That’s a negative.” There. Aliens can come and attack our planet and save me now.

More chuckling. “I figured with the way you turned beet red earlier.” Just the mention of him nudging my legs apart has me practically unravelling in front of him.

“I think that’s truly none of your business and we should keep this light. Never have I ever eaten dessert before dinner.” I smirk as I take a drink. Such a no-no, but sometimes I sneak a piece of Mabel’s pie before—

“Wow, rebel, never have I ever put my mouth around a man’s cock—*Jesus!*”

Luca wipes away the booze that just went spitting out of my mouth onto his face.

Well, that’s what he gets. Who asks such a brash question?

“My turn, never have I ever *killed* anyone.” We both pause and I wait for him to drink or not to drink. I’m hoping I’m not in the presence of a murderer, but you can never be too sure.

He doesn’t drink and continues on. “Nice try. Never have I ever ridden a man until my legs turned into Jell-O.”

God bless it. “What in Sam hell is wrong with you?”

“Drink or don’t drink.”

“Not drinking. Never have I ever thought about getting a *real* job.”

He drinks. “Never have I ever orgasmed from my own hand.”

Ugh. At least we both drink.

“My turn. Never have I ever enjoyed a Richard Simmons workout.” He stalls, but with a smile breaching his features, he drinks. “I knew it!”

“That I sadly admit, I did enjoy. But it was more watching you have the time of your life. Richard was a hard no for me.” He takes another swig, emptying out his glass. “My turn. Never have I ever been fucked by a man.”

I choke.

Then slam my drink.

And choke again.

“Okay, maybe the tequila was a bad idea.”

He reaches for my glass and I tug it back.

“I can handle it. I’m an adult.”

“With the tolerance of a baby. New rules. I chug, you sip.”

I pout, pretending I want to drink more, but thankful, because that stuff is the devil’s juice. I put my glass down and straighten in my chair. My vision is a bit off and I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel a little dizzy. Luca leans forward, too close. I fear he’s able to hear the drumming of my heart. Instead of another wishful attempt at ravaging me, he reaches over to the bottle and refills our glasses.

“I must say,” I stutter slightly over my words. “This game has gotten a bit personal.”

“Your innocence has piqued my curiosity and now I’d like to explore more.”

“There’s really nothing to tell. I’m also not that innocent.” Both truth and lies.

“And I beg to differ.” His leg stretches, scissoring between my thighs. I fight not to squeeze mine together, desperately wanting the embrace of his thick thigh pressed against my intimate parts. Feeling wicked at my own thoughts, I shake my head.

“Just play the game. Never have I ever taken more than one free sucker at the bank when making a deposit.”

“Never have I ever used three fingers to pleasure a woman.”

Jesus. The room is suddenly on fire. My cheeks are hot. My body, hot. “Never have I ever watered my lawn on an off-watering day.”

“Never have I ever gotten my nipples sucked so hard you came just by my tongue alone.”

My legs squeeze together, catching the thickness of his thigh in the process. “Never have I ever gone back for another sample on free sample day at the grocery store.”

“Never have I ever taken my tongue to your sweet ass—”

“NEVER HAVE I EVER USED A VEGETABLE FOR PLEASURE!”

This time he chokes.

I cover my mouth.

“Oh God, that came out wrong.”

“It came out all right, babe. Explain now.” His smile is outright deadly. And for a moment I wish he would just put me out of my misery.

“It was in a book once.”

His brow goes up. He’s not letting this one go. Shoot.

“See, Beatrice gives me these books. Romance books.”

“Ones where people use vegetables on people?”

Ugh, he’s not making this easy.

“Well, yeah, and no. I normally prefer a sweet romance, but Bea, she’s in this book club. They suggest dark stuff. Stuff where girls get kidnapped by older men and have things done to them, with like cucumbers and stuff...” I trail off because he looks about ready to fall off his chair. “What?”

He doesn’t even try to hide his smirk. “You won’t stay out late and I bet you don’t speed up at yellow lights, but you read smut books about girls who get fucked by cucumbers?”

I sit up straighter and cross my arms over my chest. “For what it’s worth, he did it out of love. And yellow means slow down. More people should realize that.”

Luca throws his head back and bellows out, “Jesus.” He pulls his head back to face me. “You truly are something else.” We stare at one another until the humor of it all settles in and I start to laugh.

“Wow, what a mess I am.” I take a deep breath, calming my laughter. “I bet you can’t wait to dump me on Death’s door and be rid of me.” I exhale a long sigh. Maybe spending the remainder of my days with goats in solitude is what I deserve.

Luca moves in his chair, his hand reaching forward to cup my cheek. “I think you’re crazy as fuck and I have to admit... I’m fucking into it. And

no, I'm not going to dump you on Death's door. I promise. We'll figure out why he wants you, but he's not getting to keep you."

"Thanks," I whisper, leaning into his touch. A ding from his burner phone slices our moment in half and he's out of his chair, reaching for the phone.

"Damn," he mutters, opening each attachment and zooming.

"What? Is it bad? Let me see? Is Juniper in them?" I grab the phone, which he allows, and focus on the first photo. I can't help but smile at the view of a goat, assuming it's Billy with an apple in his mouth looking up at the sky as if he's deep in thought. I may be walking into my own death, but I've suddenly become excited to meet Billy.

The next photo is of another goat and the cutest little girl I've ever seen. Curly, dark brown hair and wide green eyes. She's laughing while the goat eats something out of her hand. I look up at Luca, who has relief written on his face. I share in his happiness, almost fighting back tears of joy. I flip again, and my heart stops. My smile falls, but it's not because the photo I'm looking at is bad. It's because the woman in the photo is beautiful. Long dark hair, a bright smile. Absolutely stunning like the celebrities I watch on television. In the photo, she hugs her daughter as they share in a moment. This time I mistakenly allow a single tear to fall.

"Wow, she's beautiful."

"She sure is, isn't she? Cala is just like her mother too. They're my fucking world."

I hand him back the phone and swipe at my face.

"I can see why. I'm glad you have them." I step back, needing space. "I'm just going to go—"

"Hey, what's wrong? This is good news."

"I didn't say it wasn't." I tug at my arm he's grabbed hold of. I'm embarrassed at how foolish I've acted. A goshdarn hussy. Lost in this fantasy that I truly am on an adventure, with this amazing, strong-willed man who just may like me. Those photos are the reality check I needed to remember he's taken, and this is no adventure. My sadness morphs into anger. I may be naïve, but he's also the one who's been leading me on. Using his charm to sway me. Kiss me. Confuse me!

I rip my arm out of his grip and grab for the bottle. I splash the liquid into both glasses, slamming the bottle on the dresser. With each hand I grab

the glasses and turn, shoving one in his hand. His eyes are calculating, watching me, waiting.

I raise my glass. "Never have I ever cheated on my wife." I keep my eyes trained on his. They widen but fill with anger.

"Come again?"

"You heard me. Aren't you going to drink?"

He takes a step toward me, causing me to cower a tad. His free hand reaches for my glass, ripping it out of my hands. Tossing both on the dresser, spilling the contents, his focus never leaves mine. One step, two steps, he's prowling toward me, forcing me to walk backward until my back hits the wall. His head bows down, his lips so close, his breath is warming my already flushed cheeks. "You think that's my wife? My daughter?"

"Well—Yes. Why wouldn't I?" My voice is shaky.

His hand comes up, slowly, yet dangerously, sliding up the side of my ribs, brushing against the side of my breast, until he's wrapping his fingers around the back of my neck. "Lindsay's my sister. That little girl is my fucking niece."

His words cause a tremor to shudder down my spine. His voice low and laced with anger. I don't know what to say. How did I misinterpret? "I might be a lot of things, but I am not a cheating asshole. If I were married, I wouldn't have fucking laid a hand on you. Are we clear?"

I nod quickly.

His fingers tighten, squeezing the pressure point at my neck. He leans in more, bringing his lips to my ear. "So now that we have that out of the way, I'm going to kiss you. And it's going to be because I've been craving those lips all day. I want to taste the sweetness of your tongue, hear the sexy sounds of you whimpering when my fingers travel to a place I believe has never seen a man's hand, and when I get there, I'm going to pleasure you until you forget about that fake romance bullshit and know what a real man feels like. Again, are we clear?"

My voice doesn't work. Nor my mouth, my lips, the thing inside my throat that creates saliva. All broken.

"Frannie?"

"Mmmm?" That's all I got.

"I'm going to kiss you now."

"Mmmm..."

His lips, just as warm and inviting as I remembered, press against mine. He doesn't waste any time. He's parting my own and his tongue finds its way inside. My legs give out and a small moan travels up my throat. His arms are at my hips, lifting me up against the wall. My legs curl around his thick waist and he's hard as stone in all places. With a steady, slow thrust, he grinds into me. He dominates me with a deep, ravenous kiss. I kiss him back with the same intensity, as if I've been doing this forever. My arms find their way around his neck, my fingers travel into his hair, and I hold on tight.

"Tell me to stop. Or tell me to keep going. But I need to know now if I need to stop," he growls against my lips, opening my mouth wider.

"Keep going." I feel like I would die if he stopped.

His chest rumbles in approval. He sucks in my bottom lip, biting down. His hand frees from my hip and slides up my side until he's cupping my full breast into his hand. "Fucking perfect. I've thought about how perfect your tits would feel in my hand." There's pressure in his grip, squeezing my breast. Using his thumb, he starts to caress my swollen nipple. I'm all out of sorts. I'm struggling to concentrate on our kiss, when too many emotions are rushing through me. My skin feels too sensitive, yet I'm in such a need to be touched everywhere.

"I can feel how restless you are. I know what you need." He hums against my lips, taking his mouth to my neck. With such strength, he continues to hold me up, dropping his mouth to my covered breast. I yelp when his teeth clench around my nipple, but squirm as he sucks at me through my dress. "Are you going to be wet for me, Frannie? Are you soaked between those sweet innocent thighs?"

I'm embarrassed at how he knows exactly what I'm feeling. How my body is shamelessly reacting to him. His hand releases my breast and works down, lifting my dress. A small sense of panic sets inside me at the unknown, but to be touched and allow this built-up tension inside me to release overpowers any nerves.

"That's it. Open up for me." His words are like foreplay. This isn't like any book I've read. It's real and it's so much better. I do as I'm told and before I know it my head hits the wall as a warm, thick finger enters me.

"Luca..." I can't, maybe this was too— "*Oh yes,*" I moan like a wild feline. His lips are back on mine, swallowing each whimper of arousal as his finger pumps in and out of me.

“You’re soaking me, babe. Fuck,” he grunts, working me faster. My body begins to quiver, a tightness in my belly threatening to make me pass out from pleasure. He must sense it because his thrusts become harder and deeper. He quickens his pace and I’m squeezing my eyes shut as I clench around his fingers, white lights exploding behind my eyelids.

“That’s it. Come all over my fingers.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. I ordered no such thing!” a muffled voice from next door shouts. “Get your manager up here right now! Check your surveillance, and sure believe I’m being comped for this inconvenience.”

We both freeze against the wall.

“Fun’s over. We have to go.”

⋮

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Luca

#ALIENSINKANSAS

Yap. Yap. Yap.

I crack my eyes open as a wave of nausea washes over me. What the fuck? Where am I? The sun is bright and I'm convinced I'm in hell. The yapping is in tune with the throbbing in my skull.

Yap. Throb. Yap. Throb. Yap. Throb.

"Chandler," my crotch whines. "Hush your mouth."

My crotch?

What kind of fucking hell is this?

Yap. Yap. Yap.

"Listen, Bing," my crotch growls. "I'm going to put you in puppy time-out for this if you keep at it."

My crotch has a sexy, feminine voice.

My cock is a woman?

This is hell.

"Behave, demon dog," I warn.

My crotch bites my thigh.

Ow!

What. The. Fuck?!

"I'm his mother, so I'm allowed to talk to him that way, but you..."

I peek open my eyes and am met with a beautiful face. Not my cock. Not hell. Now that I'm looking at her, I'm pretty sure it's a fucked up realm of heaven. Frannie. Beautiful fuckin' Frannie.

"Hey, squirrel," I rumble out, my voice hoarse from a night of bad decisions.

Her hair is messy and her eyeliner is smudged. Plump lips are parted as she stares at me. A smile tugs at her lips.

“I’ll forgive you,” she preens. “Being an angel and all.”

I blink away my sleepiness and frown to see a giant drool spot on my jeans. Nice. Lifting a brow, I smirk at her.

“That wasn’t me,” she lies, her eyes shifting away to focus on her furry hellion.

Reaching over, I swipe the saliva from her chin. “Right. Must have been the mutt.”

“He is *not* a mutt! Apologize to Mr. Bing. Right now!”

Chandler, ever the dramatic like his human mother, gives me the widest, buggiest Chihuahua eyes and I swear to fuck he frowns.

“Ahh, Jesus, Bingman. I was kidding. Everyone knows you’re a princess.”

He yaps happily and runs around the front of the car, wreaking havoc. It’s too early for this chaos. My head agrees, but my heart thinks the madness is a little fun.

“Where the hell are we?” I demand.

“Last night was sketchy,” she says, her brows pinching. “I remember you paying some teenager to drive us to Taco Bell after we blew out of that hotel.” She pats down her messy hair. “You ate a lot of tacos. A lot, Luca. Like how are you so fit?” Her head cocks to the side, her gaze trailing up my front.

“Then what?”

“Rude much?”

Chandler yaps, tilting his head to the side as to agree with her.

“Good genes,” I grumble. “Now get to the part where we ended up in the middle of a field.”

“That’s where it gets sketchy…”

“How sketchy?”

“Aliens.”

A pause.

“Aliens?”

“Dennis said—”

“Wait? Who’s Dennis?”

“Someone say my name?” Dennis chirps from the back seat.

What. The. Fuck?

I whip around to meet said Dennis. A huge guy with kind eyes and face tattoos. He lifts his arm, sniffs his pit, and then shrugs.

“Did you do this, Bingy?”

Chandler yaps.

“He says *you* did,” Frannie says, not meeting my glare.

Right. This has Francis written all over it.

“Taco Bell retweeted our crop circles,” Dennis says, thrusting his phone between us.

“They what—” I start as Frannie squeals out, “They think it was aliens!”

Chandler loves this and practically does fucking somersaults.

“Hashtag aliens in Kansas,” Dennis and Frannie both say in breathless fascination.

“We’re in Kansas?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“Don’t worry, compadre,” Dennis says. “I drove Blanche like she was my own.”

“Her name isn’t Blanche, it’s Miss Russ—” Frannie starts, but I don’t have time for this madness.

“Why are you with us, Dennis?” I blurt out.

“Rude much?” Frannie grumbles again.

I feel like I’m in some bad remake of *The Hangover*. Instead of some random baby, we have Dennis. Fucking crop circle making, face tattooed, armpit sniffing, Taco Bell tweeting, *Golden Girls* lovin’ Dennis.

“Oh,” Frannie cries out. “I still have it.” She wiggles her wrist at me. “It’s all coming back to me! We made these friendship bracelets and—”

I didn’t make shit—*oh*. I’m wearing a fucking friendship bracelet too. Dennis waves a meaty arm, showing off his. And fuck if the dog isn’t wearing one tied to his collar.

Hell is preferable to...*this*.

Whatever the fuck *this* is.

“Right, so before we go down The Yellowbrick Road to Fucking Crazyville, I need coffee. A shower. A toothbrush. Dennis, my man, point the way.”

“Truck stop in three point two miles,” he tells me. “Oh, and hashtag aliens in Kansas is totally trending right now.”



“I feel bad about leaving our bestie,” Frannie says. “I miss Dennis already.”

Like a good best friend, Dennis led us to the nearest truck stop, bought breakfast, and made us promise to follow him on Twitter. Now that he’s gone off to do whatever the fuck it is Dennis does, we’re back on the road just outside of Kansas City. With full bellies and having cleaned up, I’m feeling better. Still have a goddamn headache, but the scenery sure is nice.

My eyes drag over to Frannie as she absently strokes Chandler behind the ears. At the truck stop, Dennis hooked us up with more best friend gifts. I’m wearing a Kansas City Chiefs T-shirt and ball cap. Frannie, though...

Fuck.

“I keep thinking about death,” she says absently.

Morbid little thing. Fuck, her legs are smooth. The car bounces when I go off into the median and I jerk it back onto the road. “Why are you thinking about death?”

“Not like real death. Like Mr. Death. I feel like he’s a mystery we need to solve.”

“This isn’t one of your sexy mafia novels,” I grumble. “He’s a bad guy, babe. A real one.”

She flashes me a shy smile that wakes my dick right the fuck up. “I know, but we can figure out who he is. Get the jump on the guy.”

I get the weird feeling of being watched and I glance down to see Chandler with his head cocked. Reaching over, I pet his head and accidentally-on-purpose brush against Frannie’s tit that looks all too good in her tight Chiefs tank. The little red and yellow shorts she’s wearing quite possibly might have me meeting the real death soon because they’re distracting as fuck, which makes it hard to keep my eyes on the road.

“Eyes that way, buddy,” she scoffs, pointing at the windshield when she catches me checking her out.

I smirk but continue watching the road.

“I should Google him.”

“Google who?” I ask, frowning.

“Duh. Death.”

I laugh. “Not that easy, babe.”

She smiles shyly again. Noted. She likes it when I call her babe.

“We don’t know until we try,” she tries. “I mean, how many bad guys in LA could there possibly be?”

“It’s LA,” I say with a laugh. “Probably most of them are.”

“Let me see your phone.”

Before last night, I might have hesitated. Not anymore. I hand her the phone and she starts scrolling through the texts from last night.

“Looking for clues,” she says absently. “Aww, Billy really is a handsome guy. When this is all over, I’m stealing him. Juniper too.”

“I’m sure Ross will love sharing the spotlight with Buddy and June.”

“Chandler. Billy. Jun—whatever. You’re distracting me.” She gasps. “Oh. Ohhhhhh. Ohhhhhhhh.”

I look at her expectantly and Chandler cocks his head, yapping. “And?” I implore.

“Billy has the same collar as Mr. Bing. Looks like a PetSmart special to me. Should I call all the PetSmarts in California? Do you think—”

“Focus, squirrel girl,” I tell her, my eyes glancing in the mirror at the suspicious black vehicle a half mile back or so. “Calling all PetSmarts to hunt down a collar is a waste of time. What did your bad guy Google search pull up?”

She stretches her legs out and rests them on the dash. Chandler, no longer comfortable, comes to sit in my lap. Now I’m free to stare at her pretty legs for the remainder of the drive. She’s tapping away, searching for clues, when I get the strange feeling again. When I glance in the mirror, the car is closer.

I don’t like it.

Last time we were followed, we were nearly killed.

Slowly, I accelerate as not to alarm Frannie. I like her looking relaxed and happy in the passenger seat. I’d like to keep her that way. I’d like to keep *her*...

“Oh my,” she gasps. “Mr. Death is Andy Garcia.”

“What? Like the famous actor?”

She shoves the phone my way to show me a picture of some older gentleman on Wikipedia.

“You know that’s not a reliable source. You said so yourself—”

“Says right here, ‘Vincent Lamberto shakes hands with the mayor.’”

“Right because shaking hands with the mayor proves guilt.”

“Oh! And, fun fact, Vinnie boy here has connections with...” She gasps.
“*Everyone.*”

“Jesus. Here we go...”

“Fun fact, he actually *is* friends with Andy Garcia. Vinnie, you found your doppelgänger.” She laughs.

“His what—”

“Owns a bunch of restaurants in downtown LA—”

“Fuck, we’re being followed.”

“A Rolls Royce—”

“Who are these guys?”

“Ooh, fun fact, Queen played at one of his restaurants before. I know the perfect song to fit the mood,” she chirps, her fingers flying all over the screen.

Seconds later the phone starts thumping out “Another One Bites the Dust” by Queen. The dog bounces around the fucking car like he’s dancing and Frannie bobs her head to the bass.

“Another one bites—”

“Stay down.” I accelerate faster.

“The dust—”

“They’re gaining on us!”

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The car behind us gasses it.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Another one bites the—oh, wow, and fun fact, a vineyard! Vinnie owns a vineyard!” She cackles with laughter, head still bouncing to the music.
Thump. Thump. Thump. “Slow down, buddy—”

“Goddammit, more of Arlo Rossi’s men!”

“It’s him! Vinnie is Mr. Death!”

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Not now, babe, not now,” I growl as I swerve, whipping around a minivan.

She topples my way and Chandler hits the floorboard.

“Stay down,” I bark out.

Of course she doesn’t fucking listen, peeking her head up and looking behind us. “Just one car. We can outrun them!”

I gas it hard and then the wheel jerks.

Pop!

You've got to be fucking kidding me right now. A blowout. It takes everything in me not to wreck the big mauve boat of a car. I'm forced to pull it off to the side of the road as metal screeches across pavement.

"When I stop, you stay down. I'll wait until they get close and then I'll attack," I instruct. "Just stay in the fucking car, babe. These men are dangerous."

"No," she whimpers, turning the music off. "Don't leave me."

The car rolls to a stop and the car behind us stops a hundred feet back. I grip her jaw and draw her to me, kissing her pouty mouth hard. She tastes like syrup and a little bit of heavenly hell. If that's the last thing I taste before meeting the real death, it'll be a great parting gift.

Boom!

The car shakes and we break from our kiss to see the black car no longer a car at all. It's a giant ball of flames.

What in the h—

Knock! Knock! Knock!

I jerk my head toward a black gloved hand rapping on the window.

"We don't want any trouble," I say to the man through the glass.

He peers down and narrows his gaze. "Get out of the car."

His accent is foreign and he looks like your typical—

"Belgian," Frannie hisses. "I knew it! It's *him*."

"Who?" I demand.

"Out of the car," the man barks out.

She elbows me, making me groan. "*Him*. Him. Jean-Claude Van Damme."

Chandler yaps in agreement.

"Stay here," I grit out. "I mean it, Frannie. Please."

She pouts and so does the fucking dog. I don't care. I slide out of the car and slam the door shut, keeping them safely inside.

"Please don't hurt her," I whisper to him. "I'll give you whatever you want." *Except them*.

His eyes narrow as he nods at his motherfucking RPG in his hand. Fuck. piss this guy off and he'll just blow you up like he did the other guys. With his other hand—the one not holding a motherfucking RPG—he dials a number on his phone. "I have them."

He doesn't blink or move as the person on the other line barks stuff out at him.

“I understand, sir.” He hangs up and nods toward a black Range Rover parked across the road. “I need you both to come with me.”

“Sorry, man,” I grunt out. “No can do.” Before he can argue, I rush him, ramming my shoulder against his chest. We hit the ground hard and his RPG clatters to the pavement. As we grapple, I hear it.

Yapping and screeching.

“It is you! I knew it! Jean-Claude Van Damme, why are you trying to kill us? We’re the good guys, silly! Oh, you won’t be needing this, big fella!”

She stumbles back, dragging away the heavy-ass RPG that was just in his grip as though she’s a fucking outlaw. “Let go of my boyfriend or I’ll shoot your stupid hand off!”

Boyfriend?

And his hand of all things?

If she shoots that thing, we all die, her and the dog included.

“I do not want trouble,” Not Really Van Damme says. “I offer escape.”

I scramble off him and put myself between him and Frannie, making sure to pull away the massive weapon from her grip. Chandler circles my legs, his tail wagging wildly.

“You’re helping us?” I clarify, confusion warring within me.

“Duh,” Frannie huffs. “We’re the good guys and Van Damme knows it. Right? Do I call you Jean? Jean-Claude? Mr. Van Damme? This is awkward.”

He rises to his feet and dusts off his suit. “I am Paul.”

“You don’t really look like a Paul,” Frannie argues and Chandler agrees.

“Not now,” I grumble.

“Paul is my American name. I chose Paul because Paul sounds strong.”

“Like Paul Bunyan?” she asks.

Paul’s face contorts into what I think is an attempt at a smile. “This is correct.”

She giggles. Of course she fucking does. “That’s sweet, but between us, you should just go by Jean-Claude. It suits you.”

“I deal with the vermin,” he tells her, tossing his keys at me. He points at the black SUV across the road that sits with its door open and waiting. “You escape with the female captive. But I will need the RPG in case more come.”

More?

Fuck, he can have his big gun.

I hand it over and give Frannie a small shove to get her moving away from this psycho.

“You will find an envelope of money in the glove box. Use it wisely,” he says as though all this is normal. It’s so not fucking normal.

He stiffly walks toward the blazing ball of fire, his RPG in his grip. Why? I have no fucking clue. I don’t have time to figure it out either. Not interested in hanging around when he blows more shit up.

“Quick,” I bark out. “Grab your shit and let’s bail.”

“We can’t leave Miss Russet,” Frannie cries out. “She’s a family heirloom!”

“She’s a busted-up piece of shit car, babe. Your mom would want you to leave her if it meant keeping you safe. Material things don’t matter. *You* fucking matter.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Francis

GETTING THAT LADY HOLE A GOOD WORKOUT

“Come on, Frannie, you can ride in front with me.”

My doe eyes widen in surprise. “But, I thought—”

“I know what I said, but today, you can ride up front with me. We’re just going to the market. I see no harm in it.”

I can’t hide my excitement. Momma’s car, or Miss Russet as she’s been named since it’s as red as a fire engine, is the size of a boat. I have to sit in the way back because it’s safer and Momma always worries I’ll get hurt. Lately she’s been super sad and I feel so far away from her. I itch to escape from my seat belt and wrap my little arms around her, but I know that’s not safe. It would make Momma more upset.

“Well, come on now. The day is getting away from us.”

I don’t wait another second and run into the open driver side door, jumping into the front seat. It’s just like the back, one long seat. A whole family could sit up here if they wanted to. I open my mouth to tell Momma, but her sad smile has me shutting my eager lips. We don’t have a big family. It’s just us two. I want to be enough for her, but I can tell she misses my daddy. I’m only five, but I try every day to be strong when she’s not. But she’s sad a lot. Miss Mabel tells me it’s not for me to worry, but I do. I don’t want Momma to be sad. I heard her crying in her room last night. I fell asleep with my favorite pillow and blankie outside her door, just in case she called me. She always says my hugs fix everything.

I hurry and buckle myself in and wait patiently for her to climb in. Shutting her door, she turns her smile on me and places the key in the ignition. The car purrs to life and I watch her fade off into one of her memories.

“Watcha thinkin’ about, Momma?”

She blinks away her memory, swiping at a tear. “Oh, nothin’, baby girl. Just... just how time is going by so fast. On this day, eight years ago, your daddy bought me Miss Russet from a used car dealership. He wanted something new or flashy, but I insisted we didn’t need somethin’ so fancy or big. But your daddy, he was a bossy one.” She pauses, falling back into her memory. “Said we would need the space for the dozen babies we were gonna have. That if I wouldn’t let him splurge on me, at least he’d get the size we needed.” She wipes at another tear. “Said with the wide-open seat, he’d always be able to drive with one arm around me.”

“I can sit next to you, Momma. And you can wrap your arm around me.”

Her smile hurts my belly. It’s sad and I’m afraid I’m going to not be strong for her and cry. I want to cry.

“Just like this?” she says and places her arm around my tiny shoulders. I want to ask more questions about Daddy. She barely mentions him, and when she does it’s in times like this, when she loses herself to memories and her words slip. I wish he were still here so I could love him just as much as she does.

“Maybe one day when you start driving, we’ll get a smaller car. This thing sure seems silly now, doesn’t it?”

I can’t imagine not riding in Miss Russet. I’ve always felt closer to him when we’re in it. I know she does too. “No, Momma. I want to drive Miss Russet when I grow up. I want Daddy to look down on me from heaven and see. Maybe one day I’ll have tons of babies to fill it. Or doggies. Miss Mabel’s neighbor had puppies and they’re for sale. If no one buys them, maybe I can use my money from my piggy bank to give them a good home.”

It’s felt like forever since I’ve heard the sweet sound of her laugh. She tilts her head back and laughs, patting me on the shoulder, before releasing me and putting the car into reverse.

“Sure, baby. One day. But how about we focus on those fresh blueberry muffins Judith from the bakery promised.”

I nod, my pigtails bouncing up and down. She’s right. I should probably have a full belly before becoming a momma.

I wake with a start.

Confusion surrounds me as I focus on my surroundings. Missing is the smell of Miss Russet’s old leather, or the purring of her engine.

“Hey.”

I turn to Luca, memories bringing me back to the present. The car chase. The explosion. Leaving Momma’s car.

“Hey,” I whisper, trying to adjust myself in the large, yet still compact seat of the SUV. “Where are we?” I question, pushing back the emotions that I left her behind. She’s gone. Momma’s car Daddy bought her—

“Since we’re now past Kansas City, we’re set to stop soon. Are you hungry?”

I’m sad. Regretful. On the verge of begging for us to turn back and save her. “No, I’m okay.” Chandler jumps up from the back seat and begins barking. “But I think someone has to go piddle.” I smile, rubbing at his favorite spot behind his ears.

“All right. It’s getting dark anyhow. Perfect time to scope out a place to stay for the night.” I nod and stare out the window, admiring the scenery. I always pictured Kansas looking just like it did in *The Wizard of Oz*, which it does. Lots of corn fields, but now with lots of buildings and houses. Dorothy would have loved it.

We take the exit and the first town we hit, Luca pulls into a gas station. “Sit tight, okay? I’m going to try and finagle some food. It won’t be anything fancy, but I think we need to lay low from now on. Probably have to ditch the car for another soon as well. Be right back.” And he’s hopping out and heading into the small convenience store.

I search for Chandler’s leash. “Well, we certainly can’t have you doing your business in this fancy car now.” Clipping his collar, I coddle him under my arm and jump out. We make our way to a small patch of grass and I give Chandler some privacy as I search out my surroundings.

“Oh shoot...” I scrunch my nose as I take in the payphone. My eyes scan the convenience store. “Hmmm... maybe just a quick call.” Chandler growls. “I know, but what’s one little call?” More growling. “Oh, you just focus on number two. We know how grumpy you get when you don’t do poopoo every few hours.”

I tell myself if Luca comes out before it takes me the long trek to get to the payphone—“Oh look, we’re here!” I pick up the receiver and dial in my little trick and before too long it’s ringing. The phone line connects, followed by giggling.

“Yello?” More giggling.

“Beatrice?”

“Who wants to—*Frannie*? Is that you?” I hear rustling in the background.

“Yeah, it’s me. What are you doing?”

More rustling. The sound of a man’s grumble. Is that— “Girl, where have you been? I know I said adventure, but I didn’t mean disappear!” Chuckling. Did someone just get slapped?

“Bea, what are you doing?” I can tell she covers the phone because I hear muted whispering. “Are you alone?”

“Hell, mind your business. Now, where the hell are ya?” That’s when I hear the faint sound of Henry’s voice. “Shhh! She’ll hear ya!”

“Um, I already have. Are you and Henry...” I’m not even sure if I can say it!

“Knockin’ boots? Well, ya kept pushin’ it! And boy can he read Jane Austen.” More rustling.

“Hey, sweetie.” Hearing Henry’s voice brings a rush of joy. Boy, do I miss home.

“Hey there, Henry. I take it Bea enjoyed your meatloaf?”

“Oh, she sure did, and the food was good too!”

I gasp, covering my eyes, as if I’m about to see something I shouldn’t be. “Henry!” I yell. No need to tell me the details.

More scuffling. “Give me that phone, old man—Listen. You need to come home. Mabel’s on the hunt for ya. What kind of area code is seven-eight-five? That doesn’t sound close. Is it close? Henry, where is seven-eight-five?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“You were in the Navy, ya geezer! Don’t they teach you that code system?”

“You mean Morse code?”

More slapping. “Hell, where ya at, child?”

I look around for a sign. “Wamego, Kansas.”

I think she drops the phone. Scuffling. “What the hell you doing in Kansas? Please tell me you’re getting that lady hole a good workout—*Dammit!* You wretched old hag! Get out of my room! Henry and I are nak—”

Mabel cuts off the end of that terrifying statement. “Francis, you better have a good explanation for this. This is completely out of character for

you.” My heart sinks at Mabel’s angry tone. I forget in all of this, I left them to fend for the shop, with no instruction.

“I know, and I’m sorry. I can’t really explain right now, but...but...” I have no idea how to explain the last few days of my life. I was kidnapped by a con artist who needs me for collateral for a mobster who wants me. No idea why. And in the process, he’s showed me more adventure than I’ve seen in the whole twenty-two years of my life. Not to mention passion. Real life passion. And how do I tell them that I think I’m falling for him? I hear a bell in the distance and see Luca pop out of the convenience store. *Shoot.* “Gotta make this quick. Bullet points only. I was kidnapped by a man whose family was kidnapped and he needs to take me to someone who wants me, but I have no idea who he is, but he’s a mobster and may be Andy Garcia and I’m his captive but kinda like not his captive and we’ve become partners. Kinda like Bonnie and Clyde, hopefully minus the shootout part, which we’ve kinda already been in, and I think I may have Stockholm syndrome because I really like him even though he’s a con and handsome and he kisses—”

Luca rips the phone out of my hand. I wait for him to slam it on the receiver and start yelling. Instead, he stares me down, those eyes eating away at my soul, and brings the receiver to his ear. “Who is this?”

Then he pulls it away. Even Chandler starts to bark at Mabel’s yelling.

“Excuse me? I—I—Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. Her what? Lady—*Christ.*” He looks at me, one confused brow shooting to the sky. “I have kissed her. Many times. Yes. No, I did not know she’d never been kissed before me. I *did* enjoy it.” His mischievous smile has me losing my balance. I grab for the payphone. “Oh... I didn’t know that either.” Gone is the smile, in its place seriousness. “Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. Promise. Complete gentleman. At this point, I think we’re each other’s captive.” He guns it for me, those eyes. *Shoot.* “It’s been a pleasure, but time’s up. Have a good day.”

He hangs up the phone. I’m in shock. I don’t know what to say. I want to know what Mabel asked or what she said. Luca doesn’t say anything either. He grabs my hand and takes the leash from my grip.

“Let’s go. I have a surprise for both of you.” And with a grin from ear to ear, he starts escorting Chandler and me back to the car.



The ten-minute car ride is silent. Luca hasn't lost his smile, and I haven't lost my worried expression. At least it wasn't Beatrice he spoke to. Mabel is levelheaded. She wouldn't say anything bad. Would she? My eyes are trained straight ahead, so I don't sneak a glance at the driver's side. We're riding through a small town, a row of quaint little shops and—

“Oh my, stop! Look!” I point at a huge sign reading, *Oz Museum*. Luca doesn't obey and continues to drive. “Luca! Stop! Did you see it! It *does* exist!” He stops at a stop sign, but instead of turning around, he makes a left-hand turn and continues. “Stop right now, or I'm jumping out of this vehicle.” Which will hurt since we are so high from the ground. These big cars are nonsense. He takes another left turn into a back alley. “If you just turn around in here, I saw a parking spot right up front.” Instead, he pulls into a spot in the back. “What are you...” I trail off when he puts the car in park and looks ahead.

“The museum's closed,” he says.

My expression falls. “Oh.”

“Or in con artist language, it's closed for a private viewing.” He pats my thigh. “Let's go. Bring the snacks.” He climbs out of the car. It takes me a moment to gather myself, then scoop up Chandler.

By the time I'm even to the back entrance of the museum, Luca's managed to cut the wire to the camera and jimmy the lock. “After you, my lady.”

A jolt of excitement shoots all the way down to my toes. Even Chandler can't handle it and wiggles out of my arms and races inside. While entering, Luca presses a huge lever and the place comes to life. Lights blast through the large room, accentuating each display.

My eyes can't take it all in fast enough. Life-sized statues. Dorothy, the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Man, and Scarecrow. Chandler starts yapping when he finds Toto. “Look, Luca, it's a replica of her tiny home in Kansas.” I hurry up to it and gasp in delight when I see the ruby red slippers sticking out from under the house. “Oh my! They even have the shoes!” One after another I take in each display, my heart rate at an all-time high, my excitement on overdrive. “Oh look, Chandler, the haunted forest. Better turn back.” I giggle, knowing he always hides under the blankets during that

scene. When we arrive at the glass cases, I sigh heavily, my hand lifting to cover my heart.

“What’s that big sigh for?” Luca asks, nudging me with his shoulder.

“It’s a replica of the costume Dorothy wore. Well, Judy Garland wore. It’s...beautiful.”

Luca chuckles and I slap him in the chest, probably hurting my hand more than it hurt his solid stomach. “Okay, okay, it’s beautiful.”

“It is,” I whisper, my mind starting to turn. My foot starts to tap.

Tap, Tap. Tap.

“Okay, what’s going on in that squirrel brain of yours now?” he asks.

Round and round, the thought that if I just...

“Spit it out, babe, before you hurt yourself.”

“I just think... We’re in here. Private viewing and all. No one would mind if I maybe... tried it on.”

I watch his eyes widen through the reflection of the glass. His lips spread into a humorous grin, but he refrains. Maybe it was a silly suggestion.

“In this adventure, there are zero restrictions. If my girl wants to wear Dorothy’s dress, she’s wearing her dress,” he says with laughter in his tone, but he does something so romantic, my heart does a triple flip inside my chest. He goes to the side of the glass case and jimmies open the lock.

Luca steps to the side and my eyes light up as I climb into the glass case and retrieve the costume. Chandler jumps in too and wrestles out the Toto stuffed animal and runs away with it.

“I’ll just be a moment,” I say and follow the lit sign for the restroom. Once inside, I hug the blue and white dress to my chest. Knocking from the other side of the door startles me and I jump. “Yes?”

“I’m leaving something by the door.”

“Okay. I’ll be right out.” Undressing as quickly as possible, I slide into the costume. Surprisingly it fits quiet well. Smells a bit musty. I giggle at myself when I swiftly braid my hair to match the part and when I open the door, my breath catches. The ruby red slippers. I bend down and slip them on my feet. A little snug but nothing that I won’t endure for a short time.

I find Luca sitting in front of Dorothy’s house, a Wizard of Oz blanket from the gift shop now on the floor, Dorothy’s picnic basket next to him, along with Chandler and a half torn up stuffed Toto. Hopefully they have more of those in the gift shop.

“Wow,” he starts and pats the open spot next to him.

“I know. Silly, right?” I say, taking my seat.

“Not at all. You actually look just like her.” My smile widens from ear to ear. Every girl dreamed of being Dorothy, wearing the ruby red slippers, skipping down the yellow brick road, and making a billion little munchkin friends. I’m no different.

“Thank you.” I blush, smoothing out my dress. Taking in the basket, I say, “I’m not sure Chandler will travel well in the basket. As you can see, he doesn’t care for Toto too much.” Chandler rips off Toto’s nose.

“Going to change up the storyline a bit.” He opens the picnic basket and pulls out sandwiches, chips, and some cookies from the convenience store. Not realizing how hungry I truly am, I accept the food and start chowing down.

“Tell me about your childhood.”

“’Scuse me?” Luca says, taking a hefty bite of his own sandwich.

“Where did you grow up? Did you have any pets? Were you happy?” I want to know everything about him. His favorite color, food, game growing up.

“My childhood was shit. Lindsay and I had a shit mother who was nasty in her words and liked to hit. Chose booze over her children. I had to step up and raise Lindsay when Mom would forget to buy groceries and shit, so I started taking odd and end jobs. We couldn’t afford pets. Lindsay did win a fish once at a state fair. Never seen anyone so ecstatic to win a stupid goldfish. Had the damn thing not two days, though, before our mother did what she always did and ruined it for her. Barfed in the fucking bowl.”

“How awful!” I couldn’t even imagine having a mother who was unloving and cruel. Momma made sure not a single moment went by that I didn’t feel special and important.

“Mom OD’d on heroin not two days later,” he says with a tired sigh. “My sister was fifteen and because I didn’t want the state to take her, I grabbed Lindsay and got the fuck out of there. Learned to survive on our own.”

What a sad story.

“Is that when you became a con?” I regret asking. It makes him sound like a criminal. *He is, silly.* He’s a nice, handsome one at least.

“It was probably the day of the fair.”

“What do you mean?”

“The goldfish. Lindsay had blown all the tickets I hijacked off some kid, not even close to getting the ping-pong ball into the little bowl. So, when the attendee turned to grab a fish, I threw her ball into the bowl. Won the fish, stole the food. I’ve been conning my way through life ever since.” He waggles his eyebrows, his deviant smile causing me to blush. “Enough about me. Tell me something about you.”

I don’t know where to start with that question. It feels wrong to talk about my perfect childhood when his was so horrible.

“Tell me one of your best childhood memories,” he urges.

I try and pinpoint one, because I had so many with Momma. “Momma used to always take us to the farmers’ market. Large orders would come through the antique shop and we’d have extra money to get these blueberry muffins. They’d still be warm, and Momma always bought three. One for me, one for herself, and always one for Daddy. She said it was his favorite. It was our time we spent remembering him. Even though she spent most of her days with her thoughts on Daddy.”

Luca’s hand brushes up my thigh. “What happened to him?”

“He died when I was a baby. Momma never really told me how. I tried to ask, but she’d always get so upset. Before she died, she said one day there would come a time when I would be hurt by someone, and when that time comes, I need to forgive in order to move on and find peace. I think she had a hard time forgiving him for dying. But when she made her way into heaven, I believe her heart felt solace knowing she was going to be with him again.”

His other hand reaches up and wipes away a tear. “And they both left you here in this scary world, alone, having to fend off scary bad guys and handsome con artists?”

Crimson paints my cheeks. “Oh boy, you heard that?”

“Not to mention the intriguing information your angry friend gave me. While also threatening me.”

Oh my Lord, what did she tell him?

He leans in and to my surprise, places his lips to mine. He presses ever so gently, not making a move to take it any further before he pulls away. “Lots of very revealing things...”

Oh, someone just put me down. Now, why in Sam hell would she embarrass me like that? I mean, he technically already knows about my

level of inexperience because of our drinking game, but it still stinks for him to have it confirmed by my dumb best friends.

“Hey, little squirrel. Don’t worry. I promised her I’d take good care of you.” He kisses me quick. “Be a gentleman.” Another kiss. “Treat you the way you deserved to be treated.” Another kiss. “And to make sure it was extra special if you allowed me to unlock your chastity belt of virginity.” His lips curl into a smile as he takes mine and kisses me hard, refusing me the opportunity to get up and run into oncoming traffic.

“Old people. They’re all senile,” I say with a huff. “Must be off her meds again.”

His laughter against my lips feels glorious. He kisses me senseless until I’m on the verge of passing out if I don’t take a time-out for air. I totally get it now, in the romance books how kissing can steal your breath. He pulls away, his eyes finding mine.

“Some other woman got on the phone and made me promise to take you on a proper date before deflowering you too.”

Those two women are dead to me.

“Hey, look at me. You know I’d never do anything you didn’t want as well, right?”

I nod, scared to admit what I truly do want.

“I can’t deny there’s something starting to happen between us. Fucked up, I know. Because you shouldn’t like me, you should hate me. But I can’t help but want more than just your first kiss, your first touch. I can’t offer you a future, because hell, I have no idea where my own lies. For the time spent together, I sure as fuck want to offer you the world.”

My hand is up and wrapping around his neck, pressing our lips together in the “best speech” kiss of a lifetime. He doesn’t hold back, his arms scooping me up and placing me into his lap. His hands roam freely up my dress, his thumb teasing at the lining of my panties.

“For what it’s worth, this is the best date ever,” I mumble between our kiss.

“Agreed,” he says, taking my lower lip between his teeth.

A thought has me pulling away. “But what about you? What about your adventure? This shouldn’t just only be about me. It’s important you cross some things off your bucket list too.”

His smile. Ferocious. “I am. Always had a thing for Dorothy. But in mine, she’s wearing nothing but those ruby red slippers.” Then, he captures

my mouth just as he officially does my heart.

⋮

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Luca

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

I want to tear her Dorothy costume from her body with my teeth. And I'm seconds from doing it when we get a text from Death.

Mr. Death: Call me now.

Frannie's eyes widen. "We still have a couple of hours, though. Why does he want us to call him now?"

My heart gallops in my chest. If anything happened to Lindsay or Cala, I don't know what I'll do. I notice a slight tremble in my hand as I dial him. Frannie gives my thigh a comforting squeeze.

"Let me speak to her," he practically growls.

"Are the girls okay?"

"You'll know the second I speak to Francis." His tone is icy and furious. I flip it to speaker phone. "She's here."

"Hi," she squeaks out, terror shining in her eyes.

He lets out a relieved sigh. Relieved? Why the hell does he want Francis?

"Has he hurt you?" Mr. Death asks. As if he fucking cares.

"No," she snips. "Have *you* hurt *them*?"

I clutch her hand over my thigh, silently thanking her.

"The girls are fine," he assures her.

"I want to speak to them."

"Cala just went down for a nap."

"Why do you want me?" Frannie's voice cracks. "Why me?"

He's silent for a moment. "We can talk later."

"I want to talk now," Frannie says bravely. "Please."

"You're important," he says with a sigh.

“To whom?”

Rather than answering, I hear him say something to someone. Then, Lindsay mutters, “Luca.”

“Lindsay,” I rush out. “Fuck, are you okay? I’m coming for you.”

“I’m fine,” she says, fire in her words. “Perfectly fine. Just...just get here in one piece, will you? Don’t let Rossi’s men get to you.”

“He told you about that?”

“That they’re trying to kill you at every turn? Yes,” she seethes. “I’m pissed about it too.”

“That’s enough,” Mr. Death tells her.

“No,” she barks out. “You’re going to let me talk to my brother.”

I wait for him to fight her on it, but he doesn’t. Who is this fucker?

“Listen to me,” Lindsay says. “Focus on you. Cala and I are okay. If anything, we could use the vacation.” Her voice is tight, but I hear the truth in her words. Anything—even being Mr. Death’s captive—is better than taking her clothes off every night for dirty, handsy bastards.

“When I get you back, I swear to God you won’t have to work at that club any longer. We can take a family vacation. Go somewhere fun. Take Cala on a boat or some shit. It’ll be great, I promise.” My voice wobbles with emotion. “I’m going to take care of you, sis. I always have.”

“I’m a big girl,” Lindsay says. “You don’t have to always be there for me.”

I hate that we’re airing our laundry in front of Death and Frannie, but I don’t care in this moment. “I’ll always be there for the two of you. I got you away from that mean ass bitch who shit us out, I can get you away from the one who holds you hostage too.”

“I can handle *Mr. Death*,” Lindsay sneers. “Don’t worry about me.”

“You’re done here,” Mr. Death barks out, taking back the phone. “I want a call when you reach Denver. You have twenty-four hours to make that call.”

He hangs up and I stare at the phone.

“She’s a survivor like you,” Frannie says. “There was conviction in her words.”

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss it. “Lindsay always acts tough when she’s scared.”

“That’s it,” Frannie argues, “she didn’t seem scared. She sounded furious. Maybe she’ll take him out.”

Chandler yaps, wagging his tail.

"Maybe," I offer, not at all believing her words. "Regardless, we're going to get her away from him any way we can."

Frannie smooths out a wrinkle on her dress and bites on her bottom lip. I'd love to suck that lip into my mouth, but she seems troubled.

"What?"

"I've just been thinking."

"Yeah, squirrel girl, did it hurt?"

She snorts and swats at me. "I'm quite the thinker, I'll have you know. Momma and I used to be Wheel watchers. You know what that is? Wheel of Fortune? I once submitted Momma's name for an audition to be on the show. She'd been thrilled when we got the phone call..." She drifts off. Oddly enough, I think there's a point to her random tangent this time, so I hold still. "When she found out it was in California, she made her serious, angry face and hung up."

"Momma wasn't a Cali girl?"

"She never let me out of Teterboro. Not the Big Apple, which was literally a hop, skip, and a jump away. Not Washington DC when I begged to go there for a school trip." She sighs. "I was the only kid who didn't get to go. And not even to Hershey, Pennsylvania, which was super close too. Momma was a huge chocolate lover, yet she still wouldn't go."

I give her an imploring look because she's losing me.

"Each time, she'd say, 'Sugar, you're meant to stay right here with your momma where it's safe.'" Her lips purse and she lifts both brows as though that's the punchline of her joke or whatever the fuck this is.

"So your mom kept you in the bubble. Nice. You ready to find someplace to sleep for the night?"

Her brows furrow. "You're not listening. With California, she was angry. Scared. Upset. The other times, she was sad. Whatever was out west, she didn't want any part of. Wheel of Fortune was one of her favorite shows, but even the chance to be on it wasn't enough to entice her out of Teterboro."

"You think your momma was hiding from someone?"

She nods. "What if Mr. Death wanted to hurt her? What if she was hiding us from him all along and he somehow found out where we lived?"

"If Mr. Death is Vinnie like you think," I say, "then that means he's a mobster. According to Wikipedia. You're saying your mom was running

from the mob? Why?”

“Oh my God,” she says with a gasp. “Mr. Death killed Daddy.”

I gape at her. “Why do you think that?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. Daddy died when I was a baby, Momma has been on the run all these years, and now I’m being kidnapped—no offense—to be brought to Mr. Death. Why? Am I a consolation prize? Does he want to kill me too?”

Fat crocodile tears form in her pretty eyes and rage burns hot throughout me. The very thought of someone wanting to kill her makes me want to kill everyone to protect her.

“I won’t let him hurt one hair on your head.”

“Promise?”

“It’s a guarantee. Come on. Let’s find somewhere a little more comfortable so I can hold you,” I murmur, pulling her to me. I stand with her in my arms and walk through the small museum, looking for a place that will work. In the front lobby area is a sofa. I place her down and then admire her pretty face that’s stained with tears. Kneeling in front of her, I take both hands, kissing her inside wrist on each hand.

“I know you kidnapped me, Luca,” she murmurs, her tears drying, “but I have always felt safe with you. Momma would have called it a hunch. I just knew you weren’t going to hurt me.”

I wonder if her momma knew I was going to fall for her instead...

“I’ll never hurt you,” I vow. “The moment I walked into your living room—”

“Actually, you hacked your way in with an ax—”

“I knew you were special in your ’80s blue bathing suit—”

“It’s a leotard!”

Chandler yaps, joining us in the lobby.

“I knew you were something special—something that needed to be protected and looked after. I just didn’t know I would want to be that person.” I gently push her dress up her thighs. “And now I know it. I know I’ll be that person because you’ve gotten inside me, squirrel girl, like no one in my entire life ever has. It’s exhilarating and scary as fuck.”

“Why scary?” she breathes, her eyes dilated as she watches me with parted lips.

I kiss her bare thigh. “Because I’m afraid that at any moment, I’ll blink and you’ll be a cruel dream. Something I could only look at but never

have.” I run my tongue up her flesh, pushing her back against the cushions as I tease her near her panty line. “I’m looking at you, though, and you’re still here.”

“Still here,” she murmurs.

With my eyes on hers, I pull on her panties and drag them down her thighs. They have cherries on them and are cute as hell. If I had more time—one day we will—I’d love to spend all day marveling over something as simple as her sweet cherry panties that smell like her. Carefully, I tug them off her glittery red shoes and throw them aside.

“Now what?” she squeaks.

“You know what.”

And she does because her eyes flutter closed as she allows me to part her thighs. I waste no time and dive in to lick her. She tastes like hope and passion and mine. I devour every inch of her perfect pussy, loving the way she jolts each time I suck on her clit. She whines when I slide a finger inside her tight heat. Frannie is wet and primed, ready to take me. I’m not leaving this museum until I’ve made her officially mine. Curling my finger up, I seek out her G-spot as I tease circles around her clit. She whimpers and jolts, eagerly chasing her orgasm. I pleasure her right off the proverbial cliff and revel in the way she explodes.

“I need you, Luca, please,” she begs.

Her begging is my undoing. I’m a fucking teenager again as I rip off my shirt and jeans, eager to pounce on her. She manages to remove her dress and toss it away. Her bra is red like the cherry panties and my dick literally fucking jumps for joy because it’s sexy as hell.

“Take your bra off,” I order, “but leave the shoes on, Dorothy.”

She laughs and it’s adorable. “Are you the Tin Man?”

“I’m Iron Man.”

“Iron Man isn’t in the movie!”

“Oh?” I tease as I shove my boxers down and take my cock into my hand.

“Ohhhh,” she murmurs. “Wow.”

I smirk. “You like what you see?”

“It’s...I don’t...wow.”

“You already said that.”

“Jumpin’ jelly beans, I’ll say it again because it needs to be repeated!”

Chandler yaps and yaps.

“This isn’t for doggie eyes, Bingmeister,” I holler over my shoulder.

He growls but then his little toenails scratch along the tile floors as he scurries off.

“You sent my dog away,” she huffs in faux irritation.

“Princess dogs don’t need to see Oz porn.”

“Luca!”

“I’m protecting his virtue.”

“What about mine?” she mutters as I lay her down on the sofa.

I kiss her mouth as I settle between her spread thighs. Her cunt is slick with her arousal. Slowly, I tease her by rubbing against her opening with the tip of my dick.

“Maybe I’m the lion,” I say, “because I’m feeling pretty damn feral. Your virtue is the last thing on my mind right now.” I nip at her bottom lip, smiling.

“Mmm,” she moans. “What’s on your mind then?”

“Fucking beautiful you in your Dorothy shoes,” I say with a chuckle.

Her smile fades and her eyes flash with worry. “Will it hurt? Freaking?”
Freaking.

Adorable goddamn woman.

Growing serious, I shake my head at her. “Not if I can help it.” With our eyes locked together, I slowly inch into her. Out and then in, coating my cock with her juices, each press inside her taking me deeper. She’s tight as hell and I know it’s going to hurt no matter how slow I go.

I make a decision.

One hard thrust, stealing her innocence with one quick move.

Her mouth opens as she cries out, but I silence her with a deep, owning kiss. She’s mine. I can feel it down to my fucking toes. Life’s been cruel to me, but this, this is anything but cruel. This is a reward. Her nails scrape down my biceps, producing a burn that I know matches the one between her thighs. I slide out of her and then thrust again. This time, I slide home much easier.

Over and over and over.

Our tongues thrash and duel, desperate for the other.

I grip her breast and tweak her nipple before sliding my hand between us. She whimpers when I rub my finger against her sensitive clit. Her body clenches around my dick, making me see stars of pleasure.

“Luca,” she whimpers. “Oh...my...” She screams out God’s name when I bring her to ecstasy one more time. I’m maddened with the need to claim her that I almost don’t pull out in time. My nuts seize up, jetting cum out as I slip from her warmth, and I coat her red pussy with the evidence of my release. Slowly, I stroke my cock that’s soaked with her arousal as I drain every last drop, drizzling her cunt like icing on a sweet cherry roll. Fucking yum.

“Holy crap,” she breathes. “That was...”

“Fucking amazing?”

“I was going to say messy.”

I bark out a laugh. “Thanks, babe. Way to emasculate a man seconds after he’s just had the best sex of his life.”

“Best sex, huh?” she asks, arching a brow in a playful way.

“I’ll have to do it again in about twenty-seven minutes to be certain.”

“Twenty-seven minutes?” Her breasts jiggle as she laughs.

Fuck.

My dick jolts back to life.

“Better make that twenty-seven seconds.”

When she sees my cock, bobbing back to life, still dripping with my release, she shakes her head. “W-What? Again? I feel like you split me open. I need to recover.”

I give her a faux pout. “But your pussy is as magical as the red shoes you’re wearing.”

“There’s no place like home,” she whispers.

Pouncing on her, I kiss her mouth hard. She only whines for a second when I push into her again.

The beautiful, sweet, hilarious girl was right.

There’s no place like home.

And I’m about to get a fucking doormat that says “mine” and camp right at her feet.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frannie

EAT UP, LITTLE JOKER. THEN WE RIDE THE RIDE.

Yap, yap, yap...

Yap, yap, yap...

"Shut it or die, Bingo." The rumble of Luca's voice rouses me.

Yap, yap, yap...

Luca stirs and adjusts his grip around me to attempt a whack at Chandler. My growing smile transforms into a large yawn and I stretch my sore arms. Heat burns over my cheeks at thinking about why my muscles hurt. Sex. I had sex for the first time, with a sexy, amazing, wonderful con man, and I loved every single, messy, amazing moment of it. I replay the whole night, trying to remember all the IOUs I need to write. *Replace Dorothy's now-ripped dress.* Thank God it was only a replica. *Toto, since Chandler kind of ate him.* Bad doggie. *The Wizard of Oz blanket, which we horribly disgraced.* Bad Luca.

I snuggle my face into the makeshift pillow, which reminds me of another IOU. *Ruby red shoes, because those are coming with me. Replace hot air balloon basket, because when you're propped up on it and making out heavily, it breaks.* Every other inch of this place because Luca had me lip locked and hot and heavy up against, over, and under. *Dear Lord.* My cheeks could start a fire they're so heated at the memories. I can't even wait to tell Beatrice. She's going to simply die!

"Mommy, why are those statues naked?"

"Bingo, I'm serious. You're headed to the same fate as your rival, Toto."

My ears perk at the unfamiliar sound. Definitely wasn't the sweet little bark of Chandler. I swear it sounded more like...

My eyes shoot open.

Gee willikers!

Yap, yap, yap!

I pray my sight is playing tricks on me. I'm currently making eye contact with a young child along with a wide-eyed mother.

"Bif, I'm serious, zip it or—*shit!*" Luca shoots up, realizing too late he's naked as the day he was born, and grabs a remaining shred of Toto, covering his man parts. I dart up, just as fast, grabbing for the Wizard of Oz blanket, but it causes Luca to stumble, dropping his patch. The child's mouth falls to the ground, while the horrified mother throws her hands over her son's eyes.

It seems after our all-night escapades we fell asleep in the yellow brick road window display.

"Oh God, Luca, what do we do?"

He snatches up his clothes, searching and throwing me Dorothy's torn dress. "Private tour's over, babe. Gotta go." He hooks Chandler under his arm, just as his jaw bites down on the small leftover patch of Toto, and we both make our hasty, breezy escape.



We're three hours into our trek to Colorado, still wearing our goofy grins. Maybe I'll leave *some* of the details out when I spill to Beatrice. "I'm not sure I'll ever get that terrified woman's expression out of my head."

Luca chuckles and squeezes my hand he's been holding since we threw ourselves into the SUV and escaped, just like Bonnie and Clyde driving away from a bank robbery. "Imagine the poor woman having to explain the monster he was exposed to."

I shake my head. My eyes roll, even though monster is dead on. I truly hope one day I walk normal again. He takes his eyes off the road. "Some things you can't con, you know?" And winks at me.

My lips part and my mouth waters. Between my legs begins to pulse, even through the soreness. I inhale a deep breath to calm myself. "A little full of yourself, don't ya think?" I try to mask my sudden need to want to play with said monster.

"We can pull over if you need another presentation."

I finally lose my composure. My entire face blasts crimson. Thank goodness I see a sign, welcoming us into Colorado, and change the subject. “Oh look! Colorado! I wonder what the population is. You think more or less than Kansas? California? Maybe in—”

Luca pats me on my thigh. “All right, squirrel girl, dropping the subject.”

I exhale. Thank God.

“But to answer your question, Colorado is a *monster* state. *Really big. Hard* on gun law—*ouch*.” He bends forward, laughing when I whack him in the stomach. “Geez, when did my girl get so violent?”

I open my mouth to reply, but my words get lodged in my throat at the way his head tilts to catch a look at me, accentuating his Adam’s apple. I have no idea when I became so violent, or bold, or carnal. But if I had to pinpoint the exact change, it would have started the moment I laid eyes on my sexy outlaw.

I blame the hopeless romantic in me, but I can’t control the roller-coaster of emotions I’m riding on. Every time he looks at me, touches me, I ache for more. A once uncharted territory for me. But now that I’ve gotten a taste of it, I want to explore every single outlet. Beg for him to touch me in ways I’ve only read about. The fierce heroine, bold and confident.

“Okay, spill. I can see your brain spinning.”

“What?” That’s not possible, right?

“What are you thinking, Frannie?”

That I love when you call me your girl. “I wonder what the state animal in Colorado is.”

“Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. Spill it.”

You have the most beautiful eyes and I want this adventure to never end. “Wonder how often it snows here?”

Another low chuckle. “A lot. Now stop avoiding the real question.”

I wonder if you’ll ever think of me after you’ve saved your family and go off being wonderful while I’m imprisoned by God knows who, my only friend being a goat, and possibly the neighbor if he’s still alive when we—
“Wait a minute!” That’s it!

“I *am* waiting. You keep stalling with weird questions.”

“No, I mean, wait... I know how we can find information on Mr. Death!” I grab his phone nesting in the cup holder and open the Google search app.

“Fran, I know you’re stuck on this idea, but he’s not Andy Garcia.”

I wave him off. That’s still to be determined. “Not what I’m searching for, but *who*. Mr. Death mentioned his neighbor, Gordon, remember? I don’t know why I didn’t think of it earlier, but what a rookie move! He gave us more vital information.” Remembering the conversation, I type in ‘Pesticide litigation, claim: harm to land, livestock, Plaintiff, Gordon’ in the search engine, my foot tapping on the floorboard while the wheel spins. One by one, links matching my keywords pop up. “Bingo.”

“What? Did you find something?”

“Yes! Listen to this.” I click on a link that leads me to the county website for California jurisdiction. “It’s a public complaint filed by a Gordon Eisenhower. It says his neighbor, name undisclosed, trespassed and stole his farming equipment. The items listed are Hydraulic Sprayer, tank, pump, and nozzles. This *has* to be him!”

Luca doesn’t look sold. “I don’t know. This all seems so farfetched. We’re talking a mob boss here. Assuming one who has connections to bad people and no fucking soul, since he kidnaps people for ransom.” I turn my raised brow on him. “Okay, moot point. You’re enjoying this kidnapping.”

I need to control the temperature in my cheeks. “Well, mister, I didn’t see you wanting to quit last night yourself. If I can remember correctly you told me you never wanted to leave my dripping wet—”

“All right, babe. You win. Let’s stay on track. Say this is him. And we just found this Gordon, what does that do for us? Besides prove he has it out for his neighbor?”

I copy Gordon’s full name and enter it into a new search engine. Immediately a Facebook link matching his name pops up. I click on it. An old stocky man, thick white hair matching his bushy white mustache. Gordon Eisenhower. I click on his photos and an abundance of pictures taken with him and his cat appear. One’s of them sitting in a rocker, one’s in the backyard feeding him treats, one’s—

“Oh my God! Look! It’s Juniper!” I shove the phone in Luca’s face, causing him to swerve.

“Jesus, woman!”

“Sorry. But do you see? It’s him! We found him!”

“Yeah, I see, as well as the car I almost sideswiped. It’s also just not matching up. A mobster who lives on a farm and raises goats? Come on. It doesn’t make sense. I feel like your intentions are good, but—”

“Look!” I screech, throwing the phone in his face again, and Luca slams on his brakes to avoid crashing into the car in front of us. “It is him! Look at the fence. It’s the same fence from the photo Mr. Death sent us with Cala!”

This time, Luca swerves to the right, causing a sleeping Chandler to slide off my lap. Avoiding two accidents, he pulls off to the side, throwing the car in park. “Give me that.” And he snatches the phone from my hands.

I sit with a winning smile on my face as he inspects the photo. “Say it. I’m a genius.” He doesn’t but keeps scrolling. “Three simple words, I’m a gen—”

“This is all so fucked up.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

I lean over and look at what he’s reading. One after another, crazy posts about his neighbor. All posts tag the profile name, *Godfather_V*. And no shocker his profile photo is the one and only, Andy Garcia.

Gordon Eisenhower: You’re going down @Godfather_V. No one be fooled by the goats! He’s a mobster! Stole my farming tools! Neighbors beware. He’s hiding something over there! #thief

Godfather_V: Those goats have eyes. They see what you do with that cat of yours. #sicko

Gordon Eisenhower: Keep my cat out of it, you maniac! Stay off my property! I know what’s going on over there! #mafiaaction

Godfather_V: I goat to tell you, you really need to get a better hashtag, you crazy old man. Sounds like you need more than just a kitty petting. Wanna borrow one of my goats?

Gordon Eisenhower: You’re sick! Keep those damn goats off my fence! I’ll shoot anything that trespasses! #goatfordinner

Godfather_V: I do love eating pussy myself. #challengeaccepted

On and on, his posts are meant just for this Godfather_V, the two of them going back and forth.

Gordon Eisenhower: I saw you last night @Godfather_V! If anyone in town goes missing, they’re buried in his backyard! We all have eyes and ears!

Godfather_V: Sure it wasn’t your cat I was burying? #meow

Gordon Eisenhower: Nice try. She's sitting on my lap right now. You don't scare me!

Godfather_V: Oh, I bet she is. Heard you both moaning all through the night. Really need to try out one of my goats. Give that poor cat's ass a break.

Gordon Eisenhower: You're sick! I'm calling the authorities on you! Let them know who you really are! I see all the nighttime action! Goat farmer my behind! #lies

Godfather_V: Do it. I bet they don't find you when they come ringing your doorbell. #sixfeetunder

Gordon Eisenhower: My neighbor's crops are growing because he has dead bodies buried under his fields! Anyone missing? Check @Godfather_V's property!

Godfather_V: Thank your wife for my tasty tomatoes. Nice and juicy. Really easy to pluck. Just like she was.

Gordon Eisenhower: How dare you! Bertha was an amazing woman! And I know for a fact she isn't buried in your crop field! She's living with her sister in Ohio! #mobsterlies

Godfather_V: Oh yeah, that's right because she left you for fucking your cat. Thanks for clarifying. #getsomerealpussy

Gordon Eisenhower: She didn't leave me because of that! She left because she didn't understand me and Sherley's bond! No one does. Cats are beautiful specimens.

Godfather_V: Whatever you say. Wait, is that Sherley outside right now? Fucking my goat? #cheatingcat

"These are ridiculous. I've had enough. Click on his damn name. Let's see if it's Vincent's page," Luca grumbles and I press on the name, disappointed because I was quite entertained by them, but when I do, it takes us to a private Facebook account, requiring us to request his friendship to see his page.

"Should we friend request him?" I ask.

"No, we shouldn't fucking *friend* request him. He'll know we're onto him."

Good point. "Maybe we should friend request Gordon."

He snatches the phone from my hand. "No, we shouldn't. Listen, it can't be the same person. The one we're dealing with isn't messing around here. He *will* hurt my family. He's made it clear and at no time since they've been taken has he convinced me he won't. He's dangerous. Not a pretend mobster playing with goats and arguing on social media with his neighbor." He's lost any sort of laidback demeanor. In its place is annoyance. "Let it go, Jesus. Okay?" He stares at me until I nod in defeat, and he throws the car in drive and pulls back onto the small highway.

I want to turn to him and argue that it's not safe for his family to be in the hands of this madman, but he plans on handing *me* over to him? I reroute my attention to the window and stare at the passing scenery, wondering who Mr. Death really is, and when he has me, if he'll at least grant me some answers, before he buries *me* under his crops.



I must have dozed off because when I reawaken, we're pulling up in a parking lot with tall rocks surrounding water. "Where are we?" I ask, scrubbing away the tiredness from my eyes.

"Small town outside of Denver. I don't think we're being followed, but I want to ditch the car. Think here's a good place to scope one out."

I sit up, taking in the scenery. Surely is beautiful. Chandler jumps up, his little paws against the window ledge enjoying the view, when we pull into an open spot. In front is a lake. "The sun's about to go down. I bet this place is going to fill up with cars. Tons of people who want to hang by the beach and do bonfires. When it gets dark, we'll swap and head out. It will be hours before they realize their car's gone. Maybe not even until morning."

I nod and bring my attention back to the lake. A few people are already setting up chairs and makeshift tables with coolers.

"Are you going to be okay here for a bit?" he asks. "I'm going to go scope out the scene."

Another nod.

"Hey, look at me." This time his voice is tender. Gone is the cruel tone from earlier. I do as he asks and when our eyes meet, I can't help but quickly forget the disappointment from earlier I held over him. "I'm sorry. I don't think your ideas are silly. It's just... I'm just as confused. I don't think my sister is truly in as much danger as Mr. Death wants me to think. But I also don't think he's innocent either. Something's off. This may be him trying to throw us off his trail. But one thing's for certain. I don't want to risk doing anything stupid to put my family or you in harm's way, okay? Come here." He extends his arm around my neck, guiding me closer and pressing his lips to mine. "We're in this together, right?" I nod. "Bonnie and Clyde, minus the shoot-out?" His lips curl into a smile as I cringe. Darn it,

he heard that whole conversation. “We’ll figure it out. I won’t leave you with him. Whoever he is. I promise.”

His lips fuse to mine once again, and I accept his apology in the form of a really great kiss. We break apart and all is good in the world. Kind of. Minus the whole kidnapping and ransom and—

“You okay here or did you want to come with me?”

I want to follow him to the end of the earth if it means the gift of those lips at my service any time I want. Chandler interrupts, letting me know he has to do his business, and I snap out of my fantasy.

“Actually, I’m gonna go take Chandler for a walk. Maybe enjoy some of the lake, if that’s okay.”

He stares at me for a minute, contemplating it before nodding. “Yeah, just be careful. Be aware of your surroundings. If anyone looks suspicious, run. Cool?”

“Cool.”

A quick kiss and he’s jumping out. Cuddling Chandler under my arm, I grab his leash and go on my own adventure. I discard my shoes and hold them while I sink my toes into the sand. It’s cold and smooth, unlike the old, worn sand in the parks back home. The feel of the grains under my feet is glorious and I start my trek closer to the water. Chandler stops at the garbage can and pees. I’m admiring the calmness of the water, when a man comes out of nowhere. I pop back as he addresses me.

“’Sup, little lady. You chillin’ for the bonfire?”

Watch my surroundings. If anything feels off, run. Don’t talk to strangers.

I smile wide and inviting and say, “Well, hello there. You’re an interesting looking fella. I’ve never been here before, so I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

His hair is long and braided into knots. It looks heavy and possibly giving him a headache. That or he has bad allergies because his eyes are red and squinty.

“Newbie to the Chatfield Reservoir. Rad! This place digs newbies. You look like an adventurous chica bonita. Interested in riding the ride while you’re here?”

I look around in confusion. “Sure, but where? I don’t see any rides.”

The kid laughs, whipping his long locks around. His clothing is super colorful—red, yellow, and green from head to toe. “Snap. Jokes. Dig it, girl.

You look like something sweet's coming your way."

"It is?" I ask, curious. I love sweets. He pulls a brownie out of his knapsack and hands it to me.

"Eat up, little joker. Then we ride the ride."

Eager, because I'm actually starving, I take the brownie down in seconds, being polite and feeding a portion to Chandler. "Thanks, that was tasty. So where are these rides?"

"Give it about fifteen minutes and they'll appear."

Fantastic!

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Luca

FEEL LIKE MAKIN' LOVE

There are people everywhere. Too many eyes. I'll have to lay low until the evening before I snag us a different car. Defeated, I go on a hunt for Frannie. She gets herself into too many shenanigans if left alone unsupervised for very long. And with Chandler as a coconspirator, who the hell knows what sort of shit they'll get into. That dog eggs her on.

A commotion of people singing catches my attention. Bunch of fucking hippies standing in a circle.

"Baby, when I think about you, I think about loveeeee—"

"Feel like makin' loveeeeeeee!"

Oh fuck.

I recognize one of those voices louder than the others. Pushing past several people, I breach the crowded circle and find my two crazies in the middle. Of course they are.

Hell no.

Frannie's riding on the back of some stoner with dreads. What the actual fuck. They're singing and she keeps yelling out, "This ride is slow!" Chandler is being held by some tall-ass lady with huge tits and long black hair, and is being cuddled like he's an infant.

Fifteen minutes.

I left them for fifteen minutes.

That's all it took for Frannie to join a cult of Rastafarians—one of whom she's riding like a fucking horse—and for Chandler to get adopted by Cher.

"Dog," I call out to Bingman. "Tell Cher you already have a mom."

Chandler yaps at me but makes no move to get out of her arms.

“Lucaaaaa,” Frannie calls out when she sees me. “This ride is amazzzzing! You totally should try the brownies!”

The dog yaps again.

Oh, Jesus.

“Ride’s over,” I growl, pulling her from the stoner’s back and to her feet.

She swivels and laces her arms around my neck. Her eyes are bloodshot and she’s grinning. The girl’s lucky she’s so fucking pretty. Gets her out of a lot of trouble.

“What’d you do?” I ask, pressing a kiss to her pouty lips, claiming her for all the tokers with wandering eyes to see.

“Shared a treat with my good buddy Theo,” she says with hooded eyes. “He makes bitchin’ brownies.”

My brows hike. “You said bitchin’.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You so did, Frannie. You cursed.”

Her mouth pops open. “I most certainly did n—oh my God! I’m a derelict now! Don’t tell Mabel!”

I slide my palms to her ass and squeeze. “You could convince me not to.”

“How?” she asks, her eyes growing wide with innocence.

“We’re going skinny-dipping!” the piggie-back stoner hollers, ripping off his shirt as he runs by.

“Oooh!” Frannie says with a silly smile. “Are we gonna do it?”

“You want to get naked and go swimming? With all those people? And Chandler too?”

Chandler growls. He’s quite happy with Cher.

“Just us,” Frannie purrs. “Unless you’re afraid of Theo seeing your pecker.”

“My *pecker* is a fine looking pecker. Not ashamed.”

“I haven’t seen many to compare it to.”

“You’re not missing much,” I tell her and then wave at a guy with a beer gut hanging over his very unimpressive dick.

“Holy guacamole,” she squeaks out. “That’s embarrassing.”

“Look at that one,” I point out as some redheaded guy runs by, his cock hidden in a bush of red pubes.

“Gasps audibly.”

“Did you just say gasps audib—”

“Oh my God, Luca! Your pecker totally wins this whole beach!”

I laugh as I release her and peel off my shirt. “I’m pretty sure your tits will win too.” I nod over at old big boobs Cher and Sonny-Bing. “See, you’re already winning.”

“We’re really going to do this?” she asks, wickedness gleaming in her normally sweet stare.

“I’m in.” I shrug as I drop my pants and kick out of my shoes. “Question is, are you?”

She bites on her bottom lip when I lose my boxers too. “I’m soooo in, Big Winner.”

“Big, huh?”

She starts stripping, earning several lingering stares. *Too bad, fuckers, she’s mine.* “The biggest.”

I try not to preen like a fucking chick. “Damn right.”

Once we’re both naked, I toss her over my shoulder and slap her ass. She squeals, kicking, but soon starts giggling. I wade out into the cold-ass water and then dip us under.

“Cold! Oh my God!” she shrieks when we surface. “Brat!”

I maneuver her until she has her legs wrapped around my waist and her tits are smashed against my chest. Our lips don’t hesitate. We crash together with a sigh and a groan. It’s easy to get lost in this woman. Days ago, I had no idea how miserable my life was. Until her. Now, I realize I was missing light and life and laughter.

“Found a new ride, cowgirl?” Theo asks as he swims over to us.

She grins, nodding. “He’s my man.”

I like the sound of that.

“Right on,” Theo says. “How long you two been married?”

“We’re not—”

“Remember the con,” she whispers loudly.

Theo laughs.

“Er, she’s my wife. Been married for four years.” More like wild for her for four days. Close enough.

“We got married on a ranch in Texas,” she brags. “On horses.”

“Horses, huh?” Theo snorts. “Like on one horse or did you each have one?”

“One named Black Beauty. We rode off into the sunset too. Ain’t that right, honey-boo-thang?” she asks me with a horrible southern twang. “I wore a frilly white dress and a straw hat. You wore your daddy’s suit.”

I squeeze her naked ass under the water. “Then I led our horse to a small barn where I took your virginity on a bale of hay.”

“That was the first time I saw Big Winner.”

I snort but square my shoulders. If you’re going to be the big winner at something, it may as well be the size of your dick.

“Big Winner as in that’s what you call his schlong?” Theo cracks up, nearly drowning himself.

I’m tempted to dunk him under the water just so he’ll wash his dirty dreads.

“What do you call yours?” she challenges back.

“Lil’ smokie.” He grins and winks at us. “‘Cause it be lookin’ like a snack.”

“I don’t think that’s—” I start but get cut off by Frannie hollering, “Do you ever dress it up with barbecue sauce?”

“Fuck,” Theo groans. “I’ve got the munchies. Put this convo on pause, Big Winner and little cowgirl. I’m gonna throw some brats on the fire and grab us a bag of Doritos.”

He swims away and I shake my head at her.

“What?” she asks innocently.

“You.”

“What about me?”

“I’m thinking how fucking adorable you are.” I smirk. “You’d look cuter on my dick.”

Her cheeks blaze crimson. “You’re scandalous...”

My brows lift. “I think I want to hear this but.”

“But,” she whispers, looking over my shoulder. “I like it.”

I rub against her pussy in the water. “I like you.”

“Mmm.” She nips at my ear. “You taste yummy.”

“You’re so fried.”

“I bet you’d taste good with barbeque sauce.”

“*And* you have the munchies.”

“I read about this in a book once—”

“You’re not putting barbeque sauce on my dick, Frannie.”

She fucking pouts and my dick jolts. “Ketchup?”

“W-What? No.”

“Party pooper.”

I humor her. “What do you think you’re going to do with my ketchup dick?”

“Lick it.”

“And?”

“Gobble it down.”

And boner officially gone.

“Jesus, babe, way to kill the mood.”

“Not with my teeth, silly. Down my throat. Like in Bea’s book—”

“That was hot until you brought in the old people.”

“Some people are into it.”

Yap! Yap!

Cher swims out with Chandler tucked into the top of her swimsuit. Damn dog nestled between her big tits like he’s a lil’ smokie himself.

“Bingboy is totally into old people,” I mutter. “Just look at our boy. Kinky fucker all grown up.”

Frannie giggles. “Aren’t you a naughty boy?”

Chandler yaps and grins his doggie smile at us.

“Precious likes Cheetos,” Cher tells us. “Can I have him?”

“No!” Frannie and I both bark out. Then, Frannie coos at him. “Don’t worry, Mr. Bing. I’ll get you lots of Cheetos for your munchies.”

He yaps happily.

My phone rings from my pile of clothes, Billie Eilish’s “Bad Guy” informing us that Death is calling.

“Shit,” I grumble. “Lady, give us the dog.”

She pouts but manages to untangle him from her boobs before handing him to us. Frannie squishes him between us as I swim us back to shore. We miss the call, but Death calls again.

“Hello?” I ask, breathless.

“You like making me wait, young man? You think this is funny?”

I cough. “No, sir. I mean, no. Er, what do you want?”

Frannie, still high as fuck as she tries to redress, giggles at me. “Oooh, you’re gonna get in so much trouble!”

“I have eyes on you,” Mr. Death reveals.

Panic swells up inside of me as I struggle to throw on my boxers. “Y-You do?”

“I know you’re not in Denver yet.”

“Oh yeah?” *And...*

“And you’re supposed to be in Denver.”

That’s a fucking relief. He doesn’t have physical eyes on us. The thought of him seeing Frannie with her tits bouncing and her nipples hard is enough to have me bubbling over with rage.

“The day’s still young,” I grumble.

“Brats! Luca, they have brats ready! You want ketchup?” Then she giggles again.

I shake my head at her, fighting a smile.

“Sounds like you’re having fun,” Mr. Death growls.

Sobering up, I clear my throat. “How are Lindsay and Cala?”

“They’re fine. Taken care of. For now.”

“This ketchup is green!” Frannie calls out. “It’d look delicious on Big Winner!”

Groaning, I mouth to her to “stop.” She doesn’t stop. Just keeps babbling her adorable nonsense with her dog yapping in agreement.

“She’s happy,” Mr. Death utters.

“Yeah? What’s it to you?” I bite out, remembering who the fuck I’m talking to. The man who wants to take her. To take what’s mine.

“Finish doing what you’re doing and we’ll talk in the morning.”

And then he hangs up.

“What did Andy Garcia say?” she asks, before handing me a brat in a bun dressed with a ridiculous amount of green ketchup.

“To keep doing what we’re doing.”

Her eyes flash wickedly before she licks the line of green ketchup from her own brat. “Getting freaky?”

“We’re not getting freaky,” I grunt.

She pouts. “But I think it could be fun.”

I shake my head at her as I practically inhale my brat. I abandon her and her yappy dog to grab us something to drink. When I pass by the table with all the condiments, I pick up the “green” bottle of ketchup. *Homemade* ketchup.

Oh shit.

But rather than panic, I relax.

Theo slaps me on the back. “Big Winner, that’s homemade right there by yours truly.”

“Potent,” I grumble, because fuck if I’m not already feeling it.

“Hells yeah, bro.” He playfully bites my shoulder. “We doin’ this threeway thing or what?”

“Dude,” I growl. “Frannie’s mine.”

He laughs. “Have a brownie, man. I know Lil’ Smokie can’t compete with Big Winner. Just joshin’ ya.”

A brownie does sound good...

“My van’s over there,” he says, waggling his brows as he hands me two brownies. “Everyone knows if the van’s a rockin’ to not come a knockin’. Take the ketchup too. Cowgirl over there seems to love ketchup.”

I follow his gaze to where she’s very obviously practicing sucking dick on her brat. She’s tossed the bun to Chandler while she works her magic on the meat.

“Holy fuck.”

Theo laughs again. “You’re welcome.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Francis

I'LL HAVE SEX WITH YOU IN THE MYSTERY MACHINE

The sound of joyous laughter and screaming children fill the air, the smell of buttered popcorn and funnel cake causing my tummy to growl.

“Frannie girl, don’t go too far. It’s getting dark.”

My pigtails whip in the air as I look behind me at Momma, who’s trying to keep up with me. “Hurry, hurry, they’re gonna fill up and we’re not gonna be able to ride it!”

My feet hit the ground harder, pushing in-between people. The Ferris wheel comes into view and I halt in my tracks. “Jiminy crickets,” I gasp, lifting my head until my eyes reach the top of it. It’s so much bigger than the advertisement.

Two weeks ago, the first flier was posted just outside Momma’s antique shop. Rosedale’s Amusement and Co. was traveling through Teterboro. They were bringing a carnival. The flier had rides and animals on it. Momma had to read me the rest, but my stomach started to rumble at the words cotton candy and funnel cake. Not once in my six whole years of life has a carnival come through here. The entire town was ecstatic. Miss Beatrice told me we should keep an eye out for a husband for Miss Mabel. “Hook one of them carnies, and they’ll take her out of our hair. She’ll finally get some, while seeing the world.”

While Momma shook her head and laughed, my expression turned serious. I wanted to get married and travel the world. Maybe I could find a husband too! Later that night, while we were getting ready for bed, I asked Momma, “Do you think if I wear my hair nice and my favorite church dress, I’ll find a husband at the carnival?”

She pulled the covers away from the bed and I jumped in.

“Baby girl, you’re too young to get married.”

“But you told me you and Daddy were kids when you got married.”

I wish I kept my mouth shut. She’s been in such a cheerful mood all day, the store receiving a large order allowing us the extra funds to buy the tickets to the carnival.

“I know, but everyone’s story is different. We may have been young, but it was our destiny. Love brought us together sooner in life than some.”

“So maybe I’ll find a husband. He can take me with him, and we can travel, and I can maybe ride the rides for free since we’ll be married.”

Momma laughs, tucking me in. “Now, what did I tell you about listening to Miss Beatrice’s wise comments? They aren’t always wise. You, my sweet girl, have a bright, wonderful future ahead of you. One day, when the time’s right, you’ll meet a man. And you will know. He’ll be worthy of your time and kindness. He’ll cherish his moments with you and love you for you.”

“How Daddy loved you?”

“How Daddy loved me.”

“And maybe when I grow up, I can run the antique shop and make the orders and put all the stuff on the shelf.” Right now, she won’t let me because I have small hands and she worries I’ll break stuff.

She laughs again, brushing her warm hand across my cheek. “I was thinking more like, the mayor. Or even, one day, leaving this small town and becoming president. What do you think?”

My tired eyes pop wide open. “President? You really think?”

Her head dips and she places a kiss to my forehead. “I think you can be anything you want to be, if your heart is in the right place.”

That night I fell asleep dreaming of all the things I could and would be.

When the day of the carnival finally came, I was, as Mabel called me, an over wound toy. I couldn’t sit still.

I waited while they closed up the shop and dragged Momma the three blocks until the carnival came into view. It was nothing I’d ever seen before. Gigantic rides, horses walking in circles with kids on them, rows and rows of booths with games and food. If another second went by and I wasn’t on a ride, I was going to explode!

“Baby, you have to stand in line.”

I turn around to see she’s finally caught up to me. She looks extra pretty today in her favorite yellow dress. Her hair is down, which she only wears it that way when we go out. She has a light layer of lipstick painted over her

lips and she's wearing earrings. "Momma, maybe if you say hello to the man over there, he will let us go in front. You look mighty special tonight. Can you try?"

She takes a peek at the long line until she makes eye contact with the man taking the tickets. "Um...no, baby. I think we're just gonna have to wait our turn."

My lips turn down. "But the line is so long. We're never gonna get on it. Please!"

She grabs for my hand to keep me in place. "Francis, we have to wait like everyone else."

I stomp my feet. Not everyone else had to wait hours and hours to close a store no one was even in. I'm old enough. I could have come here myself. "If we don't get on the ride, it's your fault." I rip my hand out of her grip, crossing my arms over my chest, pouting.

"Now, missy, if you keep up this attitude, we won't wait at all. I spent a lot of money on these tickets—"

"Yeah, and we're not gonna get to use them because they're gonna close before we get up there!" I yell.

She goes for my hand, but something catches her attention. She freezes, any color in her face suddenly gone. As if she's seen a ghost. My eyes search the same places she's looking, but I don't see anyone. "We...we... have to go."

"No! We can't. We will lose our place in line!"

She snatches my hand, pulling me out of line and toward the area she's yet to take her eyes off of. I fight her, watching a family move up, taking our spot.

"No! I want to ride the Ferris wheel!" I scream, kicking, but she doesn't stop.



I wake with a start.

I blink away my fogginess until my surroundings remind me of the present. The large mountains tell me we're well into Colorado.

"Rise and shine. Thought you were going to sleep forever."

I look over at Luca, sporting a pair of sunglasses, courtesy of Theo and his vehicle trade. My mouth is really dry. "Here, drink this." Luca hands me a water. I take a hefty sip, thankfully quenching my thirst.

"What happened last night?" I ask, shading my eyes from the bright sun.

"You were fed pot brownies, made friends with a bunch of hippies, went skinny-dipping, and then we traded off our SUV for a hippie van and had wild maniac sex until the sun came up."

My eyes shoot wide. "We did?"

"No, you passed out eating Doritos. I figured you needed the sleep, so I let you, while I got a head start on our drive."

Visions of green ketchup and dancing, and— "Oh my God, everyone was naked!" I cover my eyes.

Luca chuckles. "At least you can cross skinny-dipping while high as a kite off your bucket list."

"How embarrassing," I moan through my covered face.

"Consider it adventurous."

I peek through my fingers to see him wearing a humorous smile. "Making a complete fool out of myself is not what I had in mind when I said I wanted adventure." More like eat a crab cake in Maine. Visit the World's largest ball of twine in Kansas. Try bull riding.

"Then enlighten me. What's on your bucket list?"

I turn back to Luca. "Bucket list? I don't know that I really have one."

"Come on. Everyone has one. What's something you've always wanted to do?"

I sit and take a moment to ponder it.

"Don't hurt yourself." He laughs. "Just spit out the first thing that comes to mind."

"Ride on a Ferris wheel," I say, still in the memory of the past.

"Ferris wheel? Really?"

"Yeah. When I was a kid, the carnival came to town. I was so excited. Nothing like that ever came to Teterboro. So, you can imagine what a big deal it was. Anyhow, the day the carnival came, I ran straight toward the Ferris wheel. I remember it being so much bigger than I expected. I wondered if you could touch the clouds when you were all the way on top."

"Could you?" he asks, with a playful smile on his face.

"I wouldn't know. I never got to ride it."

“Why not?”

“The line was so long. I was worried we wouldn’t get our chance, so I begged my momma to go up and sweet talk the worker. She told me no, so I threw a fit. In the midst, something happened. As if she saw a ghost or something. She pulled us out of the line and across the entire carnival, until my feet couldn’t go any farther. I was crying so loud for her to stop. A stranger stepped in. She, herself, was frantic. She’d disappeared there for a moment, mentally. But when she came to, she broke down and cried. At that point, I just wanted to go home, so we did. The carnival never did come around again.”

He grabs my hand, placing a tender kiss to the inside of my wrist.

“Silly, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. It’s your bucket list. Not someone else’s. Everyone has a different take on what’s special to them. Some wishes are small, some big.”

I’m thankful for his words. I don’t know where that memory came from. It’s been so long since I’ve thought about that day. I think all the change happening is stirring up old memories. So many of Momma. I wish she were here to see me. She’d be so proud of the way I’m experiencing each day as an adventure. Maybe not so much the romance part, since she would have been scandalized by all the new things I’m learning, saying, *thinking*. “Okay, well, then tell me one of yours.”

“To ride in the Scooby mobile. And look at me now.”

A few seconds pass and I throw my head back, a boisterous laugh escaping my lips. “You mean the Mystery Machine?” I’m surprised I didn’t notice it before, but the van indeed is a spitting image of Scooby Doo’s shag machine. The seats are lined in light brown fur covers. Seventies flowers are painted on the outside of the baby blue exterior.

“You see it now,” he says, “don’t you?”

“I sure do. Wow.” I’m not sure who got the better end of the trade. A brand-new, suped up SUV, or this classic vehicle. I shake my head again in disbelief, unable to hide my smile. The craziness we’ve been through the past few days is hard to believe. Teterboro is a quiet town. Nothing exciting happens.

Before this, my enjoyment consisted of searching the Internet for new Lean Cuisine flavors and Richard Simmons’ videos. Before Luca, I realized, I wasn’t truly living. I scrape my brain for every little wish, thought, idea I’ve ever had. With the way Luca has brought my body to life,

one idea stands out. “Name one thing on your bucket list that can be accomplished right now.”

“Hot sex in the Mystery Machine.”

Wow, how our minds think alike. I start to giggle.

“What’s so funny, squirrel girl? Gone shy on me all of a sudden?”

I look at Luca and lose it, laughing harder.

“Okay, spill it or I’m going to make you. You’re still my captive. You do as I say.” He reaches over and starts squeezing at my thigh.

“Okay! Okay!” I try and catch my breath. “I think we can both scratch one thing off our bucket list.”

His brow rises in curiosity. “I’m all ears.”

I don’t know where all this boldness came from, but I’m loving it. “I’ll have sex with you in the Mystery Machine. But in doing so, you have to do something for me.” His smile turns wicked. “There’s something I’d also like to cross off my bucket list.” Holy cow I’m really going to ask this.

“Babe, spit it out. You have me thinking anything from teaching you how to fly a kite to flipping you over and owning that—”

“I want you to reenact a scene from my romance book.” Shoot. I said it. Oh God! I want to take it back! What’s gotten into— “Wait, where are you going?” I’m confused as he changes lanes and takes the rest stop exit. “I thought we still had—”

“It’s your lucky day, sweetheart. I’m all about pleasing and we’re actually ahead of schedule.” He drives up and occupies a spot toward the back of the rest stop. Putting the van in park, he turns to me. “So, please do tell, what kind of scene will I be reenacting?” His eyes are on fire, his grin already working me into a frenzy. He resembles a wolf ready to attack his prey.

“Well—um...” Just do it. There’s no turning back now. “It’s my outlaw book.” Deep breath. “And he’s rough with her.” Inhale. Exhale. “May choke her and spank her.” Oh dear Lord, just stop talking.

“Deal.”

“Wait, what?”

“I said deal. Where’s the book? I want to make sure I do it all right. Fulfill your naughty captive fantasy just right.”

My cheeks blaze, but nothing compares to the inferno of heat that’s between my legs right now. *Live, Frannie. Be wild and free.* I bend down and dig through my new satchel purse—*IOU to the Chatfield Reservoir gas*

station—since Luca, my handsome kidnapper, rushed me and I left mine at home. I finally locate the outlaw book Beatrice gave me that I thankfully thought to shove in my suitcase before I left. I pull it out and search for the exact page. Before I chicken out, I hand the open book to Luca. He accepts it, giving it a sample read. It's when his brow turns up that I want to take it all back and hide.

“His strong hands, ruthless and hungry for her virgin flesh, work their way up her silky-smooth leg, his calloused fingers finding her bare of any undergarments. ‘Naughty little girl, aren’t you? Makin’ it easier for Daddy to get to that pussy—’”

“Okay, maybe this was a silly idea—”

“Oh, I don’t think so, babe. This is happening. And I might be knocking two items off my list. Now,” he says, using his finger to imitate a gun. “Get in the back of the van, and no one gets hurt.”

My confusion quickly morphs into excitement. I almost bounce out of my seat, tossing Chandler to the floor and hopping in the back. My entire body is buzzing with anticipation as he climbs back with me.

“Don’t try and fight me, or else I’ll make you pay.” He lifts the book to read a few more lines. “Take your clothes off. And kneel. I want you to know who your master is.”

I bite at my lower lip, and his eyes darken, lost in the words. I lower myself onto the floor. My hands dig under my tank top and I lift it over my head, dropping it next to me. His eyes dilate and I continue unsnapping my bra. My breasts release and pop free as I drop the undergarment on top of my shirt.

“Fuck,” Luca groans. He shakes his head, getting back into character. “All of your clothes or I’ll teach you a lesson and you won’t be able to sit for a week.”

My thighs clench together. I push down my black leggings, taking my panties with them, until I’m completely bare for him.

There’s a strain in his voice, but he keeps going. “Open your legs. I want to see how wet your pussy is... *Jesus*.” He brushes his hand over his face, almost dropping the book. “Your pussy is mine. Hear me? You’re wet for me and only me.”

“Yes, Master,” I reply, knowing how the heroine in the book responds.

He skims through a few more lines and tosses the book. “I get the gist.” And then he whips out of his jeans, tossing his shirt as well. His knees hit

the ground, and he's putting his hand around my neck, his huge erection poking me in the belly. "You like it when I choke you, captive? I'm going to choke that innocent virgin pussy next." He pushes me gently so my back falls onto the floor bed.

This is even hotter than I'd imagined it would be. His lips fall against mine and he kisses me hard. His hand is back around my neck, his thumb pressing at my pulse.

"Please... Don't hurt me. I'll do whatever you say," I whisper, my voice raspy.

"Oh, I plan on doing more than hurting you. Starting with this gun." He lifts his hand that's still in the shape of a gun. "I'm going to fuck you hard with this pistol until you're begging me to stop." He brings his hand between my thighs and slides his finger up my wet center. "Yeah, you naughty little captive. Just what I thought. Sopping wet. Going to make you choke on my dick next—"

"You motherfucker!"

Luca's finger stops mid thrust. "What the—"

"I'm going to fucking slit your throat!"

We freeze, the color washing clear off both our faces. "What is that?" Please don't be what I think—

"Shit, the phone," Luca jumps off me and pushes me to the side. The phone, somehow when he undressed, slipped out of his pants and when he pushed me to the ground, I must have butt dialed, or in this case back dialed Mr. Death.

"Fuck," he hisses and pulls the phone to his ear. "It's not what you—"

"Enjoy the remaining days of life, you motherfucker."

"Mr. Death—"

"You're dead. You touch another hair on her body, they pay." Then the sudden howl of a female's voice rings through the phone.

"Don't fucking hurt them!" Luca screams.

"Too late. Change of plans. You have twelve hours to get to L.A."

Luca's face explodes with panic. Looking at the clock on the dashboard. "That's impossible. We're fifteen hours away at least."

"Every minute you're late, I cut off a finger, you piece of shit."

"We won't fucking make it in that time!"

"Good thing you don't need all your fingers and toes to survive. Blood loss, though. That's another problem."

I throw my hands over my mouth, about to be sick.
“You made one vital mistake. It was crossing me. Twelve hours.”
And the line goes dead.

⋮

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Luca

CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE

Twelve hours.

Fuck!

After yanking my clothes on, I scramble into the front of the van and peel out of the rest area, my heart hammering inside my chest. I'm so goddamn stupid. I really let my guard down.

And now Lindsay and Cala will have to pay.

Chandler, sensing my mood change, sits in my lap, licking my arm. Oddly enough, it calms me. I give him a little pat on his head. It's not his fault. No, this is all on me.

I'm back on the interstate by the time Frannie joins me up front. I can feel her eyes on me, but I can't look at her. I'm too upset and fucking worried. All it'll take is one look at her innocent face and I'll break. I can't break knowing my sister and niece need me whole and strong. If I have any hope of getting there before the deadline, I need to stay focused.

Frannie reaches over and takes my hand, threading her fingers with mine. "We'll make it."

I hope so.

Fuck, how I hope so.

"I don't have a plan, babe," I grit out, my voice gravelly with defeat. "My only plan is to just get to them. But I don't know what happens at that point. I don't know what he wants with you. I know nothing. I'm scared as hell about what we're walking into."

She squeezes my hand. "Whatever it is, we'll do it together. But, Luca, as much as I love the Mystery Machine, you can barely get it up over sixty. We're gonna need a faster car."

“Next town, we’ll find one,” I assure her.

“And guns. We need guns.”

“Do you even know how to fire a gun?”

“No, but you do.”

I shoot a glance her way. She’s fierce in this moment. Brave and angry and determined. Fuck, I’m glad someone is. I’m about to crack right down the middle.

“Anything else, outlaw?”

“A big knife for me.”

“You’ll accidentally cut out your spleen. Definitely no.”

She pouts. “Nun chucks?”

“What the—”

“Oh, I know! Ninja stars.”

“You watch too much television.”

“What do you suggest, con man?”

I bring her hand to my face and kiss her knuckles. “Use that brain of yours. It’s gotten us out of some hairy situations. I need you to think, because, babe, I can’t. That motherfucker has Lindsay and my niece. He’s pissed. I don’t know what that means for them. But you’ve proven you’re better than me under fire. And, Frannie, we’re in the fucking frying pan right now.”

She nods. “We’re a team. We’re going to figure this out. Come on, Mr. Bing. Let the man drive. We have a bad guy to take down.”

He yaps, jumps up to lick me in the face, and then scrambles into her lap. Her fingers fly over the phone screen as her squirrels run wild. A few minutes later, she puts the phone to her ear.

“Hello?” she asks. “Is this Gordon?”

Oh, shit.

“Put it on speaker,” I hiss, my anxiety ratcheting up.

She nods and mashes the button.

“Gordon speaking,” an old man grumbles. “Who’s this?”

“I’m Francis, uh Simmons, from the Global Tribune. Ever heard of it?”

“Can’t say that I have, young lady.”

“Fantastic newspaper. We highlight all sorts of stories from outlaws to aliens to celebrities to mobsters who threaten their neighbors. Any of those you might be interested in?”

“As a matter of fact,” Gordon says, “I have the worst neighbor and he is *the* mafia, I tell ya. As in head guy in charge.”

“Wow, crappy luck there, sir. What does that mean for you? Do you have to smell the dead bodies? Are there fingers and hacked off body parts littering your driveway?”

He snorts and I cringe at the visual. “The mafia is a lie. At least the way they tell it on *The Godfather*. Or maybe Vinnie is just soft in his old age. He runs his head a lot, but I don’t actually see any of the funny business.”

This could be good for Lindsay if that’s true.

“All bark and no bite?” Frannie asks.

Chandler barks and she pats his head.

“I know he gets up to no good, but his home is his sanctuary. Problem is, he torments me to entertain himself.”

“But it sounds like you can handle yourself,” she says.

“Damn right, little lady. I told Vinnie that more times than he can count. He may do his business in LA, but when he’s out in Rancho Cucamonga, he’s just another crotchety old man like me.”

“With goats.”

“Damn goats.”

“Like Juniper...”

“How do you know about Juniper?”

“I know everything. I know how you tried to poison her.”

“I beg your pardon—”

“Cut the crap, Gordon,” she says hotly. “I know you tried to kill that sweet goat. Is it Juniper’s fault you hate Vinnie, hmm?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Did you want Billy to lose his forever mate?”

“Errr, no, ma’am. Who are you again—”

“Billy has PTSD now, Gordon. You did this to him. You.”

“Ma’am, I don’t know—”

“I don’t need your excuses,” she hisses. “I need your stealth.”

“Stealth?”

“You got on his property once before on a mission to do your dirty deeds, am I right?”

“Plenty of times, but—”

“No buts, Gordon. This is a time for action. A time for making things right with God and the goats.”

“Am I to kill him?” Gordon asks hopefully.

“No. Something more important.”

“Like what?”

“You’re going to steal Billy.”

He gasps. “Billy is his favorite.”

“You catch on quick, fella.” She smiles at me, sweet and innocent despite doing whatever the fuck she’s doing. “Don’t you dare hurt Billy. You’re just keeping him safe for me. I want pictures. Make it look bad. Get creative, Gordon, but don’t hurt him.”

Gordon grunts. “I’m grabbing my shoes. But why am I doing this? This is for your newspaper?”

“You’re not the only life Vinnie is trying to ruin,” she tells him. “He’s upsetting my boyfriend and I don’t take kindly to that. We’re going to give him a taste of his own medicine. *Capiche?*”

“Yes, ma’am.”



“Someone’s following us,” I grumble, waking Frannie from her nap.

She sits up and looks over her shoulder. “Too far back to tell. Go faster.”

Not in the Mystery Machine.

But we haven’t hit a town in some time.

“I’m going to get us a faster car,” she tells me, her fingers once again flying over the phone screen. “Oh! In twelve miles to be exact.”

“What’s in twelve miles?”

“Aspen Mountain Lodge.”

“And?”

“They have valet. Pretty hoppin’ little place. Rich folks.”

“I like your line of thinking.”

While I drive the twelve miles with my attention divided between the road in front of me and the car behind me, Frannie puts on makeup. She disappears into the back of the van and I catch a glimpse of a tit as she changes. In a perfect world, my girl and I could roleplay all the dirty shit in her books. We’d be happy. Together. I’d spend days in bed with her just appreciating all the things about her. But we’re not in a perfect world. We’re here and under Mr. Death’s thumb. It’s such bullshit.

“When we get there, we’ll drive through the valet lot and pick out the one we want. Then, drive me to the back. I’ll get us the car. Don’t worry.” She climbs back up front wearing a slinky white dress that’s low-cut and shows every curve.

“No,” I growl.

“What do you mean no?”

“You can’t wear that.”

“Why the heck not?” she demands, crossing her arms over her chest, making her tits nearly spill out.

“That’s why.”

“What?”

“You look too...”

“I look bad?” Her lip juts out and brows furrow.

“What?” I bite out. “Fuck no. You look too good. They’re going to see your fucking tits and I don’t want them to.”

“Theo saw my tits. So did Cher.”

I growl, as does Chandler. At least someone is on my side. “That was different.”

“How?”

“They were our friends.”

She musses up her hair and fuck if she doesn’t look like a starlet. “It’s a part of the con, Luca. I don’t go home with anyone but you. It’s super cute you’re jealous, though.” She grins at me. “Totally an alpha thing to do like in my book.”

I growl again.

“They totally do that in the book too,” she tells me happily.

“If they touch you, I’ll kill them,” I warn.

She giggles. “Ooh, how? Do tell.”

“You’re a psychopath.”

“Says the man who just threatened murder.”

“I’ll sic my dog on them.”

Chandler yaps in agreement.

“Oooh, I bet they’re shakin’ in their boots,” she snarks. “What else?”

“You’ve been corrupted,” I grumble as I take the exit. “I’ve created a monster.”

“Again, you’re the one threatening murder. I just want to visualize it.”

“Freak.”

She taunts me the entire way to the lodge. When we arrive, it's definitely a rich prick place. I drive around back until I find the valet lot. It's fenced in, but we quickly find which car will do.

"I'm on it," she vows. "Let me in the side. I'll meet you at the back of the parking lot."

"If anyone catches on—"

"I've got this," she promises. "Trust me. I haven't let you down yet."

No.

She's been this insane force in my life making it better, completing me in the best possible way. As soon as I get my family back—and I will—I'm taking this woman as mine. She'll be forever my captive. Forever mine.

This has to work.

"I trust you." Before she exits the van, I gently clutch her neck, bringing her close to me so I can kiss her pouty lips. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Her eyes are soft when I pull away from our chaste kiss. "That's the sweetest and most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me. Better than anything I've ever read in a book or seen in any movie."

I brush my thumb along her jaw. "I have a lot more romantic shit to say, woman. After. After all this. There *will* be an ever after and it *will* be fucking happily too."

She grins at me and then she's gone. Chandler and I pull around to the front lot as soon as she's inside. My heart is in my throat. All it takes is someone to realize what she's up to and then the cops will get involved. We can't have that. We need this to work.

Ten minutes. Fifteen. Twenty. Fuck, I'm worried.

"She can do this," I assure Chandler.

He yaps like he knows that to be true.

"I'm keeping her," I tell him. "You too."

The dog licks me in the face.

"I don't deserve her," I mutter.

Chandler growls.

"What?" I huff. "It's true. I'm a lowlife thug but somehow..."

He growls again and then yaps.

"You think I deserve a girl like her?"

His yapping is happy and his tail wags.

If Chandler believes it, maybe it's true.

A car honks at me and I start to move out of its way when I realize it's not just any car. Not just any driver. Holy shit. She did it.

Quickly, I drag out our bags from the van and load them into the lime green 2019 Aston Martin Vantage. Fuck, this is a beautiful car.

"You went for gold, babe," I say with a whistle when I settle into the driver's seat and she's tucked into the passenger side.

"It looks super fast!"

The moment we're back on the highway, I realize just how fast this bad boy can go. I easily crank it up over 150 and it doesn't act like it's even trying.

"Racecar driving can be checked off my bucket list," she squeals.

"You and me both."

We seem so far away from LA, but in this car, we fly. Whoever was following us must be lost because it's been nothing but us and the open interstate.

The phone pings and Frannie gasps.

"Oh my goodness!" she cries out. "Poor Billy."

I ease off the gas and glance at the screen. Billy is standing in the middle of a kitchen, covered in blood, staring pensively at the camera. Behind him is a bottle of ketchup on the counter.

"Gordon came through," I grumble. "What now?"

"I'm going to crop the ketchup out and then I'm going to send this to Mr. Death." She works her fingers on the phone. "I just texted Death. Told him that he has to give us another twelve hours. Or else."

Shit.

"What do you think—"

"Ugh. He's insufferable. He thinks it's you pretending to be me." She starts to record a video. "I have your goat, Death. I have people everywhere. People who work for me. I'm the bad guy around here. Now show me the girls, unharmed, and I might let Billy live."

She looks over at me and smiles. Beautiful, wicked Frannie.

"You sent it?"

"Yep," she says. "Now we wait."

Ping.

She snorts. "He sent me crying emojis. Doesn't feel good to be outbadded! Ha!"

"You're evil. You think the girls are safe?"

“He sent a picture and said he’ll grant us the extra time. Lindsay looks furious, but Cala is feeding Juniper. We can slow down.”

Relief floods through me. If I weren’t flying down the highway, I’d kiss her.

“Thank you, Frannie. Just...thank you.”

She squeezes my thigh. “Teamwork, remember?”



It’s well after midnight when we arrive in Las Vegas. But this city never sleeps. Unfortunately, for us, we need some. And luckily, we have the extra time thanks to Frannie. She and Chandler are awestruck as we drive down the strip looking for a hotel. When we see an Elvis wedding chapel, she shrieks.

“Luca! Stop the car! Oh my lanta!”

I chuckle as I slow and whip into the empty parking lot. “Big Elvis fan?” No surprise there.

“My momma and daddy got married by Elvis.” Her eyes sheen with emotion. “Another bucket list thing.”

Ahhh, fuck.

How can I ignore that?

“We only live once, right?” I ask as I park the car.

“You’re not suggesting...oh my word! Luca!”

Chandler yaps happily.

“I mean, I know we barely know each other, we’re on a Mr. Death deadline, and our lives are in danger but—”

“Yes, I’ll marry you! If I’m going to end up buried in Mr. Death’s backyard, at least I can do it knowing I married a hunky outlaw turned hero.”

My chest tightens. “Hero, huh?”

“Hero with villain tendencies, but that’s what makes you so dangerously wonderful.”

“Dangerously wonderful. Bingo, she likes me.”

The dog yaps happily.

Holy shit, I’m going to get married. Lindsay is going to beat my ass for a multitude of reasons when I finally get her, but this is the one that’ll get

me whipped the hardest. It's reckless and careless and something Mom would have done. But, I can't find it in me to care.



"Now you have to buy me a ring," she sasses as she scribbles another IOU in her book. "This temporary one is okay, but I always wanted one that won't eventually turn my finger green."

The ones for sale at the chapel were of shitty quality, but that's all we had to work with. My con woman distracted the man and I hooked her up with the prettiest one they had. We peeled out of there before they even knew they'd been scammed. Sure, we could have used the money Paul gave us that he had stashed in his SUV, but he told us to use it wisely. Buying a cheap wedding ring after a wedding with Elvis himself seemed unwise.

"Where are we going now?" she asks absently.

I see it, though.

Like a beacon calling for us.

"To our hotel," I mutter. "The LINQ."

"Mmm, sounds nice."

Chandler starts yapping with excitement. He knows. We're taking care of our girl. As soon as she realizes where we're heading, she starts to cry.

Shit.

I didn't mean to make her cry.

"You're the best husband in the world," she sobs.

Thank fuck.

I pull into the parking lot of the High Roller—a huge version of a Ferris wheel but Vegas style. It's like the Mack Daddy of Ferris wheels.

"In another life, I'd give you a fucking fantastic honeymoon. But we're on a time crunch, babe. I hope this will do," I tell her as we pull into a parking spot.

She practically crawls over the console to kiss me. Then, all too soon, she's out of the car, a woman on a mission.



“Shh,” she hisses to Chandler, who she’s smuggling onto the ride inside her purse.

He growls but stops trying to escape. We grab tickets, wait in line, and soon we’re being loaded into a pod with a bunch of other people. It’s not quite the private, carnival feel, but based on the bright smile on Frannie’s face, I’d say she doesn’t care.

We’re followed by several men in black suits, all of which are wearing angry scowls.

“Wow, grumpy patrol three o’clock,” she whispers to me.

Something about the way they eye up my wife in her sexy white dress she put back on for our Elvis wedding has my hackles rising. Chandler growls from her purse.

“Come on,” I mutter. “Let’s go over here.”

The rest of the ride, we enjoy our time looking over the big, bright city. It’s late and we’re both tired, but we’re flying high on adrenaline. The sketchy men with wandering eyes have disappeared into the crowd inside the pod, leaving us to focus on our time together. All too soon, the ride is over and we’re headed back to the car.

“We can get a room here,” I say as I open the car door and help her inside. I trot over to my side and climb in. “What do you think—”

The passenger side window shatters, showering glass all over Frannie.
WHAT THE FUCK!

I fire up the engine and peel out. The back window shatters too. Frannie screams and I frantically look her over to make sure she’s not shot.

“Are you okay?” I demand.

“I’m fine,” she says tearfully. “They shot at us!”

I whip out into traffic and a black SUV soon follows. The traffic is a fucking nightmare, even after midnight. I weave in and out of cars, doing my best to lose the fuckers.

“You think this is Death?”

“I think it’s the same fucking guys as before.”

While I drive, I try to connect how Death found me in the first fucking place. I’d gotten caught by Arlo Rossi’s men. Then, the cops got involved. Rossi’s men came back for me, but then they’d been executed by the cop before he died. Mr. Death found me after that. Sent me on his mission. I’d assumed all bad guys were one and the same. But what if...what if they’re rivals?

“Rossi and Death are on opposing teams,” I tell Frannie, thinking out loud. “And if Rossi was trying to kill you, that means Death doesn’t want you killed. He just wants you. Why, though?”

“Maybe Rossi’s men were the ones Momma was trying to hide me from.”

“You’re certain she was hiding you?”

“Who else willingly lives in Teterboro when they could live anywhere else? She was always so protective. Fearful even. It has to be because of them.”

I turn down a dark road and zip along, trying to avoid some of the traffic. The SUV catches up and barrels after us. I turn onto the next street that is less busy. Once on the stretch, I gun it. The SUV can’t keep up, thank fuck. I’m thinking we’re in the clear when a car flies out onto the road and hauls ass toward us. More of Rossi’s men?

I slow, wanting to avoid a head-on collision, but that allows the SUV to catch up. They slam into the bumper and Frannie shrieks in surprise. I see a gunman hanging out of the window, his weapon pointed at us.

Pop!

He shoots the tire and we lose control.

No!

“Hold on!” I cry out, flinging my arm over Frannie, who holds Chandler to her chest.

And then we’re rolling.

Crunch.

Smash.

Shatter.

Pain explodes inside my head as we roll to a stop upside down. I groan, desperate to check on Frannie and our dog, but everything turns black.

Black. Black. Black.

I came all this way to die and let everyone I care about down.

Black.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Francis

IF MY MOMMA WERE HERE, SHE'D SPANK YOU!

“This little light of mine. I’m gonna let it shine...”

Momma’s hands brush against my forehead, cool to my heated skin. *“I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine...”* I’m comforted by her touch, falling deeper in my soft blankets. “Hey, there you are. Wake up, Francis.” Her voice is softer. Different than what I remember. I want to open my eyes to her beautiful face. Her deep-set hazel eyes that match mine. But I don’t want this moment to end. Singing my favorite lullaby. “Come on, you can do it.”

Her voice seems off.

I stir under the covers. They don’t feel as soft as the blanket Momma knitted for me. The smell of my bedroom is different.

“Momma?” I ask, confused, opening my eyes. The room is unfamiliar. Not my bedroom. And the girl leaning over me is not my momma. A beautiful woman, hair as dark as night, eyes greener than one of Bob Ross’s happy little trees, and a smile as kind as an angel. “Oh, bless it, am I dead?” Is she an angel? Waiting to take me to heaven’s gate?

There’s a soft giggle before she answers. “No, you’re not dead.”

“But on my way? You’re the most beautiful angel I’ve ever seen. Not that I’ve seen any, but I’ve always been curious. Are all angels female or do they have male angels too? Do fairies exist or is that only in the movies? I’ve always wanted to catch a—”

“Francis, I’m not an angel and you’re not dead. You’re at the farm.”

Farm? Why would I be at a—

“Oh my God!” I sit up, cursing and falling back to the bed. My stomach screams in pain.

“Be careful, you have a bruised rib. Nothing’s broken, but you’re going to be a little sore.”

My memories kick into overdrive, the car chase, the gun fire, the explosion. “Luca!” I call out.

“He’s here. You were brought in together. Even Chandler. Cala just took him outside on a walk. Those two seem to have a liking for one another.”

Oh, thank God Chandler’s okay. But Luca. “Is he...is he okay?” It was a bad crash. I remember the noise, the shooting pain in my side, and then, nothing.

Her face falls a smidge. “I’m not sure. I haven’t been able to see him. That damn stubborn fool of a man has him hidden and instructed me to stay with you until you wake up.”

Stubborn man? Who... *Mr. Death!* Is this...? “Lindsay?”

“Yeah, and you’re Francis. The one who’s been keeping everyone in line.” She smiles, offering me a sense of ease. She doesn’t look like she’s been through hell or tortured. My eyes quickly search her fingers and she seems to have all ten still in place. “Don’t worry, all ten toes are there too. Such a bluffer that man is.”

That man. Her captor. My future demise. “Who is he?” It’s important I see him immediately and demand he release Lindsay and Cala, and also fess up his intentions with me.

“I’m not sure,” she says, sounding completely honest.

“Is he going to kill me?” I need to know at least once they’re safe, all this wasn’t for nothing.

She grabs my hand and squeezes. “He’s all bark, no bite. He’s not a good man. And he sure is hiding something. I’m just not sure what. I do believe he won’t harm any of us, but you don’t go through all this trouble for nothing.”

I try and sit up, the pain making it almost impossible. Lindsay helps me until I’m able to lean against the headboard. “I need to see him. Right now.”

She’s unsure by my demand, but nods and stands. “All right. Let’s go let the beast know you’re awake.” She helps me up, and with her assistance, guides me out of the quaint room and down a hallway. She holds my hand as we walk down a set of stairs into an open living room. I stop for a moment to take in how beautiful the house is. Pale grays and yellow fill the room, paintings of flowers and sunsets on the wall. The furniture is big and cozy to the eye and the wood flooring really gives it the true farmhouse

feel. “He’s in his office. We’re not allowed in there, but I’m sure it’ll be okay to let him know you’re awake.”

I nod, following her through the house. I sneak a peek at the enormous kitchen, then the bathroom before we stop in front of two large wooden doors.

Lindsay knocks, and without an invitation, she pushes open the doors.

“What in Sam hell are you doing just walking in here, woman?” His voice is harsh. My view of him is covered by Lindsay, who’s standing in front of me. He slams his fist on his desk and stands. That’s when I finally see him.

Mr. Death.

My eyes take in his large frame. Six-two at least. Broad shoulders. Muscular. His hair thick, with a brushing of gray. He looks younger than I would have imagined, minus the graying. His eyes are dark, piercing Lindsay until she steps to the side.

“You—you’re awake.” His voice is now missing the beastly tone. There’s small movement to his lips. A smile possibly?

“I am. I want to see Luca.”

His chest sticks out. Smile gone. “Not happening.”

“I beg to differ. I want to see him right this instant or I’m leaving.” I lock my arms across my chest. His brows turn up in a confused manner.

“That’s also not happening.” He throws himself back into his massive chair. “Now that you’re awake, I have some questions. Starting with did that son of a bitch take advantage of you?” His jaw tightens, and I wonder if the crackling I hear are his knuckles popping or his teeth grinding together.

“What? That is *none* of your business, Dr. Death—”

“It’s Mr. Death.”

“And let me ask *you*. Did you take advantage of Lindsay?”

His eyes pop. I turn to Lindsay, her cheeks instantly flushing.

“That is none of your—I mean *no*! She’s my—I don’t answer to you. You answer to me!”

“Where’s Luca, Death? I want to see him now!” I raise my voice, aggravating my bruised rib in the process. I bend slightly to console my stomach, and Death hops up out of his chair.

“What is it?”

“It’s my...” Hmmm...interesting. “It’s my stomach. Luca has my pills. I need them or I’m gonna...” I bend over and moan of more pain. Fake pain.

“Ohhhhhhh the pain. I need them.”

I hear giggling.

I peek up and see a little girl standing in front of me. “You sound funny. Like a ghost. Are you an actress? You should be one.”

“Cala, stop,” Lindsay scolds her.

Forgetting my fake injury, I stand completely straight, slapping a genuine smile on my face. “Well, hello there! I’m Francis. I’m your uncle’s wi—wise friend!” I peer over at Death, who looks like he’s about to commit murder. Geez, grump. Also, may be a good thing I keep it to myself that we’re married. “How has your stay here been? Have you been treated nicely? Fed healthy meals? Bed at an early—”

“Enough! Lindsay, I want to be alone with Francis.”

She doesn’t even argue. She grabs her daughter’s hand and offers me a reassuring smile as the two exit the room, surprisingly a happy Chandler trailing behind.

“Where’s my goat?”

“Where’s Luca?”

“I’m not playing games with you, child. Where’s—”

“And I’m not a child. You should know, Dr.—”

“Mister!”

“Death. I’m not a child. Believe it or not, I’m quite the woman.”

He grumbles, swiping his hands down his face.

“The things I’ve experienced the last week, no child would—”

“Jesus, enough!”

I jump a bit at his raised voice. His fist once again slams against his desk.

“Fine, just tell me he’s all right. Is he hurt? Has he asked about me?”

His eyes darken. His closed fists rest on his desk and it’s then I notice the cuts. “Did...did you hurt him?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“It is.”

“It isn’t anymore. Soon he’ll be gone and—”

My heart sinks. “No! You can’t! We’re married! I—I love him.”

The floor rumbles below my feet as Death pops from his chair, his voice sending chills down my spine. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Oh shoot.

My throat locks, unsure how to respond. Repeat myself or laugh and say just kidding.

“PAUL!” he roars, the hairs on my arms blowing sideways. Quickly, Van Damme my buddy, or Paul and not so much my buddy anymore, enters Death’s office. “Get Francis back in her room and make sure she stays there. I have business to take care of. And you...” His eyes slay through me. “Don’t give him any trouble or you’ll regret it.”

He doesn’t wait for my response, which was going to be, I’m not a child, no reason to talk to me like one, but he’s gone before my mouth even forms the first word.



I wake with a start. Not realizing after pacing the small room for hours, I must have fallen asleep. My eyes dart open, the face of a small child not inches away from mine. “I like ice cream and cake. Some people only like one or the other, but I like both. What’s your favorite flavor?”

I blink away the drowsiness and try and sit up without head butting Cala. “Well, I also prefer both. My favorite flavor is chocolate and I put peanut butter and jelly in mine, and sometimes I take cake and smash it into my ice cream, so it’s like I’m eating ice cream and cake *and* a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

She’s in shock. Oh dear, I’ve broken the child.

“Are you from this planet?”

Her question causes me to laugh. “I think so. Are you? They do say we have aliens living amongst us.”

Her eyes light up. “Mommy told me that aliens don’t exist. Neither does the boogiemán, but Pappa Death said they do. He tells me he’s the boogiemán, which makes my belly laugh.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because he’s not scary. Not like some of the men Mommy’s brought home. He tries to be the big bad wolf, but I can tell he’s just a big gray teddy bear.” She earns another good chuckle out of me.

“Has he been nice to you?”

“Yep. He lets me feed the goats. And when he puts me down, he feeds Mommy. I hear them arguing, though. I hope he doesn’t hit her like the

others do.”

My smile fades. Luca’s mentioned Lindsay’s had it hard. No one should be treated that way. “Cala, honey, did any of those bad men ever hit you?” I hold my breath, fearing her answer.

“No, Mommy always told me to stay in my room. We had special code words for when I was to lock my door and keep it locked. She calls us special spies.”

I exhale. At least Lindsay shielded her daughter. But who was shielding her?

The door to the bedroom opens and the pitter-patter of Chandler’s nails hit the floor. “There you are,” Lindsay says and Cala runs and jumps into her mother’s arms. “What did I tell you about bothering Miss Francis?”

“You said to make sure she got her beauty rest. So, I was watching her to make sure. I think she was dreaming. Her eyeballs were moving all around.” She turns to me. “Mommy says that happens when you dream.” She turns back to Lindsay, bringing her lips to her ear, and whispers loudly, “I think she was dreaming about ice cream and cake.”

Lindsay laughs and hugs her to her chest. I stare at them while they have their moment, a small sense of envy. I wish I still had that. The ability to hug my own momma. Bask in her laugh.

“Sorry. Um, I came to see if you were hungry.”

My stomach takes that exact moment to grumble something fierce. “No. I can’t think about food until I know Luca’s safe.”

Lindsay’s face resembles mine. She’s also worried about him. She puts Cala down and Chandler starts running circles around her little feet.

“I think I know of a way to get him to budge,” she says.

I’m all ears. “Whatever it is...”

“Give him Billy back.”



“I’m itchy.”

“Shhhhhhh....”

“Point the light this way...”

After planning, we all separated, until dark. Death refused to allow me to see Luca, so I refused to eat dinner with them. It only angered him more,

but what did I care? My only concern was for Luca. Even though I was starving. At first Paul tried to coerce me to come down. I told that traitor not a chance and to relay the message to his boss. When Death came up banging on the door, I continued to stand my ground. Luca or no dice. His parting words before hearing him storm off were he was the one making the calls, not me. To make matters worse, now the smell of warm apple pie was seeping through the crack of the door.

Finally, after chewing my nails off, I heard the special three knocks and a whistle from Cala, informing me Mr. Death had locked himself in his office, as Lindsay says he does every night and it was safe to begin our mission.

I grabbed the things I found around the room and tiptoed down the hall. I met Lindsay by the staircase and together the three of us snuck out the back door of the kitchen, heading straight for Gordon's house.

"Can I take this off?" Cala whines.

"No, someone will see us. We need to stay in disguise," I tell her at the pillowcase mask I made each of us.

"It keeps tickling my nose."

After a tiring haul and a handful of mosquito attacks, we make it to the edge of the land. Cala mentioned a spot in the fence that had a hole, which allowed the goats to sometimes go into Gordon's lawn. Once all three of us squeeze through, we dart toward the house, a dim light coming from the porch.

I signal them to follow, and I army crawl, just like in the movies, up his front steps. Ducking under the front windowsill, I peak into the window. The living room is filled with balloons and streamers, "Birthday" by The Beatles playing in the background. Cake sits on the table in the corner and Gordon is wearing a party hat, along with Billy, and is that a *cat* in a birthday suit? "What the—"

"YAY! BALLOONS!"

I throw my hand over Cala's mouth, but it's too late. Her voice trails and catches Gordon's attention. He whips his head in our direction and before I can duck, we make eye contact. Shoot.

"Bloody hell! Who's out there? I'll shoot!" he growls, reaching for something behind his couch and making his way to the front door. Oh crud! Twisting to snatch Cala and run, the front door flies open, giving me just enough time to throw Cala behind me.

“Don’t shoot! It’s Francis from the, uh...Global Tribune!”

“Huh?” That comes from everyone.

I whip off my homemade mask. “I’m the one who had you steal Billy. I’m just here to get him back.” Both Lindsay and Cala pull off their pillowcases, revealing their faces.

Gordon eyes me wearily, taking in a nervous Lindsay and a smiling from ear to ear Cala. “Now what has you all happy, child? You’re trespassing. I can shoot ya and feed ya to my cows.”

“You don’t have cows. Just a cat, which I see has a party hat on. What kinda party you having, sir?”

He pauses, turning as we all take in the scene inside. “Well, it’s Sherley’s birthday.”

“Sherley?” Cala asks.

“My cat, girl!” he grumbles. We all look back, in fact, to the cat, who’s wearing a sweater with a birthday cake on it.

“May we come in and have cake? I love birthday parties!” Cala puts her hands together, bouncing up and down. Gordon looks hesitant at first, but shrugs and swings his hand toward the open door.

“I don’t see why not. We have enough to share. And Billy loves cake, so I’d hate to send him off before we serve any.”



The three of us practically bounce inside Mr. Death’s farmhouse, our bellies overstuffed with sugar. Before coming inside, we deposited Billy in the field with the rest of the goats, saying my first hello to Juniper.

“So, is it true? Did you and my brother get married?” Lindsay’s question has me tripping over my own feet, trying to be quiet as we sneak back into the house.

“I, uh...” Shoot. I don’t know what to say! I look back and she’s staring at me, waiting for an answer. “We, uh, did actually.” Even though I feel a ton of guilt for doing something without anyone’s permission, the fact we did it for each other makes my heart speed up. I got married! I cover my mouth as an unexpected giggle bursts through my lips. “Oh dear. Sorry.” What’s wrong with me?

“It’s not like my brother to do something so spontaneous like that. You must mean something special to him. Which also means, you’re kinda my sister-in-law now.”

Her words hit me like a freight train. I’ve never had a sister. I’ve never had any family besides Momma. And now I have Luca, a sister, and a niece! My eyes well with tears and I wrap my arms around her.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” she asks, returning the embrace.

“Giving me a family.”

She pulls away. “You have a family. Everyone has a family.”

“Not me. My momma passed away. So did my daddy. I was alone until Luca. I mean, I have a couple of friends of my mother’s, but he’s shown me what it feels like to be a part of something special. Something for me. A part of a team. Thank you for accepting me and not hating me for doing something without your permission.”

Her kind eyes comfort me as she goes back for another hug. “Francis, you don’t need my permission. This is between you and him. If anything, I commend the woman who finally put my brother in his place. Welcome to the family—”

“What in Sam hell is going on here?” We both whip around to Mr. Death, who’s standing in the doorway to the kitchen, his large frame blocking any source of exit strategy. Gone is the pressed suit as he stands there looking so normal in a pair of gray sweats, a fitted white T-shirt, and barefoot. “I thought you were in your room,” he growls to Lindsay, then turns his angry eyes on me. “And I thought you were on a strike.”

Lindsay and I break apart and I stand tall and fearless. “We were busy. What’s it to you?” Wow, does smoke really come from people’s ears when they’re mad?

“Vincent, we were just—”

“*Vincent?*” My eyes dart to Lindsay. “Did you just call him by his...” I whip back around to Death. “So, you *are* the Vincent. The mob boss. Andy Garcia!” I feel like I just won the lottery with this new development. I can’t wait to rub it in Luca’s face that I was right—

“Lindsay, go to your room.”

I grab her arm. “Lindsay, *don’t* go to your room. What are you? Her dad?” His eyes threaten to pop out of his sockets. “How about you go to *your* room,” I go on.

“Watch it,” he threatens me, but I refuse to back down.

“Or what, you gonna ground us both? Spank us?”

“I’m warning you,” he hisses.

“Or... Else what? You gonna—”

My words are cut short when I squeal at his large hand that reaches out and grabs my bicep. “I told you to watch it. I thought you were raised better than the mouth you seem to have picked up on your journey here. Maybe a spanking would set you right.”

I’ve never been spanked. Never hit. Never yelled at. Momma may have lost her patience with me, but she never took her anger out on me. The fact this man thinks he has the right digs deep at my emotions. “I was raised right, you old oaf—”

“I’m only forty-five, dammit.”

“My momma never once threatened to lay a hand on me. And even though it was only her and she busted her tail to make sure I was fed and happy and never without love, she still never raised a hand at me. So, if you think you can just boss me around and spank me into submission with your rules, then you have another thing coming to you, Dr.—”

“*Mister.*”

“It’s clear you don’t have children of your own, because you’d know better how to treat people.” My lower lip begins to quiver. How dare he trash my mother’s name and her ability to raise me right. “If my momma were here, she’d spank *you!*” I yell, ripping my arm out of his grip, pushing beside him, and running toward the stairs.

“Francis, wait,” I hear him calling for me, but I don’t stop until I get to the bottom of the stairs. When he yells my name again, I finally halt, turning to face my enemy.

“For what it’s worth, Billy is back in the field with the others. You got your goat back. Give me back my Luca. You have until morning, or you’re going to seriously regret ever putting me on your radar.” I swear I see his lips curl into a satisfied smile, but I don’t stick around to find out. I take the stairs two at a time, before making it to my bedroom, slamming the door and falling into my bed just in time for the tears to fall.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Luca

SATAN AND HIS LITTLE GOAT MINIONS

Whap!

I spit at his feet and laugh. “Did you just slap me?”

“I’m going to do so much more than slap,” Death growls. “We’re just getting started.”

My head throbs as my mind attempts to piece together the recent transpiration of events. I was cruising along—fucking married to the hottest, most hilarious girl on the planet—and then BAM! The rest is a blur. I vaguely remember being dragged out of the vehicle, screaming through my haze for Francis and my dog, and then being hogtied. Something warm hit my system and I was out.

I’m not sure how much time has passed, but I’m now Death’s punching bag. Except he doesn’t punch. He slaps like a fucking woman. I bite my tongue. If it were just me, I’d taunt the hell out of him. But he has everyone I love and care about.

“Where’s my sister and niece? Where’s Francis?” I demand.

Whap!

Fuck, his stupid slaps hurt.

“They’re away from you. You’re toxic, Luca. Tainting everything you touch. And you touched her, hmm? You touched Francis? You’ll pay dearly for this,” he threatens.

Whap!

Van Damme stands nearby, his arms crossed over his beefy chest. I should have known that guy was Death’s man.

“Let Lindsay and Cala go,” I plead. “You got Francis. You have me. Just uphold your end of the bargain.” At least if they’re safe, I can focus on

Frannie.

He steps into view, scowling. “They’re not going anywhere.”

Whap!

“Would you stop with the fucking slapping?” I roar, fighting against my restraints.

Death laughs. Van Damme remains on guard by the open doorway. It’s large. Like a barn. That accounts for the smell of hay and goat shit.

“Why do you care that I love Francis?” I bark out, rage burning through me.

This sets him off because he throws a punch. My head snaps to the side and my jaw explodes with pain.

“What do you need her for? Some human trafficking bullshit?” I spit out blood and grin at him. “Is this a bad time to tell you I took her virginity?”

The next punch knocks me out completely.



It’s pitch-dark in the barn. Something makes a sound and rubs up against my leg. I need to piss, but it was pretty fucking awkward the last time when Van Damme touched my dick because apparently manhandling another dude’s junk is preferable to freeing him for four fucking seconds.

Ba-a-a-a-a-a.

“Juniper? Is that you?”

The animal rubs against my leg again. Then, it hops into my lap and I groan in pain when one of its hooves mashes my balls.

“Fuck, Juniper, watch it!”

Juniper—at least that’s what I’m calling it—starts licking my face. There’s no escaping this goat’s obsessive need to clean my face as it sits in my lap. It nibbles on my jaw and I yell at it again. The damn thing isn’t worried. Simply chills in my lap like it isn’t fucking heavier than hell. When the goat takes another nibble at me and my legs go numb from its weight, I decide this is some form of hell. I died in that car crash. Heaven took their angel—my girl—and I got booted to hell. I’m sure my Bing man is around here somewhere. All dogs do not go to heaven. Not Chandler. Not after what he did to Toto. That’s unforgivable.

Ba-a-a-a-a-a.

“Yeah, you’re handsome too,” I tell Juniper dryly.

The goat hops off my lap and trots away, crying out like it’s excited. A few seconds later, a dark figure looms in the open doorway.

“Van Damme? Is that you? Did you come to play with my winkie again?”

The figure takes a menacing step forward. Then, a few shadowed figures of goats circle his legs. Yep, looking right at Satan and his little goat minions.

Mr. Bing, I need backup!

“You. Motherfucker.” Death’s voice is a low growl.

“Good evening to you too, kind sir,” I throw back at him. “Since Van Damme’s missing in action, how about you come hold my dick. Yeah, the same one that made that angel not so innocent anymore.”

Since Frannie is his weakness, I use it against him.

Even if it gets my ass kicked in the process.

Death storms my way and kicks me hard in the chest. The chair I’m tied to falls back, slamming to the barn floor. My head bounces off the ground, dizzying me. I blink away the stars. He grabs my throat and rights me back in my seat, but doesn’t let go.

“I ought to choke the fucking life out of you!” he roars, squeezing me. “You disgusting predator!”

Predator?

That’s rich coming from this guy.

I’m about to tell him as much too—once I can suck in a tiny breath of air—but then his phone rings. And since I want him to stop fucking choking me, I politely wait for him to take his call. He grunts, releasing me, and then yanks his phone from his pocket.

“What?” he growls.

He’s silent for a beat as someone yaps on the other line.

“No deal, Rossi. No fucking deal.”

What’s going on with these guys? I perk up, praying for superhero hearing to catch the other end of the conversation.

“You don’t get any of what’s mine,” Death snarls. “I know what you’re up to. If I give you the piece of shit, you’ll use it against me to get to her. Get it through your stupid skull. She’s mine now and you’ll never hurt her.”

Frannie.

Why is everyone fighting over Frannie?

I mean, I'd go to hell and back—clearly—for that girl because she's mine and I love her, but these motherfuckers need to back off.

"You can try, Rossi. Try and storm my fucking city. See what happens. We don't allow trash to sweep through LA. No, we fucking burn it," Death roars, hanging up.

"Your friends are awesome," I deadpan.

"You really fucked up messing with Arlo Rossi," Death says like I already don't know this.

"No shit?"

Whap!

God, I forgot about how hard he slaps.

"Rossi is a bad man," Death says.

"You don't say..."

Whap!

"As bad as they come..."

"I might have to argue on this one," I say with a smirk that earns me another slap.

"He wants to kill Frannie and I'm not about to let that happen."

Finally something we can agree on.

"You could free me and I could help," I offer.

"Fuck you," he barks out.

And because I obviously need a nap, I laugh. "Nah, that's what I have Frannie for."

His fist slams into my face, making everything blissfully black again.



"Luca," a sweet voice whispers. "Oh God."

I blink open my eyes and peer into the familiar ones of my sister. "Linz," I croak out, unable to say her full name.

"Shhh," she croons. "That bastard. I'm going to kill him. Hold still. I'm going to free you."

She squats behind me and starts to work on the knotted rope. When Death storms into the barn, my heart thuds in my chest.

"Lindsay, go to your room," Death snarls. "Right now."

“No!” she cries out. “You’re a monster for hurting my brother!”

Bravely, my sister ignores him, but he’s bigger and meaner. He stalks our way and he yanks her up. She screams when he tosses her over his shoulder.

“Let her go,” I wheeze. “Just let her fucking go!”

She shrieks and calls out Frannie’s name. Death pops her ass hard, making her shush.

“Paul,” he barks out. “Take him to the warehouse in the city. I don’t want him here with the girls any longer. They’ll just pester the shit out of me and keep doing more of this.” He smacks her ass hard again.

They leave and my heart rate quickens. He better not fucking hurt her. I’m struggling against my restraints when Van Damme—or Paul—approaches. He walks around behind me to unhook me from the chair. I’m still bound but no longer tied to the chair. I don’t waste a second, making a run for it.

Problem is, I’m tired.

Beat up.

Bruised and sore as hell.

I make it all of ten feet before I stumble and fall hard on my chest. Knowing the fucker is coming, I roll onto my back and kick him right in the nuts. He howls and then does some crazy fucking ninja shit before bringing his elbow down on my head.

Blackness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Frannie

PAPPA DEATH?

“More tea, Princess Bing?” Cala asks. Chandler yaps, his tail wagging through the princess dress Cala borrowed from her doll and dressed him in. “And you, Queen Francis?”

“Oh, why but of course, Princess Cala. This is the best tea in all the land.” I raise my still half full teacup so she can refill it up to the top. With the three sips I’ve already taken down, I’ve confirmed her secret recipe is water, chocolate syrup, and possibly salt. My stomach is already starting to rumble a wee bit, but no one turns down tea with a princess.

“Would you like another cookie, Princess Francis?” My stomach churns. I’m on my third frozen French toast stick. My belly says please God no, but my heart and that sweet little smile has me lifting my tiny plate for another raw stick.

“Why thank you. This breakfast has been simply magical! You make a beautiful princess, Cala.”

“So do you! I love your makeup. You look beautiful. I can see why Uncle Luca married you.”

I smile back, my heart threatening to explode with love. I’ve only just met her, but I’m already so much in love.

“Would you like me to touch up your lipstick now?” Before tea, Cala insisted on doing my makeup. At the current moment I have purple on one eye, starting from my lid to my forehead and the other is pink with glitter to my ear.

“Sure!” As much as I know how silly I must look, I’m enjoying myself immensely. Playing dress-up and having a tea party reminds me of when I was a little girl. And of Momma. She would always drink any concoction I

made, even when I swore dirt was a natural spice. Cala giggles and reaches into her pink purse and pulls out the tube of red lipstick. She gets up from the tiny table we're sitting at and pats Chandler, who wags his tail, causing the bow wrapped around his tail to fall off. He jumps onto the table, his painted nails pawing at his frozen French toast stick as he eats away.

"Now, stand still. I don't want to mess it up," she says, a serious look on her face as she tries her best to stay in the lines of my lips. I feel the lipstick swipe my nostril, go a little past my lip line, and onto my cheek. I also may be wearing some on my chin and am resembling the Joker.

"You look so pretty. Let's go find Pappa Death and see if he wants to take us to the ball. He can drive us around in the tracker. He does that sometimes."

Pappa Death. Interesting. "Princess Cala, has Pappa Death been nice to you?"

Her eyes light up. "Oh, yes. He's very nice. He yells sometimes, but then he says sorry. He buys me lots of stuff. And Mommy too."

"Has he told you why you're here?"

She pulls out her brush and starts combing my hair. "He says me and Mommy make him happy."

Happy?

None of this is adding up. He kidnapped them as collateral to get me. But we still have no idea why. And why has he been so kind to them?

"Right now, Mommy is sad. I think Pappa Death made her cry. She cried all night long. She didn't want to play dress-up with me. But maybe if she sees how pretty we both look, she will want to play too."

My heart sinks. What did Mr. Death do to Lindsay? Has he been... Is she... "Hey, how about you wait here and I'll go find out if Mommy wants to play? Sound good?"

Cala perks up and jumps off my lap. I stand, popping a button in the too small princess dress Cala insisted I squeeze into. "Hurry, go go!" She tugs at my arm. I start to walk, sadly catching the gown under my feet, and trip.

"Shoot, I'm okay!" Minus the huge tear in the back of the dress.

I walk down the quiet hall to the room Cala and Lindsay share. I knock gently, with no reply. I knock again, but this time, I open the door. Lindsay is lying in bed on her side, making soft sounds of sniffing.

"Lindsay, are you okay?" I call out. She doesn't answer me, so I step farther into the room and sit on the bed next to her. "Please, talk to me. Is he

hurting you? Has he done anything that you don't—"

"He's horrible and I hate him." She starts to cry into her pillow. My heart sinks once again at the thought.

"Lindsay, please, tell me what he's done. I want to help."

She sniffles, lifting her head out of the pillow. "He's such a—*Jesus!*" Her body flinches, causing me to shoot off the bed.

"Oh, Francis, I'm so sorry! You, I didn't expect to see you so..."

"I've had a wonderful morning with your daughter. Does it show?" I smirk, throwing my hair back to accentuate my makeup job. Thankfully that gets a small laugh from her. I sit back down. "Tell me what's wrong, please."

She stares at me, debating on opening up. "He's just...just...so hot and cold. One minute he's this wonderful man. Gentle. Caring. The way he..." She stalls.

"The way he what?" I brace myself to hear it. If he touched her against her will, I swear to God...

"He's... I don't know how to describe it. But when he's not this man who makes me feel, he's a monster."

Makes her feel? Oh boy. Talk about an eye for an eye. If Death was upset about Luca and me... "Lindsay, is something going on between you and Dr. Death?"

"It's Mr. and...and... I can't." Her face falls back into the pillow and she begins to heavily cry. I wrap my arms around her for comfort until her tears subside. She lifts her head back and sits up. "There's something I have to tell you."

Oh crap on a cracker.

"I saw Luca last night."

"What! Where?" My heartrate speeds up. God, I miss him so much! "I need to see him. Can you take me to him? Is he okay? Did he ask about me? Did you tell him that Billy was—"

"Francis, wait."

I stop talking, confused. She should be happy, not so upset to reunite with her brother.

"I found him in the barn. I heard Vincent and his henchman talking about him. So, once we all went to bed last night, I went in search of him. And I found him." The torment in her eyes has my stomach turning. "He

didn't look good. He was all bruised and bloody. I tried to free him, but then Vincent caught me."

No. No. No.

"I tried," she chokes out. "I tried, but he ripped me out of the barn. Said for his henchman to take him to the city. Francis, I'm scared he's going to do something to him."

My breakfast threatens to come up. No. He wouldn't. He made a deal. He has me. He said he would let everyone else go. "But, but...he doesn't want Luca. He wants me. He made a deal."

Her cries gut me. "And he's going back on it. He told me last night, before tossing me in here, that we weren't going anywhere. He said the tables have turned and Luca got himself into trouble he's not willing to risk getting him out of. I should forget my brother."

No...

The room around me spins. Lindsay reaches to steady me. Image after image of Luca and his beautiful smile, his infectious laugh, his strong, greedy hands fly through my brain. No. He won't take that from me. "No."

"No what? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell that big oaf what I think of him and demand he bring me back my husband. He made a deal. And he will stick to it. Or else!" I stand up abruptly, catching the dress under my heel, and trip to the ground.

"I'm okay!" I pop up and storm out of her room in search of the big, bad Dr. Death. I find him in his office, on a call.

"Find the goddamn location!" he roars and slams the phone on its base. "Oh hello—*Jesus!*"

"Don't you Jesus me, you Dr. Deal breaker! Now you listen to me. We had a deal. Me for them. And you're gonna stick to it or I'm gonna make your life a living hell!"

He shoots up from his chair. "Oh yeah? And how's that? Scare me into a heart attack with that makeup, already done. I'm busy, so if you can excuse —"

"I don't think so, Death Trap. I want to see Luca. And I want to see him now. I want him unharmed and then we're leaving. All of us. Even the goats."

"You're not taking anyone."

"Yes, I am."

“The hell you are! Everyone stays. Even my damn goats! You have no idea who you got yourself involved with! And to marry him! The risk you put yourself in. Now I’m forced to clean it all up. Forget about him.”

The nerve. A monster is right. I take a step closer to him and strangely I watch him cower a bit. Good. “You know what? I feel sorry for you. A lonely man, here on his farm, with no care or heart for anyone but himself. Unlike *you*, I was raised to love and have compassion. And you may not have anyone to show you love, but my momma raised me to be kind and treat others the way I would want to be treated. And I’ve always stuck to that motto because I loved my momma and she always knew best. But right now? I look at you, and I don’t think you deserve to be treated with any kindness. You do nothing but hurt people. Steal. Probably *do* murder people and bury them in your crops.”

“You been talking to that cuckoo next door. He has no—”

“I’ve been talking to you! I’ve been holding Lindsay while she cries her eyes out! Why is that? What did you do to her?” I demand.

He clears his throat, suddenly looking uncomfortable. “Nothing. Wha-What did she say I did?”

“She said you’re a monster. And you are! This game, whatever it is you’re playing, is over! I want Luca back here now—”

“That’s impossible!” he yells, shaking the ground below me. His fists slam onto his desk causing a picture frame to fall and shatter. “Last time I checked, I make the rules!”

“Well, your rules suck! They hurt people. Especially the ones I love.”

“You don’t love him. You barely know him.”

“I know that he’s shown me more heart and compassion in the past week than I’ve had in my entire life. I’ve never felt so alive and happy since my...” My lower lip shakes. NO. I refuse to show him my weakness. My back stiffens. “I do love him. Something you’ve never felt.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I sure do. I can see it in your eyes. Cold. Dead. Like your silly name. Is being a big bad mobster so lonely? No time for love? Maybe you should try a dating site and get a lady friend. My friend Dennis was telling me about places where you just swipe left or right. Stop being so grouchy and hateful and kidnapping people!”

“Get out of here. We’re done with this discussion—”

“No, we’re not. What, truth hurts? No one’s ever loved—”

“OUT! GET OUT! Before I drag you out of here!” He’s seething. But so am I. I’m not going to let him win. If he won’t stick to this deal, then I’ll just have to get Luca back myself. I’m resourceful and smart and I have love on my side. I give him one last evil stare before turning on my heel and storming out of his office.

Don’t worry, Luca. I’m coming for you.



Currently, the three of us are holed up in my room, all of Cala’s toys being used as a blueprint for our rescue mission.

“Okay, listen up. I know you think it’s best to wait until everyone goes down for the night, but I can’t wait that long knowing Luca may be in danger. So, this is the plan.” I point to Cala’s dollhouse, portraying the farmhouse. “From what you’ve said, Lindsay, Paul normally goes for a drive just before dinner.”

“I think he smokes or has a girlfriend. He always comes back smelling like perfume.” Cala giggles and I give her a wink.

“When he leaves, we’ll have you go and distract Death. Tell him you want to talk. Cry...do anything to get him to turn on his forgiving side.”

Lindsay’s eyes soften. Something’s definitely been going on between them while she’s been here, there’s no doubt. I just hope she’s able to step it up and turn her back on him when the time comes.

“So, then what are you going to do? We don’t know where they took Luca. He just said to the city property. That can be anywhere. It could take us forever to locate him. And his office is always super secure.”

“Leave that to me. While Paul leaves, you handle Death. I’ll just sneak in there and snoop.”

“Francis no, it’s too risky. If he catches you...”

“*If* he catches me, I’ll take the heat. But I have to get into his office and search for clues to where he may have Luca, because it may be our only chance at finding him.” Chandler yaps, agreeing with me. Lindsay looks unsure of the idea, but I don’t see any other way.

“So, everyone understands what they need to do?”

Lindsay nods and so does Cala.

Lindsey stands. "I'm going to sneak over to the neighbor's and ask to borrow the keys to his car. That way, once we find the information, we can get the hell out of here. Can you keep an eye on Cala until I get back?"

Cala's eyes light up, and I know she has another great idea on how to spend our time together. "Hide and go seek, Frannie!"

Hide and go seek it is.



Cala's version of hide and go seek turns into hide and seek and tag and dance. If you get caught in your hiding spot you have the chance to run away, but if you're tagged you must dance. I've been tagged four times. I'm starting to run out of spunk because this little girl is quick.

I'm running down the stairs as I watch her take a swift left. "I'm gonna catch you!" I holler, hearing her little giggle echo down the hallway.

"Nanabooobooo, no, you're not!" she squeals, and I watch her disappear into the library. I try and slow my pace when I enter, but still manage to slip when making my turn. My socks on the wooden floor cause me to slide into the wall, but I catch myself as I run into the room.

"I'm gonna get you!" I playfully taunt and listen for her little laughter. I can't help but laugh at myself at how much fun I'm having. I'm out of breath. My head turns to survey the room. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Giggling sounds from behind the reading chair in the right corner and I spot her little feet. I tiptoe, pretending I don't see her, and head to the matching chair in the other corner of the room. "Hmmm... I smell a little girl...but I don't see a little girl." More giggling. "Maybe she's under here!" I quickly tug up the rug, hearing her squeal causing myself to giggle. "Or how about...over here!" I stick my head behind the chair. Cala jumps and I whip my head in her direction. "Ah! I caught you!" I jump toward her just as she pops up in excitement, knocking an end table into the bookshelf. I quickly grab her just as a bunch of books fall from the shelf, almost smacking her in the head.

"Uh oh. Sorry, Francis. I didn't mean to."

I hug her to me. "It's okay, honey. They're just books. We'll pick 'em up." I bend down to scoop up the books and a bunch of papers and photos

that fell out.

“Are we going to get in trouble?” she asks, biting her lower lip.

“Of course not. We’ll just stuff these photos back where...”

What...

My eyes start playing tricks on me.

My hand stalls in stuffing a photograph back into the book. I know the people in the photograph. Because it’s my mother and me as a baby. I’ve seen this before, but in my version, there isn’t a man in the photo. A man holding me. I try and shake off the confusion, but more questions arise as I flip to another one. One of Momma. And *him*. Another one of us, Momma holding up a sign in front of the antique shop. Another one of her and him in front of Miss Russet.

“What...”

My hands shake as I pick up a short letter and unfold it.

V-

Please return to me. I can’t do this without you. She needs you too.

Always in my heart,

Layla

It’s my mother’s handwriting, I know it. The date is from twenty years ago. I was two. I scramble to open another one.

V-

I thought I saw you tonight. My heart is hurting. Please come home to me. We will figure it out. The only danger is my heart without you. She needs you.

Always in my heart,

Layla.

Why? Why? Why? I can barely open the last one, my hands are shaking terribly.

V-

This is my last letter to you. I’m ill. My heart can’t take this life, nor can the disease growing inside me. Soon I’ll be gone and she’ll be alone. If not for me, do it for her. She needs you.

Always in my heart,

Layla

The letter was dated two days before Momma died.

My world spins and I threaten to lose consciousness. My hand shoots out, catching myself as everything goes in and out. My chest feels heavy and I can't breathe.

"Francis, are you okay?"

No.

No.

No.

My hand covers my heart.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

Cala runs out of the room and I faintly hear her calling for help. Please tell me this isn't true.

"What's happened? What's wrong?" I hear *his* voice, laced with concern, boom through the room. It's then I slowly turn to face him.

"Francis." His tone is soft, his eyes screaming with guilt.

"You're...my father?"

"Let me explain. There are reasons why—"

"You've been alive this whole time?"

He takes a cautious step closer to me, but I throw a hand out.

"You've been alive, knowing she spent her entire life pining for you? Loving you? You let her die without you!" I can barely hold myself up, so much confusion and anger are bulldozing through my mind.

"Francis—"

"She prayed every night for you. Every night. I never got it. I never understood how after so many years she couldn't just let you go. Be at peace with your death. It was because she knew you were alive. And me... I didn't know how to fix what was so broken inside her because I knew I couldn't bring you back to her. Years, *years!*" I scream, crumbling the photo in my hand. "I thought it was me. I reminded her too much of you. Times when there was too much pain to look at me. Why?"

"Why?"

"Why did you leave her? Leave us?" I fight to breathe, grabbing at my stomach to coddle the blast of pain inside my chest. "She never truly lived without you. Did you know that? She spent her entire life trying to make me

believe I was the only thing that mattered. But deep down it was always you. A man I thought left unwillingly because God took him.”

His shoulders slump, his chest going in and out, breathing deep. “I had to leave you two.”

“No one has to leave their family!” I yell.

“You were in danger. It was either risk them finding you and your mother and killing you both or leaving so you can have a life outside of the risks.”

“Risks? *Risks!*” I throw the letters at him. “Did you ever write her back? Even just once? Did you know she wrote in a journal every single night? Same paper as that. How many letters did she write you?”

His head bows.

“The night of the carnival. Was it you? Did she see you?”

His head lifts and the moment our eyes collide, my heart breaks in half. “Yes.” I exhale in a sorrowful choke. “I wanted to come back so bad. I missed you both. It was hell for me too. I stayed away because it was what needed to happen. I got weak that one time and it almost cost you both your life.”

“You cost her *her* life.”

He takes a step closer. “Francis.”

“She died without you!” My tears pour down my cheeks.

“Frannie, please. I didn’t know she was sick. I was away on business. She would always send the letters to the farm. By the time I got back here, it was too late. I would never have stayed away if I knew. I never would have...” He has to stop to rein in his own emotions. “I loved her. More than anything. I loved you both enough to walk away.”

“Well, I hate you. Hate you! You should never have come for me. I was just fine without you. I would have continued to be.”

“They found you. The bad men who I’ve been hiding you from found you. That’s why I brought you home.” His words threaten to knock me off my axis once again. This isn’t my home. My home is in Teterboro with my momma. “Before we settled you both in New Jersey, we lived here. Layla and I. We got married, built this house together, and bought a bunch of goats. Goddamn goats. That’s what your mother wanted.”

His words seep into my mind. Images. Conversations, the tiniest little clues that now make sense.

Once upon a time I had a library where I would sit and read for hours and get lost in the most magical fairy tales.

Don't be silly, goats would make great pets. They actually have very charming personalities.

In another life we'd live on a farm. It'd be peaceful and we'd grow our own crops and not need anyone else but each other.

The whole time. She talked about this place. And I never knew.

I look around the room, picturing Momma sitting in the chair reading. Imagine her outside in the barn, petting Juniper or probably Juniper's mom. Enjoying the wrap-around porch she always talked about.

"She...she..."

"She loved it here. So did you."

I shake my head. "Stop. Stop! So what, now that my life's in danger you feel you can just step up and be my father? And if I wasn't in danger? Would you have ever come for me?"

He doesn't need to answer for me to know that answer.

"Oh God." I bend over, feeling sick. This is all too much. Too much.

"Francis—"

"Vinnie, sorry to interrupt." Another henchman pops his head into the library.

"Not now, Harry."

"But, Boss—"

"I said not now!"

"I know, Boss, but it's bad."

I lift my head to the man who entered just as Death whips around. "Spit it out and then get the fuck out of here."

"We got the location. Rossi intercepted their car last night. Paul and Luca never made it to the city compound."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Luca

KA-BOOM!

Nausea roils in my stomach and I dry heave. I can't remember the last time I ate. No thanks to Mr. Death and his fucking minion *Jean-Paul Van Damme*. I groan and try to blink my eyes open, but one is half swelled shut. The scent of goat piss no longer fills my nostrils. No, this smells different. Familiar.

Oregano.

I'd know that filthy scent from anywhere.

A certain Atlantic City casino smelled like this shit.

"Psst, kid," Paul hisses. "Wake up."

"I'm awake, fucker."

"Good," he whispers. "We have to devise a plan."

I crane my neck to seek out his voice. He's sitting in a chair beside me, ropes securing him to it. Fuck. I knew I knew that scent. We're screwed.

"Rossi," I grumble. "They got me."

"They got me as well," he huffs, clearly pissed as fuck over this.

"Welcome to villain hell." I roll my head on my shoulders, trying to loosen the kinks. "Where the hell are we?"

"An old warehouse in LA, not far from where I was going to take you," he reveals. "Four blocks at most."

"You must be so disappointed that badder guys thwarted your bad guy plans," I deadpan. "Please, do tell me what I'm missing out on now that we've been sent off course. A vat of acid? Hang me by my toes and cut open my abdomen so my guts splatter the floor? Rabid dogs to eat me alive?"

Paul's lip curls up as though he's disgusted. "Americans have sick imaginations."

"Americans are realists. Also, we watch a lot of movies."

He snorts. "I was going to hold you until Vinnie decided what he wanted to do. Contrary to your belief, I prefer not to hurt people. As Chuck Norris always says on his video blogs—"

"Oh, God, stop," I groan. "I can only deal with crazy from one person and her dog. Everyone else can just fuck off with it. I'm maxed out." My chest squeezes at the thought of Frannie all alone with that motherfucker. "Just...lie to me, man. Tell me he's going to take care of her. At least I can die knowing that."

Paul cocks his head to the side. "He is going to take care of her."

"That was surprisingly convincing. Can you say it with a little more conviction, though? Add in some specific details to make it more real? What will her bedroom look like? Will the goats love her?" I close my eyes to imagine Frannie in her pretty yellow dress that belonged to her momma, my dog Bingster Boo tucked under her arm, frolicking amongst the goats. Maybe Cala and Lindsay are there, so she's not lonely.

"It is his familial duty," Paul reveals in an ominous tone.

My eyes snap open. "His motherfucking what?"

Paul nods. "Vincent has fathered the girl."

"Wow, now those are some details, Van Damme, but stop. That's over the top. Her father? Come the fuck on." I huff and pull against the restraints, hoping to loosen them.

"Think about it, young man," he says. "Do you find it strange that you suddenly had the urge to go all the way out to Atlantic City for no reason?"

That's exactly what I think.

Though it's not, is it?

The brochure came in the mail boasting of some hotshot casino out there that looked like easy pickings for a con man. I'd already fucked around in Vegas here and there with some success. It felt like destiny—and now that I have Frannie, I believe that—not some ultimate bad guy plan.

"I decided to go," I tell him defiantly. "All on my own. Bubble burst. What now, Paul?"

"I put that brochure in your mailbox on Vinnie's command. He'd been researching you for some time because he needed the right person to do the

job. All you needed was a little push. The moment you bailed, he pounced on the girls.”

“I’ll kill him,” I seethe.

Nonplussed, he continues. “You were not supposed to get caught, though. Vinnie was disappointed when I reported back.”

“Wait? You were there?”

He nods solemnly. “I have been following you for some time now.”

“And that’s not fucking creepy or anything. Especially when you say it like that. Do you moonlight as an actor because you totally have that Van Damme vibe with a little mix of Stallone?”

The fucker preens a little at my comment.

“I assure you I am no actor,” he says, grinning. “I am a thorough henchman to the great Vincent Lamberto.” He pauses as though waiting for applause.

Sorry, dude, hands are fucking tied.

“Bravo,” I deadpan. “What next?”

“So, you got caught. The police had you in their custody, but the Rossi men knew you smelled of Vincent. They wanted to shake you down and do all those terrible things you spoke of. But instead of dogs, they’d use pigs.”

I shudder at the visual.

“Then,” he says, “Rossi’s men caught up to you. A shootout took place. I was prepared to intervene on your behalf.”

“How brave and dashing you are,” I sneer.

“Absolutely,” he agrees. “But then, you surprise me with your ability to stay alive. The cop did the shooting, but you managed to get yourself out of the situation.”

I sigh heavily. “So I was just a pawn to retrieve Frannie. Why?”

“Because Vincent’s daughter was in danger.”

“I hardly call Teterboro dangerous. I was probably their one and only home invasion.”

He shakes his head. “Before you showed up and tried to steal from them, Rossi had already uncovered Vincent had a daughter and they were looking for her. They were on your tail as it was.”

“So why didn’t you save us all the drama and just snatch Frannie yourself since you’re so skilled and all-knowing?”

“Someone had to fight off Rossi’s men so you could safely get her away,” he tells me. “Vincent knew your family was your bargaining chip

and you were the perfect tool.”

“Yeah, fuck him too,” I growl. Something still doesn’t add up. “If I believe this bullshit scam that Death conned *me* of all people to do his bidding and end up in that casino, the question is, why? Why take me to the den of the enemy and then make me go get his precious cargo all the while having the bad guys on my ass? Seems like the worst dumbass idea in history.”

“Unfinished business.”

Cryptic bastard.

“Elaborate,” I growl.

“How you Americans say it? Murder two birds with one rock?”

“Kill two birds with one stone.”

“Ahh, yes. He wanted Rossi brought to him. Into his territory. To finish what they started years ago.” Paul grins, his eyes flashing. “The grand finale.”

Cue fucking eye roll.

“This plan could have failed in so many ways.” She could have gotten hurt, or worse, killed.

“I was there every step of the way,” he assures me. “Watching you bring her across the country. A few times I had to step in, but I bragged to Vincent how well you and Frannie had things handled on your own.”

“Aww,” I say dryly, “so sweet. You put in a good word. Does he need a copy of my résumé too? I’ve been looking for a different job than con man. Henchman is a promotion.”

Fucker preens again, flashing his big white teeth.

“Why does Rossi want Vincent’s daughter anyway?” I ask, eager to get to the crux of the matter.

“Vincent blew up Rossi’s childhood home here in LA with his father and brothers in it. He has wanted revenge for twenty plus years, but never had an opportunity as Vincent is a vicious mobster with plenty of protection. Like I said, unfinished business.”

Holy shit.

“Why did he blow them up?” I demand.

“Because they failed to pay back their loan.”

“Harsh,” I mutter. “Remind me not to ask that dude to spare some change.”

“Rossi ignored Vincent and then he could not ignore him anymore.” His eyes alight with violence. “Ka-boom!”

“So why was Rossi involved with Vincent in the first place?”

“They were once business associates until it went bad, but Rossi never knew about the wife and child. Vincent had already hidden them away for fear of his associates turning on him. When things went down with Rossi and Vincent, the girls were safe.” He sighs. “Rossi used what he owed Vincent and took it down to Vegas to turn a profit. It went down the toilet and he had to flee back to New Jersey where his mother lived and he could hide out. When his mother died, he used the inheritance to build a casino in Atlantic City.”

“Quite a fucking coincidence him ending up near Frannie and her mom. Was Death concerned at all that the guy he hated was in his wife and daughter’s backyard?”

“Immensely, but he had eyes on them.”

“Eyes?”

“The beautiful Ms. Mabel.”

“Wait...what? As in Frannie’s old lady bestie? She was a traitor to my wife by being besties with her lunatic father?”

Paul shakes his head as if I’m silly. “I am Vincent’s best friend. Mabel the lovely was simply eyes. She knew it was imperative that they were kept safe. Vincent would call and check up on things, send items to the store if needed, and remind her to keep her eyes peeled for anything strange.”

“Why wouldn’t Mabel tell Frannie that she’d been in contact with her real father?” I demand, furious on her behalf.

“Mabel, the one with the prettiest lips, was sworn to secrecy. Besides, it only would have hurt the child knowing her father was out there alive and well. And Francis was precocious as a child, so she would have tried to find him.”

You don’t say...

“So we did our job,” I grumble, “by rescuing Frannie and bringing her to LA to be with her father. Big fucking deal. She’s safe from Rossi, but what about Vincent? He’s a monster.”

“I agree he makes strange decisions at times like with your sister. I’ve always preferred an older woman over a younger one, but who am I to judge. The heart wants what the heart wants—”

“Wait, my sister?”

I'm going to kill him.

Dead fucking meat.

"Would you lookie there," a deep voice croons as he walks into view.

Arlo Rossi. Shit.

"A boy and his goon," Rossi says. "So sweet."

I glower at him. "Let me loose and I'll show you what a sweet boy I am."

Rossi cackles with laughter. "Oh, Luca, how easy it would be to put a bullet through your empty skull. But, you have proved to be quite entertaining to me. And costly. You've somehow managed to evade my men at every turn. It was you who dragged my ass across country to do this job myself. I'm going to have fun making you scream, and then when I get your father-in-law and *your wife* in here, I'm going to make you watch while I skin them alive."

Bile rises in my throat. "You touch one hair on her head..."

"I'm going to touch every single hair on her head," he sneers. "And then I'm going to work my way down." He makes a salacious gesture with his fingers and tongue, making me see red.

"YOU MOTHERFU—"

Ka-boom!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Francis

GOSH DARN TRAITOR PAUL

“What’s going on with my brother?”

Yap! Yap!

“What does that mean, lost his gosh darn location?”

Yap! Yap!

“Is Uncle Luca in trouble?”

Yap! Yap!

“STOP!” Everyone goes from talking all at once to complete silence to stare at Mr. Death. “Stop. I need to think.”

Lindsay ignores his threatening tone and walks up to me, taking my hand into hers. “While he’s *thinking*, what happened? I heard you yelling.”

I blink away the tears still falling. “Well, *Vincent* over here is not only a monster who kidnaps people, but also my father. And *obviously* has been alive this whole time.”

Lindsay glares over at him, and he stares at her right back.

“That’s not the case,” Mr. Death snaps.

“Oh how is it not? Are you really dead? Are we standing here talking to a ghost?”

Cala starts running around the room, making ghost sounds. Mr. Death throws his hands through his thick graying hair and eyes me with both annoyance and guilt.

Lindsay takes aim at him next. “How could you, Vinnie?”

“What’d you do, Pappa Death?” Cala chimes in.

“Boss...”

“Cala, honey, I had to do what—”

“Boss...”

“I had to do what I had to do to keep the ones I love very much—”

“Boss—”

“Jesus, WHAT!?” He throws his weight around to address the man. He holds up a phone for him and when he grabs it assessing the screen, he growls, his facial expression transforming into another level of anger.

“What? What is it?” I forgo my battle with him. “Is it about Luca? Did you get more news?”

“Sonofabitch!” Mr. Death roars, looking at whatever just came through.

Lindsay steps toward him. “If you don’t spit out what you know, I swear to God, I’m going to—”

“Rossi has Paul and Luca.”

“Who’s Rossi?”

That’s when I step in. “Rossi is a bad man who Luca crossed, but it was kind of by accident. And we dodged them a bunch of times while making our way across the country. It was quite exciting. Lots of gunshots and getaway driving. You should have seen—”

“Enough!” he interrupts. He comes straight at me, his eyes quickly going from angry to concerned. “Francis, honey—”

“It’s just Francis.”

“Francis, I know you’re upset and this is a lot to take in. I never wanted you to find out this way. I also never wanted you to fall in love with your goddamn handler—ouch!” He growls, staring at Lindsay, who just hit him. Back to me. “But this is not good. I won’t give Rossi what he wants.”

“What does he want?” I demand.

“You.”

I inhale gustily. My eyes find Cala, who’s now sitting on the floor playing with some dolls, while Lindsay regards me with despair. Rossi has her brother. And he’s all they have. Without him, she and Cala will be lost. “Then let’s give him me,” I reply.

A loud thunder cracks in the air as my dad takes a small piece of furniture and tosses it across the room, shattering it. Cala starts to cry and Lindsay scoops her into her arms for safety.

“I said no,” he snarls. “I will not discuss this further. I’ve sacrificed everything to keep you safe. I sure as hell don’t plan on making all my sacrifices be for nothing to just hand you over.”

“So, you’re gonna let them kill my brother?” Lindsay’s voice is laced with dread. Tears pool in her green eyes. She turns with Cala in her arms

and runs out of the room. Mr. Death takes a step to go after her, but my voice stops him.

“Dad.” He halts, his eyes wide when he faces me at my choice words. His entire demeanor changes and he takes a step toward me. “It’s been forever since I’ve heard that. Probably never since you were just babbling when I left.”

“Well, it feels strange to say it. But it’s who you are. Even though Daddy Death has a better ring to it.” My shoulders rise and fall, inhaling a deep breath for strength. I brush my hands down my yellow dress, before bringing my eyes back to him. “I love him. He loves me. I don’t know if you love me, because you’ve been fake dead my whole life. But if you want to prove to me you do, help me get Luca back. Help Lindsay get her brother back.”

His nose twitches. “It’s not that easy.”

“It is. Make it or I’ll take matters into my own hands.” A threatening step has him closer, but I don’t back down. I match him and take two. “So, what’s it gonna be, Daddy Death?”

“It’s Dad now. You’ve already said it,” he growls.

“And I’ll take it back just as fast. Wanna be my dad? Earn it. Show me you do love me.” His mouth opens to reply, but I cut him off. “Do it, or it’s triple D.”

“What does *that* even mean?”

“Dr. Daddy Death—”

“It’s Mister!”

“Not to me. Not until I have Luca back. You know...Momma never talked about you. She couldn’t. It hurt too much. But on rare occasions when she did, she would tell me stories. How kind you were. How safe she always felt with you. She told me I was almost born in Miss Russet, but you had your special way, which makes sense now because you’re a mobster and probably shot out each stop light to get to the hospital faster. But she never stopped telling me what a big heart you had. Right now, I don’t believe that. Prove it.”

I keep eye contact with him, until I see the white flag go up. His shoulders slump and he eliminates the space between us. I squeal when he snatches me up in his arms and pulls me to his chest. My face smashes into him and his head dips, pressing his chin to the top of my head.

“I’ve loved you every single day since the day you were born. It’s been from afar and I’m a shit father.”

“Yes, you are.”

He squeezes me tighter, threatening my insides to explode. “This is where you tell me I’m not a horrible father and you love me.”

“Can’t do that, Dr.—you’re going to crush my insides!”

I feel his mouth press to the top of my head.

“It’s just Dad. Okay? If I can hear you just say that, I’ll give in and save your shit husband, which we then need to have a discussion about because you’re way too young to be married, which we can have annulled and you can go to college—*ouch!* Now that hurts!” he yelps as I smash my shoe onto his toe.

I pull away.

Our eyes meet. I want to say something rude or mean. Battle him. But somewhere deep inside I can’t. My momma’s words float in my head. The last thing she said to me. *One day there would come a time when I would be hurt by someone, and when that time comes, I need to forgive in order to move on and find peace.*

It allows me to wave my own white flag. Because to be honest, we need each other to make this work. So instead of opening my mouth to continue this battle, I switch routes. “Miss Russet died on our way here.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t want to leave her, but we didn’t have a choice. Momma loved that car. She would have been upset to see her left.”

His hand reaches out to graze my cheek. “I had my men go back for her. She’s in the city. Paul gave word of what happened, and I couldn’t leave her behind either.”

Okay. He’s earning his dad points back and fast. I fight the urge to start all over with the tears, but I hold them back. “Momma would be happy to know that.”

“Thank you for being there for her. When I couldn’t.” Okay gosh darn it, is he turning the tables on me. The tears break through my barrier and start to fall. I’m back in his arms, me hugging him this time. If we weren’t in the middle of a kidnapping and life or death situation, I’d stand here forever. Accept his embrace and all the years I missed out on his touch, his smell, his love. The way I feel safe in his arms. “You look just as beautiful as she did in this dress.”

Okay, hug time is over. I pull away looking down at Momma's yellow dress. "How do you..."

"The same day I bought your momma this dress was when she told me she was pregnant with you." He clutches my shoulders as he looks over my appearance in an almost wistful way. "We'd been on the road, no destination in mind. We wanted to, as she would always say, 'Let the country roads take you home.' It led us here. There'd been a flea market in the small town and the moment I saw this dress, I knew I had to have it. For her." My eyes aren't the only ones shedding tears. He wipes at his stubbled face. "She was the most beautiful woman in this dress. She shone brighter than the sun. She stole my heart, the day I met her." He takes a step back, gathering himself. "You look exactly like her. When she was your age, wearing this."

"I do?"

"Even down to your beautiful smile and fiery attitude." It's then I run back into his arms. I cry on his shoulder as he holds me tightly to his chest. "I love you, Frannie. I always have."

"I love you too, Dad."

"Everything okay in here?" We break apart at Lindsay's presence. I wipe away the wetness from my cheeks as does he.

"Yeah, Dr.—Dad said he's willing to do what it takes to get Luca back." He opens his mouth to argue, since he didn't officially agree, and I put my hand up to stop him and continue. "And he's gonna let me do it my way."

Lindsay looks relieved but not sold. "Great. But, Francis, how are you going to get them back? Vincent is a mob boss. I think he may have stronger connections."

"Stronger connections? Not as strong as *my* connections." Placing my hands on my hips, with all the confidence in the world, I say, "Have you ever met a goat slayer, an ex-military romantic, the best romance book recommender, and a grumpy old best friend with the biggest chip on her shoulder?"

Didn't think so.

My connections beat Daddy Death's any day.



“You’re *WHERE?*”

“Jesus, child, I’m old not deaf, no need to shout. I said we’re in Nevada! This place is gonna blind me it’s so damn bright.”

I swipe my hand down my face. “Why again are you in Nevada, Bea?”

“Oh, well... We just thought—I swear, woman! You’re about to be dead to me—”

Scuffling.

“Frannie?”

My heart swells at Mabel’s voice. “Hey there, Mabel!” Then it hits me. “Why are you also in a car heading to Nevada?”

“Hi, Fran!”

“*Henry?* Gee willikers, what are you three up to?” Here I am going against my mob boss father to do it my way and my reinforcements are on their way to Vegas! I shake my head, dreading to have to go back downstairs and explain that maybe my way isn’t the best way.

Mabel doesn’t answer my question, but continues, “It doesn’t matter. Fran, I need to tell you something. And you’re not gonna be happy.”

I dig my fingers into my eyeball sockets, exhaling a long sigh. “I’m sure whatever it is, Mabel, it’s fine. Nothing really can beat the news I found out today anyhow.”

“I knew Vincent was alive.”

Okay, *that* might top it. “Excuse me, WHAT?”

“Jesus!—you’re pulling my hair!”

Scuffling.

Bea’s voice takes the stage. “Frannie, it’s me again. I didn’t know nothin’ about this,” she huffs. “My wretched sister filled us in on the way here. Don’t be mad at me. I love ya, girl. It’s all her. Let’s get rid of her in the desert—*Hag!*”

“Frannie, listen to me,” Mabel pleads. “I had my reasons for not telling you. Please understand. It was for your safety.”

“And your snatch!” Bea yells from the background. “*Oh, Paul, touch me in so many dirty ways!—Jesus, you bit me!*”

I hear the phone drop and more scuffling. “That’s to shut you up. Frannie, you still there?” Mabel asks, breathless.

“Regretfully.” Because this can’t get any worse.

“Your daddy came to me. I threatened to rip his balls off and feed them to him through his ass, but he explained why he was doing what he was

doing. He didn't want your momma to know because she would obsess over it and when I'd spoken to him. It was just to make sure you were safe. For what it's worth, it was only through Paul."

Gosh darn traitor Paul.

"How? When?"

There's a bit of silence before she answers. "Well, when I said I had them bridge lessons."

I gasp. Because it's impossible not to. "You had bridge lessons once a month!" And it also sinks in. "And you were always so cheery after them." Ew! I want to cry right now. Everyone I love is betraying me. Not that I loved Paul. He was getting there on my list for saving us, but still. Bad Paul.

"I enjoyed bridge. *And* his foreign accent. We're getting off track here. Listen, we can talk about all this later, but we're headed to you."

Now *that* perks my mood. "You are? How do you know where I am?" Okay, stupid question. Actually, I don't care. I need them and they're coming to me. That's all that matters. "About time you said something I need to hear. Listen, you're right. I do need you guys. I have a plan and it won't work without you."

"Honey, whatever it is, we're in. You tell us what you need us to do and dammit, we're all over it like shit on flies!"

Ew. "I think it's flies on shhhh—you know what I mean!" I blush at the unladylike word of choice.

"Oh, hell, whatever. Count us in!"



God, I hope this works.

After the most bizarre call, I came back downstairs and told everyone my plan. Lindsay looked skeptical. Dad's third man in charge looked confused. Dad looked ready to tie me up and hold me hostage, so I don't attempt to go through with my plan. Chandler yapped in agreement and Cala clapped ready to catch bad guys while holding a night crawler net.

I reassured Lindsay with a hug. Gave my dad a look that said *remember our deal or else*. Chandler got a bone because he was a major player in the

game and Cala a bunch of sugar, because unfortunately, she was going to Gordon's to wait this one out.

After we go over the plan for a third time, everyone goes their separate ways to gather their thoughts and prepare. Mabel and crew are still a few hours out, so we have some time before we have to head out. I bypassed lunch because my stomach was in knots. I can't eat knowing Luca's in danger. Not to mention those frozen logs of French toast are still sitting in my stomach. Darn those things.

Before I know it, Lindsay's sticking her head in my room. "They're here."

It's now or never.

Time to go save my Clyde.

⋮

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mabel

LOOK! TITTIES!

“I think I see someone comin’,” Beatrice whispers, more like hisses like a hyena. I smack her shoulder, needing her to shut her mouth.

“Will ya be quiet? We need to be incognito,” I snap, stepping outside of our car. Our con is simple. We pretend we’re two old ladies, who’ve lost our minds and way. A black car, with the license plate ending in ZRW2, and the second shift henchmen for Rossi should pass through. We need to get him to pull over and help us. While we’ve got him out of his car, Henry will slash his tires and take a wrench to his head. Sounds brutal and messy and thrilling. I rub my hands together, waiting to see if this is our guy. “Yep, it’s him. Henry, go hide!”

Henry ducks behind the car, while Beatrice sticks her leg out, pulling her dress up.

“Oh hell, he’s gonna speed up seeing that! Put your damn leg down. Throw yourself in the road or something.”

“What if he hits me?”

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

My sister gives me the bird and drops her dress. The car nears around the bend, and the front plate comes into view. It’s definitely him. “All right. Just get him to stop. Smile at him. Maybe he’ll veer off the road and Henry won’t have to put the hurt on him.”

Henry pops up from the side. “No way. I’ve been looking to test out this choke hold move since ’Nam. Don’t screw this up, honey.”

Shivers run down my spine. No need for me to hear those two sweet talkin’ each other.

When the car is only one hundred feet away, Beatrice steps into the middle of the road, waving her hands and clucking like a chicken. I shake my head, knowing we should have left her at home. That little girl could have done a better job. I open my mouth to tell her to cut it out, when the vehicle begins to slow, then is pulling to the side.

“You lost, lady?”

“Oh heavens no. I was on my way to visit my granddaughter, Little Red Riding Hood, and my car broke down. Think you can take a look at it?”

Jesus Christ. Two seconds into our con and she’s gonna blow it. The thug stares Bea down, but a few seconds pass and he nods, walking toward the front of the car. “What seems to be the problem?” he asks, finding the lever and popping the hood. He dips his head in, searching for signs of distress, but clearly doesn’t see any. When he pops back up, his eyes catch movement on the side of the car. “Shit, what’s—”

“Look! Titties!” Bea whips her dress top down and flashes the thug her boobs, distracting him just in time for Henry to pop out and successfully test out and complete his choke hold.

The thug drops to the ground.

“Mission complete. Good work. Even though I think seeing Bea’s tits knocked him out before the choke hold.”

I send a text to Frannie telling her mission one is complete. On to mission two.



“Are you sure this is the place?”

“It has to be. It’s an abandoned building in the middle of nowhere. It sure ain’t a goddamn amusement park.”

“Well, shoot, if it was, I’d ride me some—”

“Hell! Stay focused, dammit!” I swat at Beatrice and go to take my shoe off to beat her with it.

“Now’s not the time, ladies. The guard is outside,” Henry reminds us. “Grab Chandler and let’s go. Time’s a tickin’.”

We get out of the car, Chandler hopping out behind us, trotting like a dog on a mission.

“So, what do we do again? And why aren’t we the ones shooting at people? Sounds way more fun,” Beatrice yaps, sounding just as annoying as Chandler when he’s hungry.

“Because no one suspects old people, that’s why. And if you want, I can shoot at you. Now shut it and get into character,” I bark back.

Henry puts on the dark glasses, along with his cane, while Beatrice and I both pull the white jumpsuits on over our clothes. The con is to look like nursing home escapees. Two batshit crazy old women and a blind man. Who would suspect them of any wrongdoing and actually part of the mob, which we made Vincent swear us in as mobsters before setting off on our part of the job. The sun is still out as we walk up to a large warehouse building. A few cars are parked outside, but the only other person in sight is a man standing outside a door. The door that we need to clear so Frannie can get to her man.

“Whoa whoa, who the fuck are you three?” thug number two questions, his hand cautiously going to his back, where we were warned he’ll hold his gun.

Show time.

“Hello there, Sonny! This is Rose and Jack. They’ve just escaped the Titanic. We need to use your bathroom. You got one in that building?”

His eyes cross. He’s so confused. So am I.

“Lady, this ain’t a rest stop. You need to be on your way. Beat it, Grannie. And your little dog too.”

Maybe I should have allowed Bea to do this part. She sure is the crazier one of us two.

But I’m not leaving without my beau. I mean... Frannie’s beau. Oh, Paul, I hope he’s all still in one piece. Resetting, I start over.

“You’re right. What am I talking about? My mind, it’s goin’. What year is it again? Marty McFly over here is lost and needs to find where he parked his DeLorean. You gotta phone we could use, preferably inside?”

Hell! I thought I’d be a lot better at this. Bea rolls her eyes at me, and I’m ready to blow our cover just to kick her ass—

“Listen up, amigo.” Bea steps in. “See this dog? He’s a smuggler dog. We stole him from the looney bin we just escaped from. We made him eat all the old people’s jewelry. Made out pretty hefty too. Diamond rings galore. We need a place to stash him until he shits it all out. You mind holding on to him?”

This is crap. He actually believes her! His eyes light up at the sound of diamonds. His hand releases his grip on his gun and he nods and smiles. “Fuck yeah, I’ll take the little mutt. How long until he shits?”

Bea looks panicked. “Ummm...”

“Five minutes or less. Hurry, take him inside.” I pick up Chandler and hand him to the gangster. He nods, giving us his back to enter in the code to the door.

Henry pounces, using his choke hold technique and bringing the guy to the ground.

I shoot off another text to Frannie. **Mission two complete. Door’s unlocked. Hurry.**

⋮

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Francis

I KILLED MY MOTHER FOR MAKING ME THE WRONG SANDWICH

My heart is beating out of my chest. I may be sweating a bit and it's becoming very unladylike. I jump out of the shadows, but Dad grabs my arm. "You be careful. You get in and place the devices where we discussed and get out. I'll do the rest. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you. In and out." My mission is simple. Being the smallest, I need to sneak in without setting off the motion detectors and stick a few wireless bugs inside. Attached to each bug is a device that contains a camera giving Dad access to the inside, and a contraption that is set to explode at the touch of a handy lever I'm holding. Once we have eyes inside, the real job begins. They will set the bombs off, distracting Rossi's men while Daddy goes and saves Luca and Paul. Sounds simple. Let's hope it is.

I run along the side of the building, avoiding two cameras and a motion detector until I'm crouching outside the door Mabel and the others just left. I reach for the handle and twist it, feeling relief when it lets me in.

The warehouse is dark, cold. Silent. I take a second to listen to any sounds, possibly to hear if Luca is close. The only thing I'm met with is rows and rows of pallet racks. Before we left the house, I memorized the layout. Turns out, Mabel and Paul were going over and beyond when it came to keeping in touch with one another. Bridge night has a whole new meaning now. Refusing to rehash all the graphic details I always swore only Beatrice had in her, I focus on the only detail that matters. The phone tracker app they had so they'd always know where the other was at. It also means we now have access to Paul's location. Which also means we have access to Luca.

I stay low and I tiptoe along the corridor of the warehouse, stepping over the first beam, and having to hop over the next. I dig into my pocket and pull out the first device and stick it to the wall. This will give Dad eyes starting now from the left end.

The next two devices are a piece of cake. I'm almost halfway across the open floorplan when I hear his voice.

"Let me loose and I'll show you what a sweet boy I am."

Luca!

It's then I hear another voice I ping as Rossi's. "Oh, Luca, how easy it would be to put a bullet through your empty skull. But, you have proved to be quite entertaining to me. And costly. You've somehow managed to evade my men at every turn. It was you who dragged my ass across country to do this job myself. I'm going to have fun making you scream, and then when I get your father-in-law and *your wife* in here, I'm going to make you watch while I skin them alive."

My entire body shivers at the mere thought. I take a step out of hiding and spot Luca, along with Paul tied to a chair. Both are slumped over. There's no hiding the pool of blood underneath each of them. I throw myself out into the open, then reel myself back in. Giving myself away doesn't help either one of them.

"You touch one hair on her head..."

"I'm going to touch every single hair on her head," he sneers. "And then I'm going to work my way down." Rossi makes a salacious gesture with his fingers and tongue. My own expression turns foul at his crude gesture, when something crawls across my foot. I spot a large rat the size of Chandler and scream, dropping the lever, accidentally detonating the first bomb.

"Oh crap—"

KA-BOOM!

The impact shoots me forward, causing me to skid across the cement floor. I grunt at the way my skin burns. It takes everything in me, but I pick myself up and survey my surroundings. Thankfully, the distraction allows Rossi and his goons to take their attention off Luca and Paul and run toward the place where the bomb went off. That's when I run to Luca. Bending down first, I work on untying the bindings around his thighs. They loosen and fall away.

“Jesus, *Frannie?*” His eyes pop—or one eye since the other is nearly swelled shut—as my heart breaks. He looks just horrible. His face is riddled with cuts and bruises and he’s painted in blood.

“Oh, Luca, what have they done to you?” I crouch down to work on the ropes around his ankles next. My head is pounding, and I feel something dripping from the side of my head.

“Dammit, Frannie, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Saving you, of course.” Darn these ties are really tight. I’m tugging, but these don’t seem to want to come free as easy as the rope around his thighs did.

“Stop, you need to get out of here. NOW!”

I look up at him. Not sure why he looks so frantic. This is where I save him and we run out of here—

“Well, well...”

Uh-oh.

“Don’t fucking touch her, Rossi. I’ll gut you from the inside out!” Luca starts wrestling in his chair, but his restraints are too tight.

I slowly turn to find a man standing over me, a gun pointed to my head. “Um, well, hello there? I’m Francis, and you are?”

His laughter turns my blood cold. “I’m your death sentence.” He cocks his head to the side, studying me. “This truly is romantic. Real Romeo and Juliet kind of shit.”

I twist so I’m sitting in front of Luca, my hands behind my back so Rossi can’t see as I continue to fiddle with the ties. “Actually, that’s a poor analogy. Romeo and Juliet weren’t in the middle of a mob fight. They were lovers with conflicting families. Technically the Rossis and the Lambertos are the feuding families here. You can be the Capulets and I’ll be the Montagues, but then that’s just gross because they do *actually* marry, and that would make us family, in which you’d be my uncle—”

“Enough!” His eyes light with fire. “I’m no family to you. I spit on the Lamberto name.”

“Oh, well then. Your loss. I make a very tasty turkey. No Thanksgiving invitation for you.”

Rossi takes a menacing step toward me and I lose my grip on Luca’s ties as he bucks again in his chair.

“I swear it! One fucking finger and you’re dead.”

That's when Rossi points the barrel of his gun at Luca. "How about I shoot you in front of her? Romeo and Juliet did watch one another die, am I right?"

"Well, *actually*, Romeo thinks that Juliet is already dead, so he—"

"Shut up!" He lifts his gun and takes one shot to the ceiling. "What is wrong with you?" He waves his gun, while I dodge his aim. "You are just as dumb-headed as your father!"

"Watch it," Luca growls, and I turn and smile at my man.

Another shot rings, this time hitting the concrete by my feet. Small slivers of shrapnel cut into my skin. I howl out in pain, and Luca goes berserk. He fights in his chair to get free, but it's no use. In the corner of my eye, I catch Rossi's gun pointed directly at Luca and I panic.

My body twists and with all my might I lunge myself at him, taking him by the legs and knocking him over. We both fall to the ground. I'm more in shock that I had the power to actually do that, so I miss the opportunity to do anything more. His fist comes at me and makes contact with my mouth, knocking me to the side. He's up and on top of me before I can shake away the stars floating above my head.

"You little bitch. Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you?"

I'm going to assume it's not help me up and get me an ice pack.

"Get off her! Don't fucking touch her!" Luca is hollering behind us. The sound of his chair scraping against the cement floor is loud. Rossi grabs my hands and pins them to the ground, taking away any fight I have in me.

"I'm gonna have fun with you. Right in front of your little hubbie. Oh, by the way, congratulations. My gift to you both. Me fucking you so hard until you bleed to death as he watches."

I squirm under his hold. That doesn't sound pretty, nor comfortable. Shoot. I'm starting to get a little bit panicky. One leg nudges in between my knees, spreading my legs. "Please, you don't want to do this. It's not right. Plus, you wouldn't enjoy it, since I would be thinking of someone else the whole time—ow!"

His slap doesn't help my already busted lip.

"You know what? No more Miss Nice Girl. I've tried to keep my manners, but you're simply one rude and disgusting man. Your mother should be ashamed of herself with that mouth of yours."

His evil laughter once again sends chills down my spine. "I killed my mother for making me the wrong sandwich and used the money to build a

casino. I don't give a fuck what she would have thought."

"Yikes, was it the wrong peanut butter or something? I had that happen to me once. I prefer crunchy but sometimes if you make it with creamy, I don't really care—*oh gosh!*"

He pops a knife out of his boot and takes it to my shirt, slicing it open. "I'm gonna fuck this stupid mouth to shut you up. How the fuck your daddy went through all this trouble for a nitwit like—"

"Get the FUCK off my girl!"

Rossi freezes at the deep booming voice of my father.

Oh, thank God.

His hand still holding the knife, slowly bends so the blade is pointing between my breastbone. "Now, now, old friend, is that any way to talk to your ex-partner?"

"You were never a friend nor a partner. And the way I see it, you're soon to be dead and splattered all over this warehouse, so I suggest slowly getting off my daughter, and maybe I'll take pity on you when I slice your fingers off one by one."

"Not gonna happen. This is an eye for an eye." He raises his hand quick and plunges down.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Before the knife plummets into my chest, Rossi's body quakes as he's riddled with bullets. His arm freezes, his eyes wide, staring into mine. With any life still pumping through him, his hand plows down. But not before a bullet ricochets through his skull, sending half his brain splattering across my face.

"Well, this is quite disgusting," I say and pass out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Luca

BILLY, GET YOUR COCKBLOCKING POSSE OUT OF HERE!

“Frannie!” I roar, my heart leaping out of my chest. With blood and brains splattered all over her and her body not moving, I’m about to lose my fucking mind.

“The grand finale,” Paul utters from nearby, pride evident in his tone.

Death—or her goddamn dad—rushes forward and kneels beside her. I struggle until a hand clutches my shoulder.

“I’ve got you, outlaw,” an elderly woman says as she starts to work the knots behind me.

A dog jumps into my lap and it takes all of two seconds to realize it’s my dog. “Bingie boy,” I choke out, overcome with emotion as the cute fucker licks my bruised face. “That’s a good boy.”

My hands loosen and I pull the dog to my chest, nuzzling my nose against his neck as I rise on shaky feet. Frannie is sitting up now and as soon as she sees me, she jolts to her feet, pushes past Death, and nearly knocks me and my dog over. Chandler yaps happily between us as we hug. She sobs and it breaks something inside me. I don’t know what kind of crazy strings my girl tugged on to pull off this mega shenanigan, but I swear, the moment I get her out of here, she’ll never have to worry about danger again.

I feel eyes on me and when I look up to see Death glaring at me, I lose it.

“Hold my dog,” I tell Frannie, pushing my prince into her arms.

She squawks and Chandler yaps when I storm over to Death. He squares his shoulders, ready for me. I get right in his face and poke his ridiculously hard abs.

“You’re a weak little bitch for what you did to my girl,” I snarl, my spit spraying his face. “Weak. You left her to the goddamn wolves.” I wave my hand in the air. “And then you played me to do your bidding. So much could have gone wrong and yet...” I choke on my words, hating to think of anything bad happening to her. “You let others protect what you should have taken care of.”

He winces and frowns.

“But don’t worry, buddy,” I tell him lowly. “I’m taking care of her now. And I’ll be damned if I let anyone—even you—get in my way. I may not be a murdering mobster, but I can fuckin’ Google it and learn. *Capiche*, Dr. Death?”

“Mr.—”

“Dad,” Frannie cuts him off. “Just say okay.”

Death looks murderous, but one quick look at his daughter and his evil glare melts away to one of love. It annoys me, but I know Frannie has that effect on everyone. Even mobster fuckfaces.

“Okay,” he mutters.

That was easy. I want to poke at him some more, but my girl has Rossi’s fucking guts on her and I’m desperate to get her into the shower with me so I can scrub it all away.

“Oh no,” Frannie whines. “We have to get out of here now!”

My heart stammers in my chest as I follow her gaze, expecting to see a bad guy with a gun. What I see is worse. Way worse.

“Bing! Close your eyes and run!” I grab Frannie’s hand and we get the hell out of there.

No one, and I mean no one, wants to watch an old lady and Van Damme play tonsil hockey. Fucking sick.



My mom sucked.

Bad.

She made family dinners awkward as fuck as kids.

But nothing, not even my mother, could outdo Death. He takes the cake. Fucking weirdo. Frannie is happy, though, and I suffer through it for her.

Death stands, tapping a butter knife to his wine glass to get everyone's attention. "I would like to make a speech before we eat," he says in a solemn tone. "Everyone at this table was brought here because of one person. And that person is my daughter, Frannie. She is the center—just as her mother was—of everyone's world."

He gets murmured agreements from everyone, including me, and a yap from Chandler. It's been a few days since the shakedown at the warehouse. I slept off my injuries with Cala and Frannie looking in on me as my personal nurses. Death stayed away to deal with cleanup and arrived back today. The house has been lively thanks to three elderly visitors from the East Coast.

"So because she is the heart of us all, and she considers you all family in some way, then you are under the Lamberto protection now." His eyes cut over to mine. "I'm sorry to those I've hurt along the way, but especially to Frannie. I thought I was keeping her safe, but all I did was break her precious heart. I'm going to put it back together one day at a time."

Ah, jeez. The fucker is a poet and his words have their intended effect. Frannie preens.

"This ham's dry," the one I learned is named Beatrice barks out, not at all concerned that a mobster is trying to have a heartfelt moment.

"*Your* ham's dry," Mabel barks at her.

"Actually," Henry pipes up, "it's not—"

"La-la-la," Frannie says, covering her ears. "I don't want to hear about geriatric bedroom sports!"

Chandler yaps in agreement.

"Dearest Mabel," Van Damme, er Paul, croons. "Would you like some gravy?"

"Gagging!" Frannie cries out.

The old ladies start swatting and Cala giggles from beside me. I turn and give my adorable niece a silly grin that makes her laugh harder. My eyes skim over to Lindsay's and for the first time in years, she seems happy. At peace. When I dart my eyes up to Death, he's watching me like a hawk. Then, as though he can't help it, he drags his gaze to my sister, his features softening.

"Pappa Death, can we have ice cream? This ham is yucky," Cala says, poking at the rubbery piece on her plate.

“Cala!” Lindsay scolds. “That was rude. Pappa Death worked hard on that!”

Chandler yaps from Cala’s lap and when Lindsay looks away, my niece slips the dog the goods. I’m wondering if I can con Chandler into my lap to handle my plate too.

Everyone is babbling and talking over each other, but rather than feel like chaos, it feels comfortable now. Death gives up and sits down, getting sucked into Henry’s war stories. Beatrice and Mabel argue loudly while Paul attempts to play peacemaker. Lindsay and Cala talk to Chandler, all smiles.

I lean in to Frannie and nuzzle her ear. “This ham sucks. Want to get out of here? I know a quiet place.”

She turns and accepts a quick kiss. “Let’s get out of here.”

We sneak away from the lively table and the moment we’re out of the dining room and outside, I scoop her into my arms. She lets out a peal of laughter that sets my soul on fire. God, I love this woman.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks, her fingers brushing through my hair.

“Somewhere romantic.”

“Ooh, I love romantic somewheres. Run faster!”

I playfully nip at her cheek as I carry her down to the same barn I was held in not too long ago. I’m sure there’s a pile of hay we can roll around in. The barn is lit up from the setting sun, but I find us a spot in the corner that’s private. Frannie giggles as I set her to her feet and attack her pouty mouth with mine. I steal her panties and pocket them before grabbing her ass to lift her up. Pressing her back against the barn wall, I take my time kissing her deeply. My dick is hard as fuck in my jeans and I take pleasure grinding against her naked pussy.

“I need you,” she begs. “Please.”

As much as I wanted to play naughty nurse with her, we couldn’t. We had a four-year-old breathing down our necks like a miniature Daddy Death.

“I want to take my time with you,” I tell her, nipping at her bottom lip. “I’ve missed you.”

“And you’re gonna miss me some more if you take too long. They’ll find us eventually and I’d rather it not be with your tongue on my hoo-haw!”

I snort. “Hoo-haw?”

“Put your bad boy in it.”

“Maybe he’s a good boy.” I unbuckle my jeans and pull out my dick.

“Ohhh,” she moans when I push into her wet *hoo-haw*. “Definitely a bad boy. Like super naughty. Devilish even. Oh God!”

I drive into her hard, loving the way her moans echo loudly in the barn.

Clomp-clomp-clomp-clomp.

Clomp-clomp-clomp-clomp.

Clomp-clomp-clomp-clomp.

“What’s that?” I mutter, pulling my mouth from hers.

“No one cares!” she cries out. “Keep stabbing me with the bad boy!”

“Sexy, babe. Super sexy dirty talk.”

“Right?”

“Ba-a-a-a-a-a-a!”

“What was that?” I grunt, fucking my wife in a hard, claiming way.

“Billy—”

“Luca—”

“Ba-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!”

“And Juniper!”

“What the—” I bark out, stalling in my thrusting to look over my shoulder.

Like some creepy Stephen King shit, we have five goats standing there staring us the fuck down.

“Oh, hell no!” I bellow. “Billy, get your cockblocking posse out of here!”

“Ba-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!”

“Billy!” Frannie admonishes. “Don’t talk back to your brother-in-law!”

“What? His what?”

“Keep going, husband! Destroy the hoo-haw!”

“Fuck, babe, I can’t work in these conditions!”

“For better or worse, Luca! You promised!”

“Not for better or fucking traumatizing!”

“Ba-a-a-a-a-a-a!”

“Shhh,” an old lady whispers loudly. “Henry, let’s hide in here. You can practice your choke hold...naked.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I hiss.

Frannie giggles. “Beatrice! Get your own room!”

“That hussy already claimed the barn,” Beatrice complains loudly to Henry.

“My dick is soft now,” I grumble. “I’m pretty sure Billy just shit himself in fear of seeing those two old fuckers go at it.”

“Ew,” Frannie whines. “That’s a Juniper poop. It has a hint of boysenberry. Ever since Gordon’s attack, she has a special diet—”

“Shoo!” I yell to the goats. “Get lost! I’m trying to fuck my wife here!”

“Ba-a-a-a-a-a!”

“Especially you, Billy! Don’t get mouthy with me!”

Clomp-clomp-clomp-clomp.

Those fuckers finally leave and Frannie giggles. I kiss her deep, thrusting hard into her. We don’t have much time. Those goat stalkers will be back.

“Luca,” Frannie moans, digging her heels into my ass. “I love you.”

“I love you too, babe. Every part of you. Even all the crazy mobster father, old lady besties, goat herder baggage you have.”

I make her come, because it’s my husbandly duty and I’m damn good at it, and I follow behind.

Just in time for round two of the old fucker horror show.

“I will be Jean-Claude Van Damme and you can be Madonna,” Paul rumbles from nearby.

Fucking crazy fuckers.

I open my mouth to yell, but Frannie shushes me with a kiss. The creepy elderly roleplaying kinkfest is cut short when Beatrice tattles.

“The barn’s taken, old bird! Go sow your wild oats in a field like the rest of us!”

“Me? Old? You’re the one with an old man! I have a young lover, thank you very much!”

“Mr. Henry may be old in body,” Paul interjects, “but he is young in spirit.”

“Okay, Chuck Norris,” Mable grumbles.

“Should I play him next?” Paul asks.

“NO!” Beatrice and I yell at the same time Frannie asks, “Has he ever played Richard Simmons?”

How is this my fucking life?

As goddamn weird as it is to be in a dark corner of a barn with my dick still in my wife as we carry on a yelling conversation with four old people

nearby—and five goats who decide to come back for a fucking encore—I'm content.

Better than content.

I'm happy.

And, of course, Frannie, the crazy ass woman I first met wearing a spandex nightmare, is at the center of it all.

⋮

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Chandler

BROS BEFORE HOES!

Where are my pets?

I look under the bed. Nope, not there.

In the closet? Gone.

Hmmm...

They were just here, but then my new baby human pet distracted me with delicious ham and a promise of more cold sweet French toast sticks when she can slip away from her mother. And now, I can't find *them*. My favorite pets.

It's up to me to protect them and I've lost them!

I gallop down the hallway and pound on the door with my meaty paws, demanding Dr. Death, the sucker, to let me out. He rushes over to me and scratches behind my ear. I'm supposed to hate him, but I'll forgive him this once because he gives the best scratches.

"You need to go outside and take a wee-wee?" he coos.

"I NEED TO TAKE A SHIT, YOU BALL-LESS CUNT!" I bellow at him.

He grins. "You're so cute when you yap."

Why do all my pets call it yapping?

As soon as he opens the door, I sprint down the porch and into the grass. I screech to a halt to sniff the air. When I get a whiff of my pets, I take off in that direction.

"Well, well, well," a familiar voice says, making me stumble to a stop. "If it isn't *the* Chandler Bing."

This fucking guy.

"BILLY, YOU WHORE! YOU HAVE A WIFE!"

Billy, the smug goat, trots my way. "We're not exclusive, handsome. Juniper and Crayola hook up all the time. That's life." He sniffs my butt, distracting me. "I always have time for you."

"NOT NOW!" I growl. "I'M LOOKING FOR MY PETS!"

Billy licks under my tail and I fall over, succumbing to his charms.

Bastard!

"HOW YOU DOIN'?" I say, drunk on pleasure. I always thought I was a better Joey than a Chandler...

Billy's magical tongue has me seeing stars until I hear my favorite pets laughing nearby.

"DAMN YOU, BILLY, FOR DOING THAT AGAIN!"

I scramble away from my relentless pursuer and race over to my people. They smell suspicious, but I climb up the small one and lick her face. She kisses me and praises me and tells me she loves me.

"Bingster," my favorite pet says, grinning at me. "Come to Daddy."

"CALL ME JOEY!"

"I'll call you Joey," Billy offers, licking his lips.

I hate that goat.

"Do you think they're talking to each other?" my pet Frannie Bananie asks my favorite one.

"Nah," Daddy pet says. "The sketchy goat is probably fucking annoying him too."

"EXACTLY!" I agree. This is why he's my favorite. Even if he calls me *everything* but Joey. He gets me. We're bros.

"You like it," Billy says.

I leap out of Frannie Bananie's arms into Daddy's. He snuggles me and tells me to watch that sketchy goat and that he has my back.

"CAN WE KILL HIM?" I beg.

"We're going to bail this loser farm, Bingboo," he whispers. "Get the hell out of this zoo and back on the road where we belong. Your mommy loves an adventure."

She's not my mom, she's my pet, but I don't correct him.

"FUCKING FINALLY!"

"I'm free next week," Billy offers.

"Dude, stop rubbing on my leg," Daddy pet grumbles to the annoying ass goat. "Go on. Shoo. Go find the Goatfather and leave us alone."

“YEAH!” I bellow in agreement. “YOU HEARD THE MAN!” I don’t care how nice Billy’s tongue is, I’m not interested. Freaky goat bastard.

“You’ll be back,” Billy says in a smug tone. “They always come back.”

I lick Daddy pet’s furry face and I wonder if he’ll soon have hair like me. I sure hope so. He’s not exactly handsome like yours truly, but I think if he keeps growing his face fur out, it’ll be a good start.

“Sometimes I think Mr. Bing likes you better,” Frannie Bananie complains as she leans in and gives me a sad face.

“I DO!” I agree, but lick her face so she won’t feel so bad. “I LIKED YOU BEST UNTIL HE SURPRISED US ON RICHARD SIMMONS NIGHT! INSTALOVE, FRANNIE BANANIE! JUST LIKE IN YOUR BOOKS!”

“I think he’s saying he loves me more,” she says, scrunching her nose and cocking her head.

“Of course he is,” he placates.

I lick his face and say, “LIES! BROS BEFORE HOES! DON’T GIVE HER FALSE HOPE!”

“Shh,” he says, snuggling me. “Our secret, Bingster.”

A whine of protest escapes me, but I don’t fight him on this. I suppose we can have our secrets to spare her feelings. She’s my second favorite after all.

“That’s a good boy,” he coos. “Now let’s get inside. It’s bed time. Tomorrow, the adventure begins.”

EPILOGUE

Vincent

Three months later...

THAT'S WHAT DADS DO

The entertainment room is dark to match my mood. My anxiety as high as Michelle Pfeiffer in *Scarface*.

Today they return.

Today *she* returns.

The scene on the big screen right now is fitting. The last breath Don Corleone takes in *The Godfather* before he's gunned down outside the market in Queens. It was how I felt the day they told me they were leaving. The day *she* went with them.

"Oh, Dad, it's going to be fine. Just a little trip to personally pay back our IOUs!"

I don't bother telling her I already took care of all of them from her list—even the motherfucking Aston Martin—because that's what dads do. She'll just come up with more excuses to leave me because that's what daughters do.

"We'll be back for Thanksgiving," she says, her features softening. "I promise."

Thanksgiving? That's three months away. My eyes search her out and I glare her down. "No. Absolutely not."

"Dad, it's not really up for discussion. We're going. Luca has the whole trip planned. There's no chance of danger."

I scoff, taking my eyes off one problem and landing them on another. "He is the danger!"

Luca chuckles, causing my fists to clench. “Oh, relax, Daddy Death. I wouldn’t let anything happen to my girl—”

“My girl.”

“My girl—”

“No, my—”

“All right, enough, you two.” Francis picks up her already packed bag and hands it to Luca and bends down to give Billy a kiss. “Now you take care of him for us. Make sure he’s nice to Gordon—”

“Gordon won’t be here when you get back. If you leave, I’m burying him in my crop field.” I swear I’ll do it just to keep them from leaving. Francis just shakes her head at me. “Dad, you’re not hurting Gordon. He’s been a huge help around here, and I think you actually like him.”

“Lies. He’s an old hag.”

“Hey! Watch the name callin’!” Beatrice hollers. “You ain’t so young lookin’ yourself, Deathy boy.”

Okay, maybe those three can go. My nerves are shot listening to them nag at each other day and night. But then I’d probably lose Paul in the process. Sonofabitch. Everyone is leaving me.

“Bea, can you go grab Chandler. Give us a minute?”

The woman nods to Frannie, shooting daggers at me, and walks back inside.

“You’re taking Mr. Bing?” Not the dog too! That’s it. I’m going to go get my gun. Shooting the old trio and tying up the rest.

“Of course. Chandler is one of us. We can’t go on more adventures without him.” She giggles when Luca smacks her in her rear. He’s dead. I consider that abuse. I turn on my heel to get my gun. No, my machete. “You know, you can always come with us.”

I stop in my tracks. My eyes close for a moment, fighting off the weakness to say yes, and scoop her in my arms and run off with her. I inhale a deep breath. “I can’t. I have business to attend to. Enjoy your silly adventure.”

And I storm inside, where Bea is scooping up Bing and walks out with my best friend. “Hag,” I whisper under my breath as I walk back to my office.

I feel her before I hear her.

“So, this is it?” Her voice hits me like an array of bullets piercing my heart. I stop, but I don’t offer her my full attention.

“You’re getting what you wanted from the day you were forced here. You get to leave. So get out.” My heart bleeds at the sound of her gasping. I hurt her. But her leaving is hurting me too.

“You know what? So be it. Go ahead and be the big dumb ape everyone’s made you out to be. The monster. The thief.”

I whip around to face her. “And what exactly did I steal?” Two large steps and I’m towering over her, my heavy breath hitting her face, warming her cheeks. “What exactly is it that you think I possibly would want to steal? I have it all. And if I don’t, I earn it. I don’t need to steal. I’m Vincent Lamberto. People hear my name and fall to my feet.” One step and our bodies are crushed against one another. “Tell me, Linz, what exactly do you think it is I have any interest in stealing?”

“Me.”

The knock on the door has me pulling back from the memory. “What is it?” I call to Paul, pausing my movie.

“Sorry to interrupt, Boss, I just wanted to let you know they’re here.”

I nod, giving no emotion away. I grumble about not caring under my breath and restart my movie. A few minutes pass and I become restless in my chair. It could be the too many slams of my boxing gloves against the punching bag I did earlier to keep my mind off today.

The sounds of laughter and commotion echo from down the hallway, and I hear my daughter’s voice. Dammit, I’ve missed her. I’ve missed her her whole life. Now that she’s gotten that damn adventure out of her system, she’s not going anywhere. Letting her leave was a mistake. She’s been away from me for twenty years. No more.

I cringe at the other three voices. “Jesus, they couldn’t find their own plans for Thanksgiving?” I mumble when the nagging gets closer.

“Well, where is Grandpa Death at?” one of the old fuckers asks.

I’m forty-five, goddammit! I hope Francis forgot the turkey so I can send them to fetch one and shoot them all on the way out and blame it on Gordon.

There’s a knock on the door and I turn hoping it’s Francis. When I see my first guest, I grunt and turn back to the movie.

“So happy to see you too, Daddy Death,” Luca says and invites himself in, taking a seat next to me. “Seriously? You’re watching *The Godfather*? Isn’t that kind of cliché?”

“It’s the best movie of all time. More people should appreciate it. And I told you, you call me that again, and I’ll be feeding your balls to the goats.” I point the remote to the TV, pressing the volume up a notch to drown him out.

“Lucky goat. But I think your daughter would be upset to not have—”

“Dad, there you are!”

That lucky motherfucker just got spared from me slitting his damn throat. I’d tell my daughter her clumsy husband slipped and fell across my machete.

“Hey! Come and say hello to everyone!” She enters the room and makes her way around the couch to bend down and give me a hug. I stand and wrap my little girl in my arms and embrace her. I also stare over her shoulder at Luca and lift my finger and make a slicing my neck motion, giving him a warning. “I’ve missed you, Dad.”

I forgo further threatening and focus on my girl. “I missed you too, Frannie. Paul says you’ve all had quite the adventure.”

She pulls away, her eyes so bright with excitement. “I don’t even know where to begin. It’s like you throw in the whole Bonnie and Clyde, minus them dying, and the Thelma and Louise, minus the car off the cliff, because, duh, who wants to die?” Luckily, they did not die. I already know every single detail of their adventure. I’ve had eyes on them since the moment they pulled out of my driveway. She continues to ramble, “Gah, it would have been so much funnier if Lindsay was able to join us. Shame she had to go back to work and her stupid boss Bruce wouldn’t let her off no matter how much I begged him. But she swears she’ll totally make it next time...”

The rest of her story goes mute at the mention of *her* name. Lindsay. The one I can’t get out of my head.

“... Oh, and then...”

Lindsay with the fiery green eyes and the spine of steel. Brave and beautiful.

“...and luckily, we made it out without setting anyone else on fire, but oh boy was that intense!” Frannie continues to babble, but I don’t hear a word she says because Lindsay’s voice cuts through all the chatter from the hallway.

“Where’s my brother and Fran?” she asks. There’s a short pause, and I’m suddenly frozen in my tracks when Lindsay walks into the room. Her

eyes find mine and time stands still as we glare down one another, the electricity in the room threatening to fry us all.

“Oh lovely you made it—”

“Get out,” I bark out.

The other two whip around in my direction. “Dad, that’s not nice—”

“Get. Out. Lindsay stays. You two, get out.” My heart is hammering in my chest. They’re wasting time staring at me as if my request is foreign or some shit. I’m about to throw Luca out by his balls, when Francis finally gets the hint.

“Ruh-roh,” Frannie says, giggling. “Someone’s in trouble. Come on, Luca, let’s bail before we get a spankin’ too!”

“He spansks my sister and I’m going to retaliate.” He tosses Frannie over his shoulder, spanking her ass along the way out and making me see red.

“Close the door,” I bite out, and Luca waves, shutting the door behind them.

We stand there in silence, our eyes daring one another to pull away first. Her hair is down in dark, thick waves resting along her shoulders. My fingers twitch to grab her by the chin and take her mouth as mine.

“I forgot how bossy you were,” she grumbles, but something feels off. She’s wearing that club shit she has to wear for her job. Waitress. Since when do waitresses wear glitter? Since fucking never. I tried to stay away and not infiltrate her life, but it’s proving to be more and more difficult each day.

“What do you want?” she asks tiredly. “I don’t have the energy for this today.”

“Why?” I demand, stalking over to her. “Because you’ve been giving your smiles to everyone but me?”

She jerks her head up, her nostrils flaring. “They pay me for my smiles, Vinnie.”

My name on her lips has a calming effect until I see it. The bruise. Bluish purple barely hidden beneath a layer of makeup on her eye. Without thinking, I grip her jaw, tilting her head up so I can properly examine her. Her full tits brush against the front of my suit, making my dick harden.

“What the fuck is this, Linz?”

Her eyes water for a moment, but then she swallows. “None of your business.”

I knew it.

I went against my better judgment and let her leave.

She was safe here and I let her go. Just like I let Frannie go.

I'll never make that mistake again.

"Hey!" she cries out when I snag her wrist and haul her through the side door that leads into my office. "What are you doing? Vinnie, stop!"

I won't stop.

I'll never stop until she's safe.

She squeals when I manhandle her into my desk chair. As I hold her down, I unknot my tie and yank it from my collar. Her pink claws swipe at my face as I tie her wrist to the arm of the chair, but I dodge it barely. Then, I unbuckle my belt. It whips out with a swoosh. The fact she cowers is enough to know I'm doing the right thing. Protecting her from them. Whoever they are. I'll fucking find them all.

"I hate you," she bellows when I tie her other wrist down with my belt.

She kicks me in the fucking balls and her chair sails back against the wall. Her green eyes are wild but alive. Not broken down and sad like moments before.

I'm doing the right thing.

"Luca! Luca!" she screams.

I rush her and press my palm against her lips. "Don't make me gag you, Linz. Test me."

Her face turns red with fury, but she nods. I jerk my hand back and glower at her.

"Tell me what happened," I demand, crossing my arms over my chest. "Now."

"Screw off, Vinnie. I don't have to tell you anything."

I take a step toward her, but safely away from kicking distance. "You have to tell me everything. Or else."

"I know your threats are empty," she hisses. "You proved that with Frannie and Luca."

Difficult woman!

I yank open my drawer, looking for my handy—bad guys always have this shit handy—duct tape and rip off a strip. "You don't want to speak? Fine. I'll keep you here until you do."

"You assho—"

Her words are cut short when I seal them off with the tape. My dick loves her furious glare, messy hair, heaving breasts, and bound wrists.

“I made the mistake of letting you go once,” I tell her with a growl. “It’s never happening again.” Then, I flash her a wicked smile. “Stay there. I’ll be back to feed you later. Like old times.”

She snarls behind the tape.

As I exit the office door and close it behind me, Cala bounds into my arms. “Pappa Death! I missed you!”

“I missed you too, princess,” I coo, kissing her rosy cheek. “Are you hungry?”

“Starvin’ Marvin!” Her nose scrunches. “Where’s Mommy?”

“Resting. I’m taking care of her now.”

She hugs my neck. “I love you, Pappa Death.”

“Love you too, sweetie.”

Nope. They’re never fucking leaving again.

To be continued...*one day*
But not today. Some other day. We’re busy.
Go on, now.
Bye.

⋮

Frannie's I Owe Yous

Velma from Whizz N Stop – \$60 and corn nuts.

Joey from The Dempsey Hotel – a glowing review to his boss, \$200 for the room, \$52 for the fancy breakfast, and \$16 for all the stolen syrup bottles.

Mean Suitcase Lady – 6 beautiful Gucci dresses, 4 pairs of Jimmy Choo heels, and a Louis Vuitton suitcase.

Mr. Hilltop Steakhouse Credit Card Owner – \$248 worth of food for me and my fake brothers.

Mr. Moreau in Room #105 – \$36 bottle of tequila

Luca's Wife-Sister – an apology letter for all those kisses I stole from your husband my father holding you captive and a thank you for letting me marry your brother.

Dennis My Bestie – \$132 for Kansas City Chiefs' clothes and breakfast at Taco Bell. #aliensinkansas

Oz Museum – \$2500 insurance deductible. (Oh, heavens, I hope insurance pays for everything.)

Chatfield Reservoir Gas Station – \$14 for satchel purse.

Theo My Other Bestie – \$3 bottle of green ketchup I snuck into the Mystery Machine.

Aspen Mountain Lodge Car Owner – Lime green 2019 Aston Martin Vantage. Approximately \$7,343,345,135.12.

Elvis Wedding Chapel – \$200 for wedding band that turns finger green

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Creed's Expectations

Exquisite Taste

2 Lovers Series

[Text 2 Lovers](#)

[Hate 2 Lovers](#)

[Thieves 2 Lovers](#)

Four Father Series

[Blackstone](#)

Four Sons Series

[Hayden](#)

Elite Seven Series

[Pride](#)

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[*Whispers and the Roars*](#)
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[*El Malo*](#)
[*Notice*](#)
[*Sweet Jayne*](#)
[*The Road Back to Us*](#)
[*Surviving Harley*](#)
[*Love and Law*](#)
[*Moth to a Flame*](#)
[*Erased*](#)

Extremely Forbidden Romance Standalones:

[*The Wild*](#)
[*Hale*](#)
Like Dragonflies

Taboo Treats:

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[*Coach Long*](#)
[*Ex-Rated Attraction*](#)

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[Easton](#)
[Crybaby](#)
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[Dane](#)
[Enzo](#)
[Red Hot Winter](#)
Dr. Dan

KKinky Reads Collection:

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[Choke Me](#)
[Daddy Me](#)
[Watch Me](#)
[Hurt Me](#)

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[Wicked Lies Boys Tell](#)
[The Day She Cried](#)
[Untimely You](#)
[Heath](#)
[Sundays are for Hangovers](#)
[A Merry Christmas with Judy](#)
[Zeke's Eden](#)
[Schooled by a Senior](#)
[Give Me Yesterday](#)
[Sunshine and the Stalker](#)
[Bidding for Keeps](#)
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[*Running Free*](#)

[*Mad Sea*](#)

War & Peace Series:

[*This is War, Baby*](#) (Book 1)

[*This is Love, Baby*](#) (Book 2)

[*This Isn't Over, Baby*](#) (Book 3)

[*This Isn't You, Baby*](#) (Book 4)

[*This is Me, Baby*](#) (Book 5)

[*This Isn't Fair, Baby*](#) (Book 6)

[*This is the End, Baby*](#) (Book 7—a novella)

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[*The Vanished Specialist*](#) (Book 2)

[*The Mad Lieutenant*](#) (Book 3)

[*The Uncertain Scientist*](#) (Book 4)

[*The Lonely Orphan*](#) (Book 5)

2 Lovers Series:

[*Text 2 Lovers*](#) (Book 1)

[*Hate 2 Lovers*](#) (Book 2)

[*Thieves 2 Lovers*](#) (Book 3)

Pretty Little Dolls Series:

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[*Pretty Lost Dolls*](#) (Book 2)

[*Pretty New Doll*](#) (Book 3)

[*Pretty Broken Dolls*](#) (Book 4)

The V Games Series:

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Four Fathers Books:

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Four Sons Books:

[Camden](#)

Elite Seven Books:

[Gluttony](#)

[Greed](#)

Not Safe for Amazon Books:

[The Wild](#)

[Hale](#)

[Bad Bad Bad](#)

[This is War, Baby \(Book 1\)](#)

Like Dragonflies

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[Becoming Countess Dumont \(Book 2\).](#)
[Becoming Mrs. Benedict \(Book 3\).](#)

Alpha & Omega Duet:

[Alpha & Omega \(Book 1\).](#)
[Omega & Love \(Book 2\).](#)

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ABOUT J.D. HOLLYFIELD



J.D. Hollyfield is a creative designer by day and superhero by night. When she's not cooking, event planning, or spending time with her family, she's relaxing with her nose stuck in a book. With her love for romance, and her head full of book boyfriends, she was inspired to test her creative abilities and bring her own stories to life. Living in the Midwest, she's currently at work on blowing the minds of readers, with the additions of her new books and series, along with her charm, humor and HEA's.

J.D. Hollyfield dabbles in all genres, from romantic comedy, contemporary romance, historical romance, paranormal romance, fantasy and erotica! Want to know more! Follow her on all platforms!

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ABOUT K WEBSTER



K Webster is a *USA Today* Bestselling author. Her titles have claimed many bestseller tags in numerous categories, are translated in multiple languages, and have been adapted into audiobooks. She lives in “Tornado Alley” with her husband, two children, and her baby dog named Blue. When she’s not writing, she’s reading, drinking copious amounts of coffee, and researching aliens.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FROM **J.D. HOLLYFIELD**

To my wingman.
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My ride or Die.

Wine... I love you.

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