

How much are you willing to sacrifice for love?

WHAT'S LEFT OF US

B. CELESTE

WHAT'S LEFT OF US

B. CELESTE

OceanofPDF.com

© Copyright 2025 B. Celeste
EPUB Edition

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover Design(s):
Temptation Creations
Y'all That Graphic

Editing: Proofing Style by Marla

OceanofPDF.com

To “The Cop”

For answering every stupid question that I had during the writing process.

Thanks for inspiring the muse.

OceanofPDF.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Also by B. Celeste](#)

[Author's Note & Trigger Warning](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Chapter Fifty-One](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Five](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Six](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

OceanofPDF.com

PLAYLIST

“Hate Me More” – Canaan Cox
“I Will Not Bow” – Breaking Benjamin
“Hold Me While You Wait” – Lewis Capaldi
“Last Night” – Morgan Wallen
“False God” – Taylor Swift
“I Love You, I’m Sorry” – Gracie Abrams
“Take Me to Church” – Hozier
“Real Good Man” – Tim McGraw
“Young God” – Halsey
“Dawns” – Zach Bryan (ft. Maggie Rogers)

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

ALSO BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)

[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)

[The Truth about Us](#)

[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)

[Where the Little Birds Go](#)

[Where the Little Birds Are](#)

[Into the Clear Water](#)

[Color Me Pretty](#)

[Tell Me When It's Over](#)

[Tell Me Why It's Wrong](#)

[Dare You to Hate Me](#)

[Beg You to Trust Me](#)

[Lose You to Find Me](#)

[Teach You to Love Me](#)

[Make You Miss Me](#)

[When It Rains](#)

[Wanted You More](#)

[Girl Going Nowhere](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE & TRIGGER WARNING

Please note that this book contains explicit sexual scenes (you're welcome), as well as drug and gun related violence and death. While research has been done on the legal ramifications of the events in this story, some elements have been fictionalized purely for entertainment purposes.

Simply put, I'm only an author with an English degree who both lives with and gets fucked down by a member of law enforcement with a criminal justice degree, so my knowledge is solely based on research. I made sure to make the events and investigation as realistic as possible, while also sticking close to mafia romance plotlines that we know and love.

Enjoy
xx B

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

Lincoln

*F*_{UCK HER.}

Picking up the box of Johnnie Walker Blue Label left at the bottom of the stairwell, I glare at the white ribbon stuck to the top and grip the present as I walk up into the air-conditioned living room of the two-thousand-square-foot split-level ranch. The second I open the door, my body is cocooned by the strong scent of floral Valentino perfume lingering in the air.

Nostrils flaring, I drop the whiskey onto the entryway table a little harder than necessary and glance at the matching red lacy bra and panty set on the carpet.

“What are you doing here?” I ask the woman lounging on the couch.

Nothing about the sleeveless red cotton dress she’s wearing should make me as hard as I am right now, considering the circumstances, but it never ceases to fail. Especially not when those long brunette locks are pulled away from her petite, feminine face, and her round amber eyes, striking and mischievous, lift from her phone screen to my piercing scowl.

Georgia Del Rossi is the kind of beautiful that turns heads—lean with the slightest curves and long legs that any man would fantasize having wrapped around them.

The problem with beauty like hers is that she knows how to weaponize it.

She smiles, her bright lips painted the same sinful shade of her dress. “Hello, darling.”

Teeth grinding at her flirty greeting, I walk over and take her phone—the one *I* bought for her all those years ago. “No.”

“No, what?” she asks innocently.

“We’re not doing this today.”

Her lips twitch. “Doing what, exactly? I’m here to see you. That’s not illegal. You, of all people, should know that.”

The timid girl I met at the bar almost a decade ago is long gone, morphed into a manipulative temptress. That's what *he* wanted, wasn't it? And I hate that those sharp, manicured nails still have their grip on me after everything she's done.

"You need to leave," I tell her, trying to ignore the growing ball of tension in my chest. "I've had a long day, and I'm in no mood to handle whatever the hell this is."

"Funny," she muses, eyelashes batting as she bites into her bottom lip. "You used to love handling me."

What the fuck does she think this is? I'm getting whiplash trying to decipher what she expects from me these days.

Closing my eyes, I count to three to simmer the temptation that twitches my cock.

"Georgia..." I murmur, feeling her palms slide up my chest and resting over my shoulders.

I open my eyes.

"If you want me to leave," she says sweetly, rising onto her knees, "you're going to have to make me."

Something inside me snaps at the challenge in her voice. I wrap my hand around her throat to make her stand.

When she peeks up at me through her dark lashes, there's a flash of lust in her whiskey-colored eyes that curls her lips higher. This is a game to her.

Cat and mouse.

So, I'll play.

My fingertips tighten around her neck before I crush my lips against hers, spin her away from the couch, and force her onto her knees in the middle of the floor.

Because this is what she's here for.

Grabbing a pair of handcuffs that I keep tucked in one of the cabinets under the entertainment stand, I dangle them from my fingers. "Put these on behind your back and open your mouth."

She watches me with a Cheshire cat grin and obeys. My ears perk when I hear the two subtle clicks of each of the metal cuffs that secure her hands.

I reach down and grab her chin, tilting her face up after undoing my pants to take myself out. "What did I tell you to do, Georgia?"

Her tongue drags slowly over her bottom lip before they part for me.

She always used to listen to me.

Submit to me.

Listen to every command willingly.

When the hell did she stop?

My hand goes to the back of her head, threading in her silky chocolate hair and cupping her skull before pushing her onto my dick.

Stifling a groan as she chokes on my growing length, I watch her bob over me. Her tongue glides along my shaft, her lips twisting just under the tip and causing me to jerk when she hits my nerve endings with skillful precision.

“That’s it,” I praise, forcing her to take me deeper until she gags. The sound makes me harder, growing in her mouth until another gag vibrates over me. She grazes her teeth along the sensitive skin, not quite biting but taunting me with the possibility. She’s become a master of this—trained for pleasure. *My pleasure.*

And *goddamn*, does it bring back memories.

Pulling her away, I take a fistful of her hair around my hand and guide her up to stand. Twisting her around, my other palm grips the chain cuff links as I walk her to the dining room.

One of her palms wraps around my cock, stroking it and earning her a purred, “Good girl.”

Once upon a time, she used to be innocent. Every touch was hesitant, every stroke experimental, and every kiss shy. I broke her of those habits years ago.

Broke her.

And inevitably, us.

As if she knows the mental spiral I’m falling into, her grip on my cock tightens and pulls me from the thoughts leading me to rock bottom quickly. “Don’t,” she whispers, her hand fondling me until I twitch in her hand.

It’s enough to make me forget. At least for a little while. “You know exactly what I like, pretty girl.”

Forcefully, I push her over onto the corner of the expensive cherry table, lifting her dress and studying her perky round ass exposed to me. I’ve missed this sight more than I like to admit, and no number of cold showers with my hand around my dick can do the real thing any justice.

“Is this what you came here for?” I ask, running my finger down the seam of her and pressing against the entrance just north of where she’s aching for me. “Did you hope for this, my little slut?”

She sucks in a breath when the pad of my finger applies the slightest pressure against the puckered hole. Wiggling her hips, she juts her ass out and whimpers when my finger slides south until it gets closer to where she wants me most.

“No words?” I ask, bending over and biting her ass cheek hard enough to leave a mark behind. She gasps, causing me to smirk against her as I trail my nose down, down, down as if I’m going to get a taste.

I already know what she tastes like.

Sweet.

Sultry.

My Georgia Peach.

Mine.

Reality seeps in, washing away some of the lust clouding my vision.

No. Not mine.

Not anymore.

It breaks whatever spell she has on me.

Standing to my full height, I stroke myself and step forward, lining myself up to her. I give her no warning before settling my dick between her legs and surging forward, getting a strangled moan of pleasure from her that reminds me all too well of our first time.

Except this time, it’s hard, rough, and brutal as her body welcomes me with the sound of her aroused mewls.

There’s no gentleness or comforting coos or praising kisses. We’re beyond that.

Not mine, a taunting voice in my head whispers in my ear.

I grab her hair and yank her up, keeping myself buried inside her as I walk us to the back deck just off the kitchen.

I don’t stop my assault on her pussy as I bend her over the back railing and grin as she clenches me. My hands squeeze her hips as the wood shakes with each thrust, feeling her coating both of us as we lose ourselves in the moment.

I shove two fingers into her mouth to quiet the noises she makes, leaning forward until my lips graze her ear. “Be quiet, or the neighbors will hear.”

Her teeth sink down, but not hard enough to break skin.

Georgia still loves this.

Even if she stopped loving me.

I look over my shoulder at the security camera above the back door and wink, knowing she still gets the footage through the app on her phone. I could have kicked her off of it by now, but I haven't.

Once, I debated on bringing home somebody new just so she could witness it—hurt her like she hurt me—but I never did.

It's always been her.

This.

Us.

When she does little to muzzle her noises, I move her one last time to the patio table, shoving her over the glass top and pressing her face against it to stifle the sounds as I build my release.

The sparks shooting down my spine as I jackknife forward tell me I'm close. I pump twice more before pulling out, stroking myself until every drop is painted across her lower back.

There's a moment of primal satisfaction seeing myself dripping off her body before I use the hem of her dress to wipe myself off and tuck myself back into my pants.

Once upon a time, I would have gotten a towel, cleaned her off, told her I loved her, then pressed a kiss to her temple.

But that was before.

I drop her stained dress, leaving her bent over and catching her breath. Knowing she didn't come. Knowing she was close.

She's not my responsibility now.

"Now that's over, pick up your shit and get the fuck out of my house."

Shifting on my heel, I walk inside and hear, "Until the divorce is final, this house is still half mine, Linc."

Linc. She's the only person who calls me by that name.

I look over my shoulder, wondering what her motive for being here is. "Then do us both a favor and sign the goddamn papers, Georgia. Put me out of my misery. I don't have time for any more of your bullshit."

There's only a moment, the briefest second when her eyes flash the way they used to in the past when I hurt her feelings during an argument. But why are they dulled with sadness when she caused this to begin with?

"Just..." I pause, giving her one last look before shaking my head when I see that damn necklace hanging from her neck. Why hasn't she taken it off? "Get out before you do more damage than you've already done. Go back to Luca."

She gapes at me, then stands taller. It's all mock confidence—as fake as the makeup on her face. Almost eight years. Nearly a fucking decade later, I finally understand that there was nothing ever real about Georgia Del Rossi.

Right before I close the door to the back deck in hopes she'll let herself out, she says, "Don't go tomorrow."

Tomorrow.

My fist clenches around the door handle. "Do I want to know how you know about that?"

There's a pregnant pause, but I refuse to look over my shoulder at those pleading amber eyes. I don't want to get sucked into the guilt for what needs to be done. "Just...please. Don't go. Tell Matt you changed your mind."

She'd love that, wouldn't she? My knuckles turn white where they remain on the handle. It's the only thing grounding me where I stand.

"We're going to that house and executing the arrest warrant," I inform her, using the same stern voice I use on the people I interview in interrogation rooms. There's no room for bullshit. Not there and not here. "It's time we ended this."

This. The ultimate game her father started years ago when he tried threatening my career. He knew the truth, and his secrets were finally about to be exposed.

It was him or me.

His livelihood was at stake.

But so was mine.

Don't go.

"I have a bad feeling," she whispers, her words causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. "And I'm asking you to do one last thing for me, even though I don't deserve it. Don't go tomorrow."

Is that a warning? Or a last-minute plea?

Either way, it's pointless.

"If you came here to convince me to change my mind with sex, it's not going to work," I tell her, turning the door handle and opening it. I pause halfway through the threshold, the next two sentences streaming past my lips before I can filter the cold words. "Your pussy is good, baby girl. But it's not that good."

I hear her intake of breath but can't find it in me to feel bad. All I've felt for the past two years is bad—bad because I can't make her happy and bad

because I can't make things better with her family. Hell, bad, because I refuse to give up my mission to destroy the man who's done everything in his power to destroy me first.

There's nothing left in me to feel bad about.

"Lincoln," she whispers.

I stop just inside the house, ears perking at my name on her lips. It elicits the same reaction it always does, sending my heartbeat into overdrive like it forgets what she's done.

"Happy birthday," is the last thing she says.

Slamming the door shut, I'm tempted to slide the lock into place and make her walk around the house without her bra and panties.

But I don't.

Because Georgia still holds a place in my heart despite the knife she stuck into it when she chose *him*.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Lincoln / Present

THE SILENCE IS deafening as I make a list in my head of at least fifty other things I could be doing right now instead of this. It's the beginning of September, the perfect time to gather firewood when the weather is cool enough so I don't sweat my balls off, and the bees aren't infesting the wood pile. Then there's the yard that needs tending to, thanks to the blanket of orange, yellow, and red leaves that cover the once-green grass that's an inch too long. I could go on, thinking of the never-ending to-do list that always grows ten times longer when the fall hits.

Not that any of it matters. If I skipped another session, the lieutenant would hear about it within the hour and tear me a new asshole. Then he'd be on me about all the reasons I needed to go and *talk out my feelings* like that could change anything that happened over the past year. It can't. I know that, he knows it, and the attractive brunette in the seat across from me knows it too.

Doctor Theresa Castro holds my fate in her petite hands thanks to the work-ordered grief counseling I have to sit through before my happy ass can get back to my regular schedule.

It could be worse. The psychiatrist is pretty in a sophisticated sort of way. Professionally put-together. There isn't a piece of hair out of place on her head or a wrinkle to be seen in her purple dress, which reminds me of the tie I used to wear as part of my old uniform.

The woman, who must be around my age, seems comfortable in the leather armchair, with a quiet confidence about her that I can appreciate even if I don't want to be here.

But I have no choice, no matter how far away my mind wanders from the events that led to the weekly meetings to discuss all the fucking ways my life has been turned upside down over the past year. I've learned by now that getting lost in the what-ifs of life only gets you closer to rock bottom,

and I don't think I could survive the plummet at this point. Talking about it seems like a cruel punishment—like pouring salt into an open wound.

Rolling my shoulder, I internally wince at the pain radiating from the torn flesh and muscle between my heart and left clavicle. The reconstruction surgeries fixed the majority of the damage but not all of it. Five months after the incident and I can still feel the bullet ripping through me.

My eyes lift to the antique clock hanging beside the door for what must be the fifth time in the past twenty-five minutes. When I look away, I'm caught with calm, curious eyes behind a pair of brown glasses.

Theresa Castro reminds me a lot of Georgia.

Dark hair. Fair skin. Piercing eyes. From here, I can't tell what color they are. Lighter, like some shade of blue or gray or green. The gleam in her glasses lenses makes it hard to tell. My guess would be green. Not quite emerald or mint, but something in between.

Like the grass I really need to mow.

Sighing, I lean back on the emerald suede couch and study the woman whose job it is to analyze me. I've always had a thing for brunettes. Even in high school, the two girlfriends I thought I'd loved had brown hair.

Crossing my arms, I keep the same stoic expression on my face that's been painted there since I walked into the brick building with Psychotherapy written in gold lettering on the door. It felt like a diagnosis the second I opened the door like the world could see there was something wrong with me.

I hate the free advertisement that might as well tell people I'm fucked up, just like I hate the laundry list of reasons that led me here.

Don't go, Georgia had pleaded. I have a bad feeling.

Jaw grinding at the warning I chose to disregard, I sink into my seat and feel the crushing weight of my consequences.

Tell Matt you changed your mind.

Grinding down until my teeth hurt, I force myself out of my head and train my focus on the doctor.

Women like the one in front of me have always captured my attention. I used to enjoy their lingering gazes as they scoped out my body. It was an ego stroke to have their attention.

But not hers. If she were anyone else, a random stranger on the street, maybe the circumstances would be different. I'd flirt with her. Maybe ask

her to get coffee sometime. That's another what-if I choose not to fixate on for long.

"What's on your mind?" she asks.

It's only the second question she's asked me since I sat down, preceded by "How are you?" and "let her know if I need to turn the air conditioner down." The rest of the time has been filled with awkward silence, save the ticking clock that taunts me as each slow second passes.

Just like the last three times I've been here.

"What's on *yours*?" I counter.

Her expression isn't nearly as stoic as mine, but I'll give her credit where it's due. She's got a good poker face. But I see the tiny little twitch in the corner of her mouth. She's amused by my reluctance to talk to her. I doubt it's the first time it's happened to her in this profession, but I find that smile oddly...fascinating.

She may be good at reading people, but I'd like to think I'm better. I spent years training to figure out what isn't being said. Body language gives a lot of people away. I'm good at my job because I pay attention to details. I'd like to think that's the *real* reason I got promoted to the investigative unit in my station. The BCI, Bureau of Criminal Investigations, is a competitive unit. There are hundreds of applications a year that spread across New York State. I worked my ass off to be one of the people accepted without any special treatment.

I refuse to believe the alternative reason thrown in my face for the better part of five years. I don't kiss ass or shake hands with the right people like some believe. I get results by quietly observing.

Like how the doctor doesn't have any personal touches in her office—no photographs or degrees or anything that could give away her identity or personal life. I bet she doesn't even have a social media presence for the sake of her privacy.

There are plants everywhere, though. On the desk, hanging from the ceilings, and a few spread out on the hanging shelves. Probably all real, based on the small watering can on the windowsill across the room.

She keeps a lint roller on her desk, which most likely has to do with the few short pieces of coarse hair on her outfit, so I know she has an animal—maybe more than one. I'd guess a cat, but she could be a dog person.

She doesn't wear jewelry or anything flashy. I don't see any tan lines on her fingers either. She's either single, divorced, or chooses not to wear her

ring when meeting clients.

It's smart. You never know who you're going to meet, especially in her career.

I respect her dealing with people like me—closed off and unpredictable. Maybe if I actually spoke during these sixty-minute sessions, I'd realize she and I aren't that different.

But I have no intention of doing that.

I've gotten used to the weight sitting on my chest, suffocating me with every bad decision I've made as a reminder that it's my fault.

"What are you observing, Mr. Danforth?" she questions, the notepad on her lap untouched since she sat down with it.

"I'm trying to figure out if you're a cat mom or a dog mom," I answer honestly.

The corners of her lips lift a fraction. "Both. I have one cat and two dogs. They keep me busy in what little spare time I have."

So she's a busy woman. A workaholic like me. Although I stay busy because I have nothing else in my life. It's a way to drown out the thoughts that keep me up at night. What's her motive?

She doesn't ask me if I have pets, not that I'd expect her to. The things she wants to talk to me about go beyond which dog breed I find superior or what vacuum works best for getting fur off carpets.

Heaviness settles a little deeper into my stomach when I think about the events that led me to this seat, and the throbbing ache in my shoulder rattles to life.

Good. Another reminder.

The good doctor clears her throat. "I have a lot of experience dealing with both men and women in your field, Mr. Danforth. Your line of work is not easy. You see a lot—get put on the front line of a lot of very difficult, dangerous situations. Each of your experiences may be unique, but the gravity of them is all very similar. There's nothing wrong with feeling the effects of the job or talking about them if things go awry."

Awry. Is that how she views it? "That's putting it mildly," I mumble, meaning to keep the scoffed tone to myself.

I've been molded to be guarded after serving four years in the Marines, two years as a sheriff's deputy, and now seven years with the New York State Police. Law enforcement is taxing in more ways than one, sure, but I've learned to do what a lot of my peers can't. Detach before it completely

drains you. Three years on the road and four years working on various crime scenes have reminded me that humanity can be a fucked-up thing with a lot of fucked-up people.

I've witnessed it firsthand.

Experienced life's repercussions.

The more you take home with you at the end of the day, the harder you'll slip. I've seen guys lose it. Some of them even quit their job and take a different one, with fifty percent pay cuts for the sake of their sanity.

"Not everybody is cut out for this job," I tell her, jaw ticking when the tip of her pen drags across the notepad to write God only knows what.

When she sets down the ballpoint, there's a look on her face that I recognize all too well when we lock eyes. Sympathy. "You may be right, but nobody can sustain a lifetime of suppressed emotions either. We all have our breaking points."

I swallow the lump forming in the back of my throat and sit straighter, not bothering to look away first. "I can't change what happened."

Her head dips once in thoughtful acknowledgment, her features softening. "No, you can't. But that doesn't mean you can't process it and mourn. If you bottle up all of those pent-up emotions, you'll combust. And if there's anything I want you to take away from these sessions, it's that what happened wasn't your fault."

Those words are a punch to the gut.

I've heard them before, but they don't soak in or make a difference. If anything, they keep me up as I think about what happened that night. And it always leads me back to the same thought—the same hypothetical what-if.

Because if I'd done things differently, if I didn't let myself be ruled by my emotions, then my friend would still be alive today.

"I appreciate the sentiment, doc," I say, standing up and walking to the door. "But I didn't come here to be lied to."



"HEARD YOU WALKED out of your therapy appointment," Lieutenant Folts says as soon as I walk into his office. He doesn't even bother looking up from the report he's reading over to spare me a glance.

I drop some papers onto his desk that he asked me to look over for him. “I thought the happenings of those sessions are supposed to be confidential.”

When he lifts his head, there’s a deadpan expression on his face. “You do understand that they’re not going to clear you for full duty until you’ve completed the grief counseling, right? It’s not just your physical you’ll need to pass.”

My eye twitches at his firm tone. For someone barely ten years older than me, he sounds fatherly. “You and I both know those appointments are ridiculous. It’s a PR stunt to show the public that the state is willing to kiss our boobos and act like they give a fuck about our wellbeing before ripping the Band-Aid off and sending us back out there to put our lives at risk some more.”

He sits back with a sigh, his chair groaning under his weight. Ever since Folts became head of the BCI, he’s packed on a few pounds. His promotion came with a bigger paycheck to go along with a larger uniform and hair loss. When I took on this position, I told myself I wasn’t going to be stuck behind a desk eighty percent of the time, like Folts told me I’d be. I wanted to become a detective to make a difference, not make phone calls.

“Look, Hawk,” he begins, using the nickname I got during my probationary period doing field training as a rookie. Every new recruit is assigned to a seasoned officer to do on-the-road training after you graduate from the academy. The officer I worked with noticed my ability to point out things he never saw. He said I had eyes like a hawk, and the name stuck from there. “I know you’re not happy about this, but I do think it’s worth a real chance. In my eighteen years, I’ve seen what these kinds of situations have done to people.”

“Respectfully, sir, I’m not the victim. And I don’t know why everybody is treating me like one.”

He studies me for a split second, scrubbing his clean-shaven jaw. “Marissa popped by today. She was hoping to see you.”

My spine goes ramrod straight at the name.

Folts eyes me. “Everybody knows how close you and Conklin were. If she can manage to pull herself together enough to come here and get the rest of his belongings and still find it in her to ask about you, don’t you think you can entertain the idea of talking to a therapist? Maybe even getting back to Marissa to let her know you’re okay?”

It's a low blow, and he knows it. "You can't honestly be guiltting me into this by comparing me to Conklin's *widow*."

I like Marissa Conklin. She was the glue that held my former partner together; grounded him. After my divorce, she was the glue that kept me from absolutely losing it too. I spent more time at their house than I did at my own because I hated being there alone, where my thoughts echoed off the half-empty walls.

I don't know why bad things happen to good people, especially not to people like them, but it pisses me off every time I think about it.

Because it should have been me.

It would have made everything easier.

"Marissa is worried about you," he replies, lifting a shoulder. "Said you haven't been returning her calls. Frankly, I think her coming here today had nothing to do with the stress ball or snow globe that her husband left in his desk. It was you she wanted to see."

I *have* been avoiding her calls. And texts. And even the emails she sent when she realized I wasn't going to return her other messages. What could I possibly say to her? I failed her husband. A colleague I should have tried harder to protect instead of putting his life on the line for a lead that I needed for my own personal vendetta.

Matt Conklin and I became friends during the academy, then got transferred to this station within a year apart. I spent a lot of time at their place, watching them live their lives. I was in their wedding. I became their son's godfather, for Christ's sake.

I knew his death wasn't entirely on me. I'm not the one who pulled the trigger. But I was the one who insisted on dragging him there. I delivered him right to death's goddamn doorstep.

And for someone with eyes like a hawk, I sure as hell didn't see that shot coming.

Or the three that followed.

"I don't know what to say to her, Folts," I admit. "Telling her how sorry I am isn't going to change the outcome for her and their kid."

He makes a thoughtful noise. "I don't think she's looking for an apology, Danforth."

Then what the hell is she looking for?

As if he can read my mind, he says, "If I had to guess, she's looking for somebody who can understand her pain."

My eyes go to the floor as I soak that in.

A piece of paper is extended out, capturing my attention. I take it, brows furrowing at all the red marks throughout the summary. “While you figure out what the right thing to do is, you might as well edit this report and consider taking a class on basic grammar since you seemed to skip that in high school.”

I snort at his remark, grateful for him lightening the mood. “Do you get off on this shit? I’ve never seen so much red ink on one piece of paper. It’s like you slaughtered a virgin.”

“Hawk.”

“Yeah, sir?”

He points that red pen at the door. “Get the hell out of my office. And call back the DA’s office about the upcoming Hebert trial. We need to make sure the ADA has everything they need so this jackass doesn’t get off again.”

I salute him sarcastically, earning me a hard glare that has me smirking on my way out.

But as soon as I get into my office down the hall, the smile falls and reality slinks back in.

Just like it always does.

CHAPTER TWO

Lincoln / Present

TAKING A SWIG of the beer in my hand, I shoot my little sister a look before she can say whatever is making the blue eyes she gets from Mom gleam with mischief. “Don’t,” I warn her, flipping one of the burgers on the grill.

Hannah lifts her hands in surrender, stealing my Corona and taking a sip. “You’re extra testy today.”

“And *you’re* already getting on my nerves,” I shoot back, reclaiming the bottle. “Not to mention underage.”

The girl thirteen years younger than me snorts in amusement. “What are you going to do? Arrest me? I’m eighteen, Lincoln. You used to drink all the time in high school, so get off your high horse.”

I close the grill and pass her the nasty fruit seltzer I bought specifically for her. “My house. My rules.”

“Hypothetically, if I *were* to broach a conversation about you-know-who,” she says, smiling innocently when I narrow my eyes at her, “I’d ask if you were okay.”

Choosing to play coy, I walk over to the table and grab the buns Mom brought to toast on the top rack of the grill. “I’d tell you that I’m perfectly fine and that your focus should be on passing your classes at college, not on me.”

The girl, who has only gotten sassier with age, takes the buns out of my hand with a frown. “I’m only asking because I care, and because Mom and Dad are worried. Come on, Lincoln. You were so screwed up after the separation with Georgia and then the shooting—”

“What makes you think I want to talk about it when I’ve avoided it all this time?” I cut her off. “Everybody is so worried about me, but they won’t respect my space.”

It was bad enough when my friends hounded me about my divorce because their wives wanted to make sure I was okay after the split. But I wouldn’t give them the answers they wanted to hear. Like, I was *sad* and

depressed and wanted to *talk about my feelings* when that was the last thing I wanted to do. Was I fucked up? Yeah. Who the hell wouldn't be when they gave the best version of themselves to someone who didn't think it was good enough to stay?

All I wanted was to drink beer, talk about why the New England Patriots needed to be brought down a peg by literally any other NFL team, and move the fuck on from the hellhole reality I trapped myself in.

When that goddamn shooting happened, it only made things ten times worse. Suddenly, it wasn't only my friends and their wives trying to have impromptu therapy sessions with me, it was my family and coworkers too. I knew I was fortunate to have people in my life who genuinely gave a shit about my well-being. But I also needed room to breathe, which I found hard to get nowadays, with everybody looming over me like they're waiting for the day I snap.

Thankfully, Hannah lets it go too. "Fine. But, for the record, we've given you plenty of space. Too much, if you ask me." I eye her, so she lifts her palms in surrender. "I'm only dropping it because I have zero interest in dealing with your moody ass the rest of the night. You always get all depressed and poetic whenever you've indulged in a few drinks anyway, and none of us need you spewing your long-winded tangents."

I'll take a victory where I can get it. "Why don't you go inside and get Mom to relax? She's been cleaning my kitchen since she got here, even though I told her I'd do it when I had a free day."

My sister snorts. "We all know you never have free time. That's why she's here twice a week, making sure your house doesn't look like a homeless person broke in and started squatting."

Lips curling into a ghost of a smile, I hide it behind my drink. I appreciate everything my parents have done for me over the years, even if it's using the spare key I gave them in case of emergencies to do my laundry, dishes, and vacuum. Maybe I should be embarrassed about my mother coming in and doing Mom shit as a thirty-one-year-old man, but I have no shame these days. All of that disappeared when I told my parents that Georgia left me, then took a bottle of my father's scotch and damn near drank the whole thing myself within a few hours. It was a dark time that only got worse after I'd been hospitalized.

Dad shows up at the back door with a tumbler of whiskey in hand that I poured him when he got here, replacing Hannah's spot next to me.

“Burgers should be done soon,” I tell the person I look even more like as the years pass. I close the lid to let the cheese melt into the patties and finish my beer. “You liking retirement?”

“I’m bored out of my mind. Jim said he could take me back at the garage part-time if I wanted.”

That was short-lived. “You haven’t even been retired a full year yet,” I muse.

He harrumphs. “You try retiring and tell me how much you like it.”

The senior investigator gave me paperwork for medical retirement when he visited me in the hospital for the first time. He told me the state would take good care of me. When he left, I crumpled the paper and threw it across the room.

It felt like giving up.

Accepting defeat.

I wasn’t going to do that.

Dad watches me take the food off the grill, sipping his whiskey and studying the amber liquid he’s had a time or two before. “This is pretty good.”

“Johnnie Walker,” is all I say, glad he’s not pressing me on retirement. He and Mom told me I should consider it, but I knew that was fear talking.

They’ve been worried that I’ll go back and be put in the same situation, except next time, *I’d* be the one carried out in a body bag.

“Huh.”

Huh. He knows who gave it to me and still doesn’t say a thing.

I pass him the plate of food. “Take that over to the table for me, will ya?”

He walks away with it, putting it by the paper plates Hannah set outside for me earlier. I put the toasted buns on a different platter and pass it to the man who’s picking at the deviled eggs Mom made.

“Food is ready,” Dad calls out to the women inside, putting the plates out at four different spots. “We expecting anybody else?” he asks, staring down at the extra one in his hand.

I set my beer down. “Not unless you invited somebody I don’t know about. Why?”

Mom butts in, appearing behind Hannah with some burger toppings she must have cut up in the kitchen. “I thought an extra plate might be necessary just in case we get any unexpected visitors.”

Unexpected visitors. “And who may that be, Ma?”

Hannah grins. “Unless it’s you who suddenly wears expensive perfume, it’s not far off to assume that Georgia—”

“She’s not coming,” I inform them through my teeth.

My little sister has always liked my ex-wife. I used to be glad they got along. These days, not so much. Because there’s a lot my family doesn’t know about the cunning woman who showed up at my house late last night, crawled into my bed, and told me she couldn’t sleep.

It’d been weakness letting her slip her hand inside my boxers, but I didn’t stop her. I let her strip me, put me in her mouth, and climb on top of me until we both chased relief.

Mom shrugs. “Well, you never know...”

Hannah laughs, Dad shakes his head, and I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Let’s eat.” I plop into the closest spot and start serving myself to drop the subject.

Before Mom can bring up my ex or my late partner and do some sort of feelings check-in, I look at my sister. “Hannah Banana, why don’t you tell Mom about that speeding ticket you got the other day?”

She gapes at me in betrayal. “You ass! You said you wouldn’t say anything to her about it.”

Mom turns to her daughter with her hands perched on her hips and a scolding expression shadowing her feminine features. “You got *another* ticket? I swear to all that’s holy, Hannah Marie. We told you if you got another one that we were going to take away your—”

I hide my grin behind the food I shovel into my mouth, glad the spotlight is off of me.



THERE’S NO DOUBT in my mind that the good doctor catches the subtle wince as I drop onto the couch. I try my best not to move or roll my shoulder, no matter how much the ache has settled in today. It always hurts when it’s raining out, which is almost every day at this point. This time of year is rough in Middle Point because of the rainfall, but it’s going to be a bigger bitch when winter hits and the temperature drops.

Should have moved down south when Georgia suggested it, I think to myself, unable to stop the soft chuckle from escaping me.

“What’s so funny?” the good doctor asks, crossing one of those lean legs over the other and settling into her usual armchair.

She’s in pants today, which is unfortunate. If I’m going to sit in silence, I at least want something nice to look at. I’ve always been an equal opportunist when it comes to the female form—I’m not just about the ass, tits, or legs. I like it all. And since her outfits always cover her chest, her legs are about all I can get a good glimpse of.

I entertain her question rather than stare at how her shirt tucked into her pants shows off her tapered waist. “I was thinking that my ex-wife was right,” I muse, a half-smirk curling my lips. It’s been a long time since I’ve said that aloud, and I bet her ears are ringing. “She always said we’d be happier down south where her family is from. She told me I should look into jobs somewhere warmer because the sunshine would put me in a better mood.”

“But you didn’t want to.” It’s not a question.

“New York pays better,” I answer. My job with the state ensured that she could get every new book that came out from her favorite authors and each special edition that released with sprayed edges I could easily do myself. I made sure she had whatever she wanted because I thought it would make her happy—thought it would be enough.

Turns out, it wasn’t.

“It’s also a lot more hours and a hell of a lot more stress,” I add. “And my family is here. So is most of hers.” *Unfortunately.*

She nods in understanding. “I know many couples who’ve struggled to find balance when careers blow up.”

All I do is make a thoughtful noise.

“Are you hurting?” is her next question, her eyes going to the spot in between my collarbone and heart. She’s read my file. She knows what’s under my shirt without me exposing the damaged, marred flesh.

“I’m always in a perpetual level of hurt,” I answer dryly. “Isn’t that why I’m here?”

Her lips move into a ghost of a smile again. Subtle and gone before I can blink. That’s the third time I’ve gotten her to lift those otherwise unreadable lips. “I suppose so. Are you on any medication for the pain?”

“I was given some when I was released from the hospital, but I stopped taking it.”

“Why?”

I hate how narcotics make me feel. They were essential the first week after the shootout, dulling the pain that was hot and fresh as I tried to function on my own. But I didn’t like how groggy they made me when I took one, knowing the second they wore off, I’d feel everything ten times worse. I didn’t want to depend on the painkillers to get past the physical or mental pain. I wanted to remember.

I *deserved* to remember everything.

I could tell her all of that. Be honest. I don’t though. “Just didn’t like them,” I murmur instead, trying not to roll my bad arm.

The physical therapy I went through for two months helped with mobility, but there’s still a lingering pain that tugs on the muscles that were obliterated by the bullet that day. No amount of exercise, medication, or surgery is going to get me back to one hundred percent.

I have to live with that. Accept it. No matter how much it pisses me off.

Those two whispered words reappear in my head, caressing my conscience. *Don’t go.*

The good doctor writes something on her notepad, saying nothing as her pen drags across the paper effortlessly. I’d like to know what she’s writing about. I’m sure there are a few choice words she’s thought of in the short time we’ve spent together.

Stubborn, being one of them. Evasive is probably underlined and starred. Cynical might be on there too.

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about today in particular?” she asks, letting go of the previous conversation.

It’s how she starts most of our sessions.

To which I always reply, “No.”

She watches me, studying me with a professional amount of interest in her eyes, like she’s trying to calculate how to fix me. Wondering what magic anecdote is going to help me open up in order to heal.

I’d like to know myself.

She sets her pen down and picks a piece of invisible lint off her top. “Was your divorce amicable?”

The question catches me off guard. I suppose this is my fault for bringing up Georgia. I led her to the topic I’ve done my best to avoid

talking about with most people. Then again, she's not most people, is she? "I wouldn't say 'amicable' is the right word. It took months for her to even sign the paperwork after we separated."

"And why is that?"

Her guess is as good as mine. I've learned it's damn near impossible to figure out the inner workings of Georgia Del Rossi. "Don't know, doc. I guess she was having second thoughts. Maybe because I supported the two of us. Maybe because..." *She loved me.* I stop myself from saying that because the thought cuts deep.

"She didn't work?"

Georgia's father co-founded a construction business called MDR Inc. in Savannah, Georgia, where she was born. They made good money and expanded up north when his former business partner said there was good money to be made near New York City. Then, that same partner was sent to jail for tax evasion and money laundering within five years of their move to New York. Nikolas Del Rossi claimed he wasn't involved, but not all the facts added up. He knew having me as a son-in-law would quickly uncover a hell of a lot more than he was letting on, so he needed to do something about it.

He liked control as much as I do, but he knew a lot more powerful people to ensure he'd always have the upper hand in our relationship. Looking back, I'm not sure I ever stood a chance.

"She did," I relent, rubbing my leg. "But she could never hold one for very long under circumstances out of her control."

Circumstances pertaining to her father.

My fingers curl into a fist and stay by my side.

"I bet that was stressful."

We weren't exactly eating Ramen noodles every night, but some months were harder than others. "It was," I agree finally. I meet her eyes, trying to look unfazed as a tight ball of nerves settles into my chest cavity. "But we made it work. For a while."

She's quiet for a few seconds, watching me with those inquisitive eyes through the thick lenses of her glasses. "May I ask what the reason for your divorce was?"

There was a litany of reasons, but we didn't have time for me to list them all. "I suppose the short answer is that we grew apart and wanted different things."

I've seen it happen more times than I could count. In law enforcement, the divorce rate is almost seventy percent. That's twenty percent higher than the average. It's hard being married to an officer, especially one as stubborn as me, who wants to change the world.

Georgia never understood it was all for her.

Her father never let her before poisoning her mind with whatever bullshit he could to drive a wedge between us. It worked.

"And when was that finalized?"

Another question I'm sure she already knows the answer to. "About seven months ago."

"So, right before the shooting?"

"I was served a month before it happened." A familiar bubble of anger rises up my throat that I force myself to swallow. She had the nerve to serve me and then refused to sign negotiated paperwork that protected my pension. One of my buddies was a lawyer and manage to talk to whatever seedy motherfucker she worked with until her inked name was finally put on the dotted line. "They were signed a month and a half after it happened. My lawyer called me the day I was released from the hospital to let me know I was free."

Free. Whatever the fuck that meant.

It'd been a harsh reality call—like the string that had attached me to Georgia had been severed by a meat cleaver that might as well have been held by Nikolas Del Rossi himself. A final *fuck you* from the girl who didn't visit me once when I was hurt.

Yet I keep the door unlocked just for her so she can sneak in and remind me of the one thing we were always good at.

"It's been a rough year for you," she states.

I know where this is leading. "I'd say I've been pretty damn lucky considering," I answer pointedly. I'm in no mood to bring up Conklin. I barely like talking about my failed marriage.

Thankfully, she doesn't push the topic I think she's veering toward. "Whose idea was it to separate?"

My jaw tics because there are two people responsible for that ultimate decision. But inevitably, she was the one who walked away first. "Hers."

The good doctor's head dips down, pausing before asking, "Did you try fighting for it?"

Fighting. Isn't that all I did for the entirety of our marriage? Fighting to make it work. Working my ass off day in and day out to make sure she was comfortable. We might not have always been happy, but we were content.

"What's the point of fighting for somebody who doesn't want to fight for you?" I ask her.

She doesn't have an answer for me.

Good. At least she's not the kind of person who will sit here and bullshit me with some Pinterest-level advice. It's the last thing I want and the last thing I need.

I cross my arms over my chest. "I won't sit here and lie and tell you it didn't suck that the woman I spent almost ten years with chose to leave. But I wasn't going to force her to stay either. One of us might as well be happy."

She tilts her head, starting to pick up her pen but setting it back down on the paper as if she decides whatever she has to say isn't important enough to be immortalized. "It sounds to me like you still care about her."

Truthfully, I probably always will. I can only hope that fades as time goes on. "These days, the only thing I let myself care about is my job. And I think that's probably for the best."

This time, she does pick up her pen and write something down.

"So," I press, watching as she scribbles down her thoughts, "when are you going to sign off on the paperwork that lets me get back to it?"

She looks up at me through the tops of her glasses. "When I feel you're ready."

Swallowing, I scoot to the end of the couch and rest my elbows on my bent knees. "And you think talking about my failed marriage is somehow going to prepare me for getting back to work?"

Smile number four appears, as small as before but present. "I think it's a very big step in the right direction, Mr. Danforth. After all, it was a domino effect following that that led you to me."

It's not a question because she knows.

She's just waiting for me to admit it.

"Would you look at that," I say, checking my watch and standing. "Looks like our time is up for the day."

CHAPTER THREE

Lincoln / Present

WIPING OFF THE slick sweat from my skin after I finish my last rep at the station's gym, I flinch when my shoulder pops and sends shooting pain down my arm. I drop the dumbbell onto the floor and suck in a breath, putting my head between my legs to fight the nausea rising up my throat.

"Goddammit," I growl, squeezing my arm to my body and trying to breathe past the pain.

My doctor told me I needed to stop getting ahead of myself, and the physical therapist I was assigned to was inclined to agree. But months off my regular training regime made me grumpier than usual. It was hard enough not to work my regular shifts, but having nothing to channel my frustration into made me a hell of a lot harder to deal with when I was stuck behind a desk or at my house trying to find distractions.

I'd rather be here, pushing my limits with the mindless chatter and sirens surrounding me, than in a house too big for me where my demons poke and prod my conscience whenever they get a chance.

Rubbing my shoulder after putting my weights away, I head to the locker room for a quick shower to feel half-human. By the time I'm out and changed, the pain is tenfold. No amount of hot water and ibuprofen seems to touch it, and I know damn well the bottle of oxycodone at home is going to remain untouched where it's collecting dust in the medicine cabinet, no matter how bad the pain gets.

As I make my way through the building, one of the new dispatchers calls out, "Finally leaving, Lincoln?"

I lean against the wall beside the bulletproof glass separating me from Haddy's desk in the dispatch room. She's been here almost as long as I have and is constantly training new personnel on the phone systems. "'bout time, isn't it?"

Most of the dispatchers are older, with kids around my age, so it's easy to get along with them. Some of them act motherly if I do something stupid,

like the time Haddy scolded me for not calling out my location before I got into a foot pursuit in the woods at one in the morning back when I was a patrol officer. It helps to have a good rapport with the people on the other side of the scanner, especially when you need a favor.

She'd sent me a get-well card after I was released from the hospital that had everybody's signature on it, along with a plate of her famous homemade cinnamon buns. It was her I had to thank for the slight weight gain during recovery that hid my once-defined torso.

"I'm surprised you don't have a cot set up in your office with all the time you spend here," she remarks, a sad smile on her face.

She knows about my divorce and why I don't like going home. Most people here do because they're in everybody's business. But, for the most part, they don't pry too much in my personal life. They know I won't reveal anything, even if they ask.

"Sometimes I think about it," I admit, smiling past the pain still throbbing in my arm.

My eyes flick to the new dispatcher sitting beside Haddy, who definitely doesn't fit the mold I'm used to. She's younger than everybody else, probably around my age or a little younger. Pretty in an innocent kind of way. I'm not sure why she took this job because she looks like she belongs in a classroom teaching kids. The kind of calls the station gets tend to be too much for the people filling these seats, which is why we have so much turnover in staffing in the comms room.

Her eyes, some kind of mixture between green and blue, roam the front of me, taking in the suit pants and button-down I'm in. She's used to seeing the officers in the state's scratchy wool uniforms that are known as the gray bags—they're shapeless, hot in the summer, and cold in the winter. When I got my promotion, I got to switch to business casual attire that is a hell of a lot more comfortable and definitely more flattering. I can tell the new girl appreciates it as much as I do.

I've seen that look flashing in her eyes before. I used to relish in the attention women gave me in the past. One smile, a singular wink, and they were mine to do what I wanted with.

It was that easy.

"You do spend a lot of time here," she notes, her gaze finally landing on my face. She props her chin onto her palm. "Most guys have to be home to spend time with their families."

She's been here long enough to know the dynamics of most of the officers; those who are married, the ones with kids, the few who are unattached, and the ones having affairs behind their significant others' back. Usually with other people from the station. This place is a cesspool of infidelity and scandal, and I definitely wouldn't want to run a blue light over half the surfaces in it hearing half of the shit that goes on.

"I guess I'm not most guys," I comment, choosing not to feed into her prying. I'm not an idiot. She's interested and fishing for information that I have no intention of spoon-feeding her.

Her lips curl up at the same time her eyes lighten with mischief. "I get off in a few hours."

One of the other dispatchers in the room coughs into their palm right before taking a call, but I see the amusement on their face all the same when I shoot them a look.

I look at the new girl, whose name I don't even remember. Anna? Brittany? She looks sweet-faced, but I can see trouble under the mask. I bet she'd be easy to control, a distraction to feel good when I need it most. Someone like her, ready and willing, would let me do whatever I wanted with her body. And she'd take it with a smile.

But the heavy piece of gold I always keep in my pocket reminds me that there's somebody else who would be just as willing.

And, frankly, hate sex is hotter than the desperate kind, no matter how attractive the person is offering it. "I hope you get home safely then," I tell her, pushing off the wall I've been leaning on.

Her eyes flicker to my left hand, locking on the fourth finger that my thumb lazily drags across. "Lucky girl," she murmurs.

Hardly, I want to say, but I choose not to. I don't want to feed the fire or give her hope. There is none, and there never will be.

Not when there are ghosts of the past constantly haunting me. Dragging her, or anybody, into the mess I've made for myself, would be cruel and unusual punishment.

"Have a good night," I tell everyone in the room, waving a hand in their direction.

"Try getting some sleep for once, Hawk," Haddy calls out to me in that maternal tone.

As I walk away, I feel a twinge of regret for not giving the new girl a shot. It's not like I have to promise her forever, just an orgasm or two and

maybe some breakfast in the morning. I know damn well I won't sleep like Haddy wants me to, so I might as well spend the time doing something I enjoy.

There are days when that temptation to enjoy a woman again almost beats the vows I took eight years ago, but I never let anything come of it. Not even after the divorce was finalized.

No matter how much I want to, no matter how much the need seeded inside of me begs me to stop holding out for hope that something will change, I never stray. What I told the therapist was true. I don't want to fight for somebody who doesn't even try to do the same for me.

On the drive home, I let the radio drown out the thoughts swirling in my head with classic rock. When I look at the time illuminating in the darkness, I tap my finger on the top of the steering wheel before cursing under my breath and taking a sudden left.

I may not want to fight, but that doesn't mean I don't want to feel *something*.

Eight minutes later, I'm turning into a narrow driveway to an apartment building that's a far cry from the house we used to share.

Despite the time, I knock on the door and wait for the tired brunette to open it with confusion pinching her brows together.

I step inside, pushing Georgia back and closing the door behind me. She's about to say something, but I grab the back of her head and fist her hair, guiding her to look at me. "Don't talk."

Crushing my lips against hers, I back us up until she's pressed between the erection quickly hardening in my pants, and the drywall. Her hands quickly grip my hips, her pelvis arching forward to gain friction against mine.

Biting into her bottom lip, I swallow her moan and grin when I pull back and see the way her whiskey eyes take me in. "You're going to do exactly what I say. Do you understand me?"

Her tired expression melts into lust as she nods slowly, a hunger in her eyes that matches my own. "Yes, sir," she whispers.

"Good girl," I praise, caressing her cheek. I step back and watch as her chest, covered in a thin piece of fabric that I realize is an old shirt of mine, rises and falls rapidly.

I undo my pants and pull them down far enough to take myself out. "Get on your knees and remind me what that pretty little mouth can do."

Her eyes flare as she watches me stroke myself, her teeth digging into her bottom lip as I grow in my palm.

When she sinks down on her knees, I bite back the groan as she takes me into her mouth. And damn, do I miss the skill set of her tongue and teeth, teasing me without hurting me, swallowing me without gagging, and pleasuring me without argument.

I run my fingers through her hair, watching her head bob over me with a precision that has my eyes rolling back. I'll never forget the first time I got to experience her mouth on me.

The thought hardens me, making her choke as I push her down until I can feel the tip of my dick in the back of her throat. When her moans vibrate me, I pull her away and force her up by her hair.

When I see the slick grin on her face, I pull her head back and hover my lips over hers. "Playing games, are we?"

Her eyes sparkle. "Never," she says coyly.

We both know that's a crock of shit.

"You know what happens when you play games," I say, nipping at her lip before stepping back and guiding her to the bedroom. "You get punished."

I bend her over the bed and slide my hand over her exposed ass cheeks. Opening the pathetic excuse of a closet, I grab a silk scarf that looks as expensive as the rest of her wardrobe and use it to bind her arms so she can't touch me. Then I grab a belt and wrap it around her waist to give me leverage as I lift up her ass to bring it off the bed and level to my aching dick.

Lifting the oversized shirt she stole from me, I grin when I see she's not wearing any panties.

"It's like you knew I was coming," I praise, closing the distance between me and her pert ass and grazing my nose along the curve of her until I hover over her seam.

Slowly, my tongue finds its way down, down, down until she's arching her ass up higher as I get closer to where she wants my mouth. I can smell how turned on she is—how badly she wants me.

"Somebody is eager," I muse, letting my tongue lightly graze over her entrance as I part her for better access.

"Just shut up and fuck me," she moans, wiggling her hips.

Humming, I kneel behind her on the mattress and press her chest down. "I thought I told you not to talk."

This time, she's quiet. "Good." My knuckles graze the sensitive area between her legs, feeling how ready she is for me. "Were you thinking about this all night? Thinking about me? It feels like you were. You're so fucking wet, it's almost pathetic."

She sucks in a breath when my fingers taunt her core before tweaking the nerves that have another moan escape her.

"I hope you're ready for me, wife," I say, positioning myself at her entrance. "Because I've had a bad day, and your pussy is about to make it better."

That's the only warning she gets before I'm burying myself inside her, each thrust and pump hard, fast, and ugly.

Using the belt, I pull her body into mine until the slick sound of her arousal is mixed with our slapping skin and the noises muffled into the mattress that her face is pressed into. Her arms squirm behind her, her hands grasping at nothing but air, making me smirk victoriously.

"Do you like that?" I ask, grinding myself against her ass so she feels all of me. "Do you like being my little slut?"

A garbled noise is all I get from her, so my palm comes down on her ass cheek, leaving a red mark in its wake.

"I didn't hear you."

"Yes," she gasps, as I spank her ass cheek again.

"Yes, what?" I demand, tightening my hold on the belt and using her body to get closer to release.

Nothing about my movements is gentle or sweet, but then again, they rarely were with her. I'm not sure either of us believed in making love. The rawness of our relationship was always shown in much more creative ways that didn't always involve this kind of intimacy.

She submitted to me willingly because she knew I would always put her first, make her feel good; to feel *worshipped*. It wasn't like the control she relinquished to her father, who used it solely for selfish reasons.

Georgia trusted me, and I made sure to show her how much I appreciated it.

"Yes, *sir*," she spits, her head tilting back when I hit the spot that has her choking on the sassiness trying to creep out.

I massage her sore bottom. “That’s a good girl. Are you going to come for me?”

She looks back, her eyes narrowed like she wants to fight, me but her body is giving in to the sensations pulsing through it.

“Say it, Georgia,” I command, picking up the pace and fucking her faster, getting close to my release when I hear the way her ass slaps against my hips. “Say you’re going to come for me.”

She opens her mouth, but words don’t come out. Instead, a guttural noise rises from her throat as she cries out through an orgasm despite her best efforts to hold back.

Those goddamn noises do me in.

I pull out right before I come, emptying myself on her until she’s covered in me.

Releasing the belt, I let it fall onto the bed as I stroke myself until every last drop is painted on the woman who claimed to love me in sickness and in health.

What a fucking liar.

I take my time undoing the makeshift restraint around her wrists before using the expensive material to wipe both of us off, not caring if I stain it.

When she’s finally free, she sits up and stares at me, the shirt falling back over until her exposed skin is covered. “Why did you come here, Lincoln?”

I debate whether to tell her the truth or not since it’s rare that she offers me the same. But I do. Because some truths hurt, and maybe I want her to feel even a fraction of what I do. “I could have fucked somebody else tonight,” I tell her, collecting my clothes from where I discarded them.

Georgia is silent, her breathing stilled in wait for me to say something else. I feel a hand on the back of my bare shoulder, comforting me, telling me she’s there.

“I wanted to,” I admit, moving away from her touch before it burns me. “For a minute.”

She still doesn’t say anything.

I start redressing. “For some reason, I always come back to you.” When I turn, I see her watching me with glassy eyes. Jaw ticking at the vulnerability on her face, I clench my fist at my side. “And I fucking hate it.”

My ex-wife's eyes pierce holes into my face, acting like *she's* the one who's been shot when it was she who all but pulled the trigger.

Her throat bobs, swallowing down whatever bullshit she was going to hit me with. Probably not an apology. I'm sure she loves that she still holds my interest. Coming here was basically a victory for her, showing that her grasp is still tightly wrapped around me.

The next words out of her mouth are unexpected. "I started seeing somebody," she whispers, my shirt pausing halfway over my head.

My throat bobs with a thick swallow. Her words hurt a hell of a lot more than my injury, but it stings all the same. I knew it was only a matter of time before she admitted it, but I'd hoped the day would never come.

Because then I'd have to make a decision.

"Why didn't you stop me tonight then?"

I'm met with momentary silence before she speaks on the softest exhale. "Because he's not you."

For the briefest moment, I close my eyes.

"Stay," I hear her say next. "Stay the night."

I stop in the middle of her tiny living room, where temporary, cheap furniture sits until she can find something else. I wonder if her father put her here as punishment for everything she's done.

She used to have it all. Over two thousand square feet of space that was hers to do what she chose with. A house with a reading nook she loved spending time in. Cheap bookshelves I put together that lined the wall beside it, full of every color and shape book to add to her never-ending to be read list. A kitchen to experiment with new recipes in, no matter the mess she made or the inedible outcome of the meal.

Yet she sacrificed it for this.

For this life without *me*.

To spend it with someone *else*.

So, I swallow my pride and say, "No."

As I walk out of the room, her rushed footsteps follow me to the front door. "I didn't know," she tells me, catching my arm. "That day, I didn't know what was going to happen."

Don't go.

Don't go.

Don't go.

She knew enough.

“I didn’t know,” she repeats, this time her tone broken as her hand drifts toward the injury.

I refuse to let her.

“You knew *something*,” I counter, grabbing her wrist and squeezing it once before dropping it away from me. “You knew what your father was capable of. Matt was your friend too.”

The amber in her eyes becomes glassy as her throat bobs.

“His blood is just as much on your hands as it is on mine,” I declare, storming out.



DURING MY NEXT session with Doctor Castro, it’s me who breaks the silence first. “Have you ever cheated before, doc?”

The question has her raising her eyebrows. I spent the first few minutes staring silently at all the fall décor she decorated her office with over the past week. Fall is my second least favorite season, following winter. Everything is pumpkin-scented or flavored, the trees lose their leaves, and the cool temps make my body hurt. It’s a reminder of what’s to come for the next six months.

But I’ll give the good doc one thing. It looks nice in here. Cozy. Like HomeGoods threw up in here. In a classy kind of way.

“Cheated how, exactly?” she inquires, adjusting her glasses higher up her nose. Does she even need those, or are they for sure?

I pocket that question for another time. “Cheated at all. My friends and I used to cheat on our math tests. They tended to copy my answers because I was better with numbers than they were. But, in return, they’d write my English papers so I wouldn’t have to read those dry-ass books.”

Right before I blink, I see a glimpse of amusement flicker across her face. Is that smile number five? “No, I’ve never cheated.”

“Not even in a past relationship?”

She shakes her head. “No. I believe communication is key in any relationship, and if there’s a problem that can’t be fixed by talking it out, I find it better to end things. It’s less messy that way.”

I used to think I was good at communicating. Georgia and I had goals. Dreams. Things to chase after. People to prove wrong. When did that change?

“Have you ever cheated on a partner before?” she asks. There’s no judgment on her face, but I wonder what she’ll write down after this conversation is over.

“No,” I admit. “Not *on* anyone.”

One of those brows arches higher. “But *with* somebody?”

My eyes go to the fake pumpkins by the door. At least I hope they’re fake, or they’ll rot and attract flies. Not even the apple cinnamon incense plugged into the wall can hide the smell that would leave behind.

“Georgia is seeing somebody,” is my only response, drifting my gaze back to her.

“How do you know that?”

“Because she told me.”

Slowly, she nods but doesn’t write anything down. “How often do you speak to her?”

I wait for her to pick up her pen, but she doesn’t so much as move from where she sits comfortably, one leg draped over the other like usual. “Whenever one of us is feeling lonely, I suppose.”

A thoughtful noise rises from her. “But didn’t you say she’s seeing somebody?”

My attention is drawn to the niche sign about fall leaves and apple picking hanging on the wall. I bet she paid a stupid amount of money for that. My mother has about a million little signs with sayings on them spread around her house that she spends way too much money on. I told her dad or I could make the same ones for cheap. “People can be lonely standing in a crowded room, doc. Maybe he doesn’t provide her the same things I can.”

“What would that be?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue. *Love*. But that’s what she’s expecting me to say. So, I give her the next best answer. “Somebody to take control.”

Her fingers wrap around the pen. “Do you consider yourself a controlling person?”

The curl to my lips happens instantaneously. “One might say I have a controlling personality, yes. I don’t like *not* being in control.” I think about Georgia and how responsive she was to my every demand the other night. She was always submissive to me, but it wasn’t by force—it was by choice.

She was used to being controlled by her family without any expectations, but she *chose* to submit to me because she knew the reward was her pleasure.

That trust meant something to both of us, given the unique circumstances of our relationship. “I tried not being completely controlling in my marriage. Domineering, maybe. Authoritative, sure. Dominant, definitely. But Georgia always had a say when it mattered. I made sure of that. I made sure not to be...”

Just like her father.

She could have said no when I asked her to marry me. Sometimes, I wish she would have. I wish I never stepped foot into that bar that night or talked to the pretty brunette sipping on a top-shelf scotch. But I did. And the domino effect led me here, just like the good doc said.

“And how did you two meet?” she asks, her head tilting to the side.

My lips twitch, thinking about that night.

It was the beginning of the end.

“That’s a long story.”

She leans back, her foot bobbing up and down. “We’ve got time, Mr. Danforth. Enlighten me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Georgia / Seven Years Ago

I TAKE A deep breath and lift my knuckles to the door, repeating the same words in my head over and over again for practice. *I want to celebrate my birthday with friends this year, Daddy.* Plain, simple, and to the point. Nikolas Del Rossi likes people who go after what they want. He says bluntness is a trait he looks for in business partners because he doesn't have time to waste on those who talk in circles.

I know the second the door to his study opens, I'll be greeted with the smell of expensive tobacco, whiskey, and leather. I was allowed to sit in on meetings inside the room when I was younger, and it was one of my favorite spots to sneak into where I could take one of the books off the shelf and spend time absorbing eighteenth-century literature when I was a teenager.

As I got older, the things I took from inside my father's favorite room changed, like my first taste of alcohol from his liquor cabinet, which contained only the finest scotches, whiskeys, and bourbons. I hated the initial burn from one of his favorite bottles of Macallan but found it soothing by the third time I'd tried it.

Swallowing down the anxiety that's been building since my best friend Emilia DeMatteo, or Millie for short, suggested we go out for my birthday tomorrow, I gently knock three times on the thick wood. Biting hard on my lower lip, I wait until I hear a firm, "Who is it?" before cracking it open.

"It's only me," I say, flashing him my best smile where he's perched behind his desk, still in his pale green polo tee that I bought him for Christmas and the designer khaki slacks that my stepmother found to match that he was in when he left for golf this morning.

He used to say my smile was my best feature, capable of making even my worst enemy like me. I always thought of it as a compliment until I was older and wondered why I'd have enemies to begin with. But he always

said the same thing when I asked. *“You’re a Del Rossi. And Del Rossis have far more enemies than we do friends. That’s the price of our last name.”*

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” I apologize, stepping in and staying near the door. I do my best not to fidget with the hem of my dress like I normally do when I’m nervous. Millie said it was one of my tells when I had something on my mind.

“Georgia,” my father greets with a tip of his head, gesturing me forward. “We were just talking about you. You remember Antonio Carbone, don’t you?”

I turn to his companion and flash him the same smile I gave to my father. He’s far too dressed up for golf, which I thought was where my father had spent his day off. The graying man must be around my father’s age and looks familiar, but I can’t say I remember him. There are always people coming and going from the house thanks to Daddy’s booming construction business that’s expanded past the five boroughs and into New York City and Jersey, so it’s hard to keep track of them all.

“Hello, Mr. Carbone.”

Antonio’s eyes flash appreciatively as they rake down the front of me in a way that has hair standing on my arms. “You’ve certainly trained her well,” he muses, his eyes roaming over my chest in a way that makes my toes curl in my shoes uncomfortably. “I do agree, Nik. She’d certainly fit the part. If you’ve raised her as I’m sure you have, she’ll be as dutiful as Leani is with you.”

Confusion furrows my brows at the mention of my stepmother, but I don’t have time to ask him what he means when my father speaks. “Is there something we can help you with, Georgia?”

I shift on my feet, gathering my courage. “I was hoping we could talk about something. I wasn’t sure if your...friend was still here or not.”

Once upon a time, I’d gotten to sit with him while he smoked and talked to his friends and associates. But that was when I was eight and still wore pigtails in my chocolate hair that I got from my parents and hideous frilly dresses that my stepmother insisted on putting me in. That quickly changed when puberty hit, and curves took over the stick figure I’d been sporting since my girlhood.

Millie said my father’s protectiveness was inspired by the C-cups that grew on my chest overnight, and the feminine slopes of my hips that accompanied them. Gone were the days when I could mingle with the men

who now looked at me like a prize to be won, and in its place were strict demands to stay in my room when I wasn't helping Leani with whatever charity event she was hosting in the Del Rossi name. It was busy work that I rarely found fun, but it was better than sitting around bored to tears because I wasn't allowed out with the friends I'd been able to spend time with when I still attended school at St. Mary's.

My father watches me with raised brows, lifting his cigar to take a drag in wait. No beating around the bush. Got it.

"My twenty-first birthday is tomorrow," I remind him, standing taller with feigned confidence. "I was hoping I could go out with Millie for it. She mentioned a dance club opening that has very respectable reviews. It's —"

"Absolutely not," he answers before I can convince him otherwise.

My smile slips, and heat settles into my cheeks as Antonio chuckles from his spot in the leather armchair.

"Twenty-first birthday parties are full of nothing but debauchery, and that DeMatteo girl is hardly the right kind of influence you need in your life right now. It's bad enough she's got you to dress like her, looking like an escort for hire. I will not allow you to look like a hooker at some nightclub where you're unsupervised."

His tone warms my face, shrinking my posture. Any confidence I had before washed away as I feel Antonio Carbone's eyes on me.

Millie has always been unapologetically herself—from the short, tight clothes she wears to the bright colors she dyes her hair to the people she associates with. She's stubborn and opinionated. Two things that my father has never liked me being as I got older. He said I needed better influences if I was going to make it in the world he was building for us, but I never understood what that world was if I couldn't be my own person in it.

"Plus," he amends, tapping the cigar against the ashtray, "Leani has already planned a get-together here to celebrate with close friends and family."

She hasn't said a thing to me about it. Then again, the woman who always took me shopping for ugly dresses, shoes, and jewelry so I could fit into high society never quite enlightens me on anything unless she has to. Her sole focus has always been maintaining the household, which I learned all Italian American wives strive to do. I'm an afterthought more times than not, only getting attention when my appearance needed to be worked on for

outings I was reluctantly dragged to. Usually, ones where I'd be squeezed into fancy dresses that hurt my waist, forced to sit through hours-long hair styling, and dolled up with makeup that made me look ten years older.

I know better than to press my luck and push the man watching me, but I do anyway. "Couldn't I do both if I promised to behave myself? Most of the parties we host here only go until nine. I could get a ride with—"

"The decision has already been made," he tells me firmly. "Trust me, dear. Tomorrow is far too important to miss out on. In fact, you're going to formally meet Antonio's son Luca tomorrow night. I already told your mother that you'd be needing a new outfit for it. I imagine you'll go out tomorrow morning to find one."

I've known Luca Carbone since we were little because we'd been dragged to the same galas and events by our families. As he got older, he started acting like the other boys he hung out with from other important families from the city. He schmoozed like a future politician—those were my father's words. He's always liked Luca and the connections he made, while I found him...less than impressive. He was a flirt back then, and I doubt he's changed any now. Not to mention, there have been whispers about how he treats some of his intimate female friends. Why would my father want me to formally meet *him* of all people?

"I'm sure I could find something in my closet if you tell me what the theme for the occasion is," I tell him, trying not to let my confusion show.

Antonio and my father share a look before my father turns those dark, espresso-brown eyes on me. He says I got my eyes from my mother, which is probably why he's never able to look at me for long. "Find something formal and elegant and consider it your pre-engagement party."

For a brief moment, I swear my heart stops.

Thump. Pause. Thump. Pause. Thump.

It echoes in my ears as I repeat those words in my head.

Antonio stands and walks over to me, giving me another cursory glance with a look of hunger in his eyes that I've seen too many times during the events I attend with the family. "My son is certainly going to be a lucky man, isn't he?" A slick grin spreads across his face as he tilts my chin up to meet his eyes before his own goes to my chest. Goose bumps cover my arms as I withhold from the shiver that quakes my spine. His touch feels wrong. Dirty.

My parents always told me to never let a man touch me without permission or supervision—that my virtue was my strongest asset.

Sure, I would dance with random men at charity events, no matter how little I wanted to, but it was always under their watchful eyes. And, most times, I was more than glad when the song was over, and I got to smile and leave my partner behind in favor of trivial conversation at my parents' table discussing politics and the state of the economy.

My experience with the opposite sex is limited at best. I'd snuck my first kiss behind the bleachers at St. Mary's when I was fourteen because Millie told me it was lame to be in high school with no experience. Then again, she's the same person who lost her virginity at fourteen at a party she snuck out to in the middle of the night. I was open to kissing a boy or two, but I never let her pressure me into doing more.

I'd had it drilled into my head since I was eight that my virtue was everything to me. I never truly understood why, but I held on to that, knowing how much it meant to my family.

Humming, Antonio releases my chin and circles me. "I hope he thanks me for this arrangement. Too bad they didn't make them like this when we were younger, huh, Nikolas?"

"Careful, Antonio. That's still my daughter," my father says, deceptively calm.

I look at him, trying to hide my disgust for the stranger who touched me so nonchalantly. Hasn't he heard about Luca's indiscretions with women? If my virtue was so important, what about his?

"I don't understand, Daddy."

"You don't need to, darling," he answers, standing and pressing a palm down on his shirt to flatten the wrinkles.

"I'm to be engaged without any conversation then?" I doubt, my voice nearly inaudible. "I barely know Luca, and I highly doubt one party is going to change that. Marriage is forever."

"Exactly. And marriage is important, Georgia. For both us, the Carbone family, and our social standing." He extends his hand toward the door. "Antonio, I'll walk you out. We can discuss the details later."

Betrayal weighs heavily in my stomach at the news. Nobody has said anything about *marriage*. I'd thought about the day I would get married. What little girl hadn't? But I never dated because I was never allowed to. I couldn't even go to college because my father insisted that it was a waste of

my time and money. He informed me I had other priorities. Unfortunately for me, those priorities consisted of co-hosting charity events and presenting myself as a dutiful Del Rossi in the public eye to help boost my father's business and reputation. Once in a while, he'd let me go to work with him and help file paperwork at The Del Rossi Group office, but it was rare.

I watch as my father passes me without any further explanation. It doesn't make sense.

I straighten, holding up a hand. "I don't—"

"Don't argue, Georgia." He cuts me off with a stern look. "You're to respect my decision as you always have. You've trusted me this long. Now trust me about this. It's a good pairing. Now, go ask your mother to buy you a dress for the occasion. What's done is done."

Swallowing, I stare at his back as he walks my future father-in-law to the door. I say, "She's not my mother."

He stops, his back straightening before he looks over his shoulder. "No," he agrees, with his mouth twitching downward. His eyes dim the same way they always do when my late mother, his first wife, is mentioned. Scanning my face as if seeing the ghost of her before him, he shakes his head. "She most certainly isn't."

My heart sinks to the bottom of my stomach when he opens the front door and says something quietly to Antonio, paying me no more attention.

Ever since my mother passed away when I was little, he's buried himself in work. It seemed like no time at all that Leani entered the picture. Daddy told me I needed a maternal figure in my life because he was too busy to be raising me himself. But I could tell my mother's death hit him harder than it did me. I was too young to understand she was gone. I'd been at her funeral, but even then, I didn't grasp who lay inside the closed casket covered and surrounded by hundreds of flowers—all white carnations.

Her favorite.

I still smell them after all these years, and my mind goes back to that day in the big church full of people I didn't know who offered me and Daddy their deepest condolences. He had been stiff and withdrawn as each person shook his hand but changed completely when a man in a fancy suit stopped in front of us. To me, he was just another stranger here to tell us how sorry he was for our loss, but there was something about him that stood out from the rest.

“It’s a shame it had to come to this,” the stranger tells Daddy, his grip on my father’s hand lasting longer than the line of other people before him. “Perhaps now you will listen the way your late wife did not.”

I look up at my daddy, then at the man.

His eyes lower to meet mine, and a funny feeling creeps up the back of my neck. “I would hate for something to happen to your precious daughter. She’ll be a stunner one day, Nikolas. Keep her close.”

He smiles at me, but there’s something weird about it. I reach out and touch my daddy’s hand, but he doesn’t hold it. When I glance up, I see the same expression on his face as when he heard about Mommy’s accident.

“Goodbye for now, Del Rossi family,” the man says in farewell, giving me one last glance before letting the people behind him have their time to talk. “And remember the conditions of our little deal.”

My father loved my mother so deeply that he used work to distract himself from the pain of her loss until I spent more time with my stepmother and house staff than I did with him.

Now it feels like he’s trading me off to be somebody else’s problem. What would my mother have thought about this?

I close my eyes and count to five. It’s only when I hear a soft, “Georgia?” from the housekeeper that I open them to see a concerned expression on the elderly woman’s face. “Is everything all right, dear?”

Voice shaky, I whisper, “No.”

Mrs. Ricci gestures for me to follow her into the kitchen, so I do. Guiding me to a stool at the large, marble kitchen island, the gray-haired woman sits me down and pours me a glass of homemade hot chocolate. She even keeps a secret stash of mini marshmallows hidden in the cupboard because she knows they’re my favorite.

Sliding me a mug of the hot drink, she offers me a comforting smile. “I know those eyes. Tell me what the matter is.”

“Nobody said a thing about me being married off to a stranger,” I say, gripping the mug handle until there’s a bite of pain in my knuckles. “Don’t I get an opinion? It’s my life.”

Her smile only saddens. “You’re a Del Rossi, my dear. And your father cares very much about your future because he loves you.”

She must have known about this. What has she heard? I know she eavesdrops. I’ve seen her do it outside of my father’s study. “I know he cares. But what about me and the love *I* want?”

“What about it?”

Shoulders dropping, I shake my head. Maybe love is for fairy tales. Movies. Even the books I’d lock myself in my room to read. I haven’t witnessed it firsthand before, not in the same way I’ve read about or watched in film. I don’t think my father ever felt the same way after my mother passed away in a tragic car accident when I was four. Maybe selfishly, I’d always assumed he never felt the way for Leani as he did with the woman I get my looks from.

“I thought...” I loosen a sigh, letting go of the hot chocolate and dropping my hands into my lap. “I thought I would fall in love with the person I marry. Is that too much to ask for?”

Mrs. Ricci is quiet for a minute before patting my hand. “You can still fall in love with him, Georgia. Love takes time to grow, no matter who it’s with. It takes a strong and special woman to change a man. But I think you’re capable. And Luca is young too. There is always time for change.”

I glance down at my fingers, fiddling with the hem of my dress. “I’ve heard bad things about him. What if he doesn’t change for me?”

There’s a momentary pause that has me peeking up to see a pinched smile on her face. “I don’t have an answer for you, I’m afraid.”

What did I expect?

The kind older woman who’s been here for as long as I can remember squeezes my shoulder once. “You didn’t hear this from me, but I happen to know your parents have dinner plans with the Coopers tonight.”

My brows pinch at the information I hadn’t known. Howard Cooperman and his family founded New York City’s most prestigious law firm. My father is always doing business with them now that The Del Rossi Group has grown outside of the metropolitan area of New York. I usually get told to wear something classy whenever we’re having dinner with them because it’s typically at a ritzy steakhouse where the side salad alone is a hundred dollars.

“Alone,” she adds with a small smile teasing the edges of her mouth. “So if you happened to go out for a *small* birthday celebration of your own, nobody here would stop you.”

Instantly, I’m out of my seat and lunging at her, my arms wrapping around her body. “Thank you, Mrs. Ricci.”

She pats my back. “No need to thank me. Personally, I always thought you deserved a little more freedom than you had. Nobody your age should

be cooped up inside for as long as you have been. You're only young and pretty once, and I think that scares your father."

When I pull back, I'm met with a strange look that has her smile wavering. She affectionally pinches my cheek. "I know being a Del Rossi is hard, so I want you to remember that freedom comes with consequences. Whatever choices you make tonight should be ones you stand by because it's right for *you* and *your* future. Understand?"

My nod is minuscule, but I'm not sure I know what she means.

One night.

I have one night before my life changes forever thanks to decisions I had no say in.

One night to make it count.

Mrs. Ricci's throat bobs in a thick swallow like she can see the choice I've made for myself long before I've had time to process it fully myself.

"Go on," she urges, those eyes becoming glassy as she nudges me out of the kitchen. "Go."

CHAPTER FIVE

Lincoln / Seven Years Ago

THE ICE CUBES in the tumbler of amber liquid *clink* against the glass as it's raised to a pair of red lips. They're not the subtle kind of red either, but a sultry shade meant to draw attention to the heart shape of the top lip and the full bottom one. The brown-haired bombshell wants people to look at her, and it's working.

"Macallan," I appreciate, sliding onto the bar stool beside the slender girl who I can only hope is around my age. I set my glass of cheap IPA down on the counter. "That's four-hundred-dollar whiskey you're drinking."

One of her dark tweezed eyebrows arches as she turns, letting her whiskey-colored eyes roam over the length of me inquisitively. It takes her a long moment to answer after giving me a thorough once-over. "A man who knows his stuff. I'd *almost* be impressed if we weren't in a bar."

Chuckling, I give her a cursory glance.

Her long brown hair rests in waves just past her shoulders. She's lean and unafraid to show off her results in painted-on clothes that leave little to the imagination. I'd also bet good money that the tits in her low-cut top are either padded or fake based on the way they sit. And I've had enough girlfriends in the past to know what expensive perfume smells like.

This woman wreaks of materialism.

Not usually my type, but a guy can look.

And I am. Thoroughly.

"Are you finished?" she asks, taking another slow sip of the top-shelf drink, her lips wrapping along the edge and pulling my attention back to their fullness.

I flash her a grin, unfazed by being caught.

Beautiful and sassy.

A dangerous combination.

"What's your name?" I ask instead of indulging her.

“Georgia,” she drawls, the southern accent she uses either watered down or fake. There aren’t many southern belles that settle near the city because it’s a different atmosphere here in Middle Point. You’d have to do well or know the right people to live on the outskirts of the Big Apple.

Those amber eyes lined skillfully with makeup flicker between my fresh buzz cut, the same style I’ve worn since getting out of the military, and my lopsided grin. “Georgia Del Rossi.”

All I do is watch her. The last name rings a bell, but I can’t place it.

Her eyes lift to my hair again before she dismissively turns forward in her seat, picking up the glass and glancing at the dive bar’s TV, playing a sports game I’m sure she doesn’t give a shit about. “Why do you ask, Officer?”

This time, I flash her a grin that she ignores completely.

“What gave me away?” I ask, still impressed that she’s drinking her whiskey neat without so much as making a face as it goes down. Not even my friends can handle doing that without bitching about the burn.

Her eyes stay trained in front of her, her body stiff as she watches the game. “I can spot a cop a mile away. You all look the same.”

Swiping at my lips to hide my growing smile, I nudge her arm with my elbow. “Familiar with law enforcement?”

Finally, her gaze shifts back in my direction, those eyes absentmindedly raking over me. Their path warms my skin the same way my third IPA does, and I like it. Way too much. “I’d wager to guess that I’m better acquainted with Captain Chamberlin than you are.”

I’m impressed that she knows the captain’s name, and I’m not entirely sure that’s a good thing. “In this profession, that’s probably not a bad thing, sweetheart,” I muse, knowing any officer who’s had a run-in with the captain probably isn’t going to be employed for much longer if Chamberlin can help it. “And, for the record, I work for the sheriff’s office, not under Chamberlin with the State Police.”

Her tongue darts out, dragging along her bottom lip as she nods once. “Ah. So you’re on the low end of the totem pole then,” she answers plainly, lifting her drink to her lips to hide a secretive smile.

The challenge in her eyes only sparks my own, and I can feel my dick twitch from the banter. Damn, I need to get laid. Hallman, one of the deputies I work with, has been hounding me about letting him set me up with his girlfriend’s friends, but I never take him up on it. I’ve been set up

before where the outcome isn't desirable for anyone, and all it does is make things awkward when it doesn't work out.

"I don't know if I'd say that," I reply with a flirty smile. "Our handcuffs work the same at the end of the day. Care for a personal demonstration?"

Even under the dim lighting, I can see the faint pink settle into her cheeks that has nothing to do with the makeup she caked onto that pretty face. It's a reaction that only encourages me.

Leaning in to crowd her personal space, I drop my voice. "I think you'd like that, Georgia Del Rossi."

My eyes go to where her throat bobs, half of my lips curling upward at the way she leans into me almost subconsciously. "Who likes being put into handcuffs?"

"You'd be surprised."

Her cheeks turn redder as her body shifts closer. I don't think she realizes she does it, but I do. You can always figure out if somebody is interested based on their body language. Her legs are slightly turned toward me, angled in a way that invites more.

"You haven't asked me for my name," I point out, taking a swig of my beer.

"I don't care what it is."

Humming thoughtfully, I watch as her eyes dip to my mouth and back. When she realizes I caught her, her bottom lip draws into her mouth.

I bump her foot with mine. "I think we both know that's not true."

She stares down at her drink, which is nearly empty, before looking at the time on her phone. I wonder if she's about to make an excuse as to why she has to leave or tell me to go fuck myself.

"It's Lincoln," I tell her, holding out my hand.

Her gaze dips down before peeking up at me through her lashes.

"I don't bite." I wink. "That hard."

Narrowing her eyes, she takes my hand and squeezes it gently. Her painted pink nails are sharp, digging into me as she tightens her hold in challenge. "There are plenty of other women here for you to flirt with, Lincoln."

"True," I appease, my thumb brushing the back of her hand. "But then you'd get jealous. Wouldn't want that, would we?"

Pulling back her hand, she grabs the rest of her drink and downs it in one go. Her hair cascades behind her as she takes the drink like a shot. It

turns me on. I know women who can handle their alcohol but never whiskey. Especially not one of my favorite kinds.

My eyes go to her hair, and my fingers twitch with the desire to wrap around it. I wonder if it's as silky as it looks. If she'd like it if I pulled it. The possibilities are endless.

"Why me?" she asks, sliding the empty glass toward the bartender.

Good question. "Why not you?"

Georgia doesn't answer. Instead, she grabs the purse hanging from the back of the chair and sets it in her lap, digging through it and pulling out a tube of red lipstick.

I watch as she reapplies, my eyes tracking the movement along her plump bottom lip before she rubs them together. I picture what they'd look like wrapped around my cock. Would they leave a stain? God, I fucking hoped so.

"I've never seen you here before," I note. The Barrel has a specific clientele—cops and bikers being the main two. Once in a while, criminals will show up. I've been offered drugs almost as much as I've been offered blow jobs here. I haven't taken up either offer, though there were times I was tempted for the latter.

She sets her lipstick back into her purse and pulls out a black credit card, sliding it over to the bartender. It's not her name on it but a man's name. Nikolas. Her father? "My friend and I were supposed to go out together, but she bailed on me for a guy."

My answer is genuine. "I'm sorry."

She shrugs, waiting for the receipt and signing her name on the bottom. She stares at it when she says, "It's officially my birthday."

I look at the clock. It's midnight—12:02.

"Happy birthday," I tell her almost immediately. "How old are you?"

Her lips tilt up slightly. "Twenty-one."

"And they served you?" I question. The Barrel tends to be pretty lenient, so I'm not surprised. But they also got hit with a massive fine after they were raided and checked for serving underaged people a few years back. The department that did it got over fifty fake IDs from the clientele that night. They had to close for a few months before reopening under new rules.

Georgia puts her card away before turning to me with watchful eyes. "What are you going to do, Officer? Arrest me?"

A thoughtful noise rises up my throat as I picture her in handcuffs. *Only* handcuffs. “I guess we’ll see how the night goes.”

Her teeth bite down into her lip again, suppressing a smile.

I lean my arms on the edge of the counter. “Do you want another drink? On me, of course.”

My salary definitely doesn’t cover expensive top-shelf liquor, but I could probably scrape together enough for a glass of blue label.

“No.” Her lips curl downward. “Thank you,” she murmurs, almost as an afterthought.

Sadness dulls those unique eyes.

“What is it that you want for your birthday, Georgia?”

When her gaze finds mine, there’s indecision in the hues that roam over my face. “I don’t think you can give me what I want.”

Curiosity blooms in my chest. “Oh? And what is that?”

For a long moment, Georgia is silent. Contemplative, perhaps. Her tongue dips out, trailing over the seam of her lips again. I watch each little movement, being taunted by her whether she knows it or not. “I want to escape.”

My mind comes up with at least three different positions I’d like to put her in, making me a hell of a lot warmer than before. If an escape is what she wants, I’ll give her one. “I think I can help you.” Brushing a piece of hair behind her ear, I ask, “So the real question is, do you want to go to your place or mine?”

She swallows again, stares at me, and then down at her purse. I’m not sure what she’s thinking for the few moments of silence before she picks up her phone, does something on it, and then tucks it away. When she stands, I’m at eye level to her chest.

My ears perk up at the magical word that comes next. “Yours.”

I let reason evade me as I lead her out of the dive bar and toward my motorcycle parked off to the side. When we stop next to the Harley, I offer her the only helmet I have and say, “Trust me,” when I see the skepticism on her face.

“I’ve never been on one before.”

I’m half-tempted to make a sexual joke, but something in me softens when I see the nerves on her face. “I won’t let you fall. Okay?”

She looks at me, wariness tilting her lips.

Then, under her breath, I hear, “One night.”

I help her put the helmet on before she hesitantly climbs onto the back and wraps her arms around me.

Twenty minutes later, we pull up to my apartment building. I wish I weren't riled up from something as simple as her arms around my waist, but the second she touched me, my dick jumped to life, straining behind the layers of clothing, knowing it's moments away from sinking between a pair of sexy thighs.

As soon as we're off the bike, I help her out of the helmet, grab the back of her neck, and pull her into me for a clashing kiss until a startled noise rises from her. I take advantage of her open mouth to explore it, letting my tongue and teeth wander and play and nip.

When I pull back, I tip her head back by her hair to look me in the eye. "You're going to do exactly what I say, and if you're a good girl, I'm going to let you come. Do you understand?"

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, a shaky breath exhaling from her parted lips. When she nods, it's the green light I need to give us both some much-needed relief.

I put a little more pressure on her hair. Silky like I thought. It's going to look great around my hand as I watch her deep-throat me. "I didn't hear you, sweetheart."

"Yes," she gasps as I dip my head to the crook of her throat and nip the skin above her pulse.

I lick the spot I bit and feel her shiver under my touch. "Good. If an escape is what you want, then you and I are about to have a very long night ahead of us."

As soon as the front door clicks closed behind her, her back is against it with my mouth on hers. She's responsive, her hips arching against mine that pin her between me and the wood. My hands grip her sides, sliding over the perfect curve of her ass as hers slowly explore my back, mapping out every inch until they find their way to my hips and hesitate to go any lower.

Biting her bottom lip once hard enough to get a stifled gasp, I trail my lips over to her ear and do the same to the lobe while my fingers grab hold of the hem of her shirt. Breaking apart, she lifts her arms for me to strip her, her black bra soon following behind the other piece of fabric thrown somewhere behind me onto the floor.

Definitely not fake, I note of the perky round breasts that my palms greedily knead. Pinching the nipples that pebble in the cool air, I harden

when I hear the subtle noise Georgia makes.

“Do you like that, pretty girl?” I ask, playing with her nipples as her jaw quivers. Lust and something else coats her face. Nerves? No. Somebody like her, as beautiful as her, couldn’t be nervous.

Dipping my head, I take one of the hard buds into my mouth and suck, getting another drawn-out moan from her as she threads her fingers through my hair. I allow her to play, to comb through what little is on my head, and trail her fingers downward to mold around the back of my neck, squeezing, massaging, then lowering to my collarbone as if trying to figure out where to leave them.

Moving from one breast to the other, I work skillfully to undo her jeans, slowly sliding them and the thin scrap of black material she calls panties down her thighs. A matching set. She knew damn well what she was doing when she walked into the bar.

When she’s bare to me, I step back and take her in. “Beautiful,” I murmur under my breath. Her hands move to cover her before I stop them. “Don’t. I want to see you. Better yet—” I drop to my knees with a devious smirk on my face as I look up at her. “I want a taste.”

“What do you—”

She doesn’t get the question out before my lips graze over the carefully groomed area between her thighs. Her words get caught in her throat as my tongue darts out, doing exactly what I tell her I will.

Within minutes, she’s panting over me, one of her legs draped over my shoulder where I put it for better access and all but clenching my head as I massage her ass with my palms while licking, flicking, and sucking the nerves that build her to the brink of insanity.

And I fucking love it.

Her sweet taste.

Her desperate noises.

The way her body responds to every little thing I do to it. Her sensitivity drives me up a wall, and before long, I’m so painfully hard that my cock is practically begging for relief. So, I give it what it wants.

It takes seconds to discard my clothes as I guide Georgia to the couch, guiding her on her hands and knees on the cushions and stuffing two pillows under her stomach so she’s ass up in the air. And damn, is it a great fucking view.

Humming, I cup her and lean down, biting one of the cheeks. “If we had more time, this ass would be mine. You’d be begging me to fill it.”

Her eyes quickly bolt over her shoulder, panic widening the bourbon-colored orbs.

Chuckling, I caress the red spot I left with my teeth. “Don’t worry. We’ll save that for another night. I want to make sure you’re good and ready for me when I claim your ass. Until then, your pussy is mine.”

Cementing the statement, I line myself up behind her and fill her in one fluid motion until I’m seated in the tightest, hottest heaven that I’ve ever felt before.

Georgia freezes, making a garbled sound muted by the couch cushion she buries her face into as I pump into her. Her hand reaches out, gripping the edge of the corduroy fabric until her knuckles turn white. At first, I think the noises she makes are hot—out of control, like she’s trying to hold them back because she’s embarrassed.

But then I look down and notice the blood.

“Did you get your...?” I stop myself when I see the smear of red on her thighs, then realize how tense she is. I’ve seen it before, in high school, when inexperience was something I shared with my first girlfriend. “Georgia...”

Very gently, as gently as possible, I pull out.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whisper, staring down at the blood caked on my dick. Helping her turn onto her back on the cushions, I see the vulnerability in her glassy eyes that wasn’t there before.

She swallows, experimentally moving and wincing at the pain I created between her thighs moments ago. She closes her eyes, squeezing the lids once before opening them to meet mine. The fresh glaze of tears kills me. “Because in the family I was raised, virtue is everything.”

I study her face, swiping at a fallen tear as it rolls down her cheek with the pad of my thumb. “What does that mean?”

It’s my job to read people; I never would have guessed that she hadn’t done this before. She came to the bar with a purpose. Gave me that look—the *take me home* look that instantly hardened my dick. Hell, she was wearing matching panties.

She lets out a quiet breath and wraps her bare legs around my waist, pulling me back down to her. “It means I’m *free*.”

She leans up and pauses only a moment before she kisses me, using the heels of her feet to push me back in, where I'm already nudging at her entrance. I can feel her lock up, her body flinching as she arches up to allow me in deeper, past the pain from the first time.

"Are you sure?" I ask against her lips.

She loosens a small breath before nodding, experimentally bringing her lips back to mine and exploring my mouth.

The invitation is all I need, though my movements are far more calculated this time. My kisses become gentler, coaxing her to relax as my hand finds its way back between her thighs to toy with her nerves and loosen her up. "I'll make it up to you. I promise."

Her little gasp as I tweak her clit is the response that stirs something primal inside me, and I spend the next hour making sure her body is sated before burying myself inside her fully again, letting her search and explore and feel comfortable with every position I put her in throughout the sleepless night.

It means I'm free.

I fall asleep thinking about those words.

When I wake up to my phone going off well after the sun has risen, I feel the cold sheets beside me and call out to her groggily.

I sit up and look around and realize I'm alone.

The only thing left of her is the scent on my pillows and the blood droplets on my sheets.

CHAPTER SIX

Lincoln / Present

THE CRINKLE OF the paper on the examination room table fills the silence of the small room as heavy footsteps and light laughter fill the other side of the door. Shifting for what seems the third time since I was brought in here, I lift my watch and sigh when I realize only five minutes have passed since the bright-eyed nurse, who I'm fairly certain was hitting on me, told me the doctor would be in soon.

Knee bouncing, I try convincing myself not to get pissed. Doctor Lucero is usually on time, so today is an oddity. He knows I don't like being kept waiting and have better shit to do than sit here in a cold-ass room that smells like cleaner and bad news.

I hate the doctor's office. Hate the hospital worse. Nothing good ever happens here. You go in, pay money for somebody to either tell you that you're fine, dying, or somewhere in between, and then get sent on your way after waiting for what seems like forever. If hell exists, mine would look like this.

Finally, after another five minutes, my doctor knocks on the door and walks in.

Dr. Lucero gives me a withered smile, extending his hand toward me to shake. "Good to see you, Lincoln," he greets, dropping my hand, sitting, and rolling his stool over to me. He scans his badge at the computer to sign in and clicks a few buttons. "Although, I'd rather see you on the golf course or anywhere else if I'm being honest."

"You and me both." I chuckle halfheartedly. "Maybe you can help me get back to the country club. My swing needs some work. Heard you play a hell of a game, so I could use some pointers."

Buttering him up certainly can't hurt, and I'm willing to do what I need to for him to sign off on my paperwork. I woke up today with a purpose, and dammit, I was going to accomplish that. His signature is a big step in the direction I need to get back to work full-time. I need to be hands-on

again, taking pictures and searching crime scenes for evidence. Interviewing witnesses and suspects. Not helping my coworkers with their paperwork or making phone calls to the DA's office about cases I couldn't give less of a shit about.

"My handicap isn't what it used to be," he admits, still smiling. "But I haven't lost it yet. One day, we'll have to go out together."

One day. Meaning not now. "Is that your way of saying things haven't been healing the way they should be?"

Dr. Lucero's smile doesn't go anywhere. "I wouldn't say that necessarily. The wound itself has healed quite nicely, but the MRI scan you had done a few days ago showed that the muscles surrounding it are struggling to recover the way we'd hoped."

My eyebrow twitches. "What does that mean? You said before that full recovery usually takes three months. It's been five, doc. Almost six. I did physical therapy when you asked. I took it as easy as I could until my parents drove me mad. I'm in pain, but it's not nearly as bad as it was. That has to mean something."

Lucero pats my leg before standing and moving the gown off to the side to get a better look at the ugly scar mere inches from my heart. Everybody who saw me in the hospital when I was admitted after the incident said I was lucky, but I knew what most of them didn't—that somewhere else in the hospital was a cop in a body bag.

Don't go.

"Our concern is that the muscles may never return to their full functionality. It's not impossible, given the extent of the injury. The bullet caused a significant amount of damage when it entered—"

"I know where it entered and the damage it caused," I cut him off angrily. "What I want to know is when I can get signed off to go back to work. Are you telling me this is going to make that harder?"

Dr. Lucero pauses, giving the injury one last look, before putting the gown back into place and sitting. "Do you want me to be blunt with you?" he asks. When I nod once, he sits up straighter and says, "Considering this isn't your dominant arm, I can't give a clear reason why you *can't* go back to work. Eventually."

Hope has my shoulders easing, but the look on his face tells me not to get ahead of myself.

“However,” he adds, eyeing me, “there can be permanent damage in your left arm if you don’t consider more physical therapy or even another surgery.”

The answer comes easy. “No.”

“Lincoln—”

“In the last five and a half months, I’ve had three surgeries. If I didn’t have good health insurance, I’d be in massive debt right now that I wouldn’t even be able to pay off because I haven’t been able to work the entire time.” I grip my knees. “Doc, I need to get back to work. I don’t want to be sitting behind a desk or picking up lunch orders or helping with inventory. I’m losing my mind there.”

Sympathy masks his face. “I know it’s frustrating—”

“You’re damn right it is! This is my *life*. I’ve been fucked enough over the past few years. I don’t need any more bullshit that takes away the one thing I have left.”

He doesn’t flinch at my raised voice or try telling me what I want to hear. Instead, he dips his chin in acknowledgment and tells me the facts. “I can’t sign off on your paperwork until you pass your physical. Once you do that, I have no reason to hold you back. I want you to get back to normal, Lincoln. I do. You deserve it. But I need to make sure that I’m not putting you, or anybody else, at risk by not doing my job and making sure you’re good enough to go back one hundred percent.”

As much as I hate it, I know he’s right. If I were him, I’d do the same thing. If he signs off on false pretenses and I get into an altercation that gets anyone hurt because I’m unable to perform basic maneuvers, it’ll fall back on him as much as me. “So, when can I get the physical scheduled?”

Dr. Lucero stands. “You can make an appointment at the front desk when you leave. But I really do suggest at least another month of physical therapy.”

Sliding off the table, I peel off the gown and put my shirt back on. “No offense, doc, but I’ve done enough therapy for a lifetime. Not sure how much more of that I can take either.”

“It’s for your benefit,” he reminds me. “But I can’t and won’t force you to do what you don’t want to. Just remember what I advised you.”

The stiff nod is all he gets in reply, earning me a saddened smile as he scans me. He’s known me for a long time—almost my entire career in law

enforcement when my last doctor moved out of state with his family. He knows I love what I do and need it in my life right now.

But that doesn't stop him from saying the same thing he's told me once before. "I know this isn't what you want to hear, but retiring early is an option too. I know you said you were given the paperwork. I could write you a letter that backs up the medical necessity if the time comes."

The suggestion isn't as insulting coming from him as it was my boss back when I had little hope of recovering. But I'm not nearly as bad as I was then. There's still hope.

"I'm not you," I answer stiffly, grabbing my wallet and phone from the counter and sliding them into my back pocket.

"No," he agrees, opening the door. "No, you're not."

His eyes are full of unspoken sympathy that's clear in his tone, like he thinks I'm making the wrong decision. He knows it's not his place to say one way or another. He also knows I wouldn't listen to him even if he told me what I should do.

So, he doesn't bother. "If you have any questions or concerns, you know how to reach me."

I know he's doing his job, but I can't help the irritated feeling that creeps under my skin the entire rest of my day. Especially when the next available appointment I can get isn't until January.

Goddamn January.

That's another three months of sitting around with my thumb up my ass waiting to get my life back together.

Normally, when my bad mood strikes, I go to Georgia. She also distracts me enough to get me past it. I hate to admit it, but she still grounds me.

And no matter how badly I want to turn when I pass her road, I keep driving.

And driving.

And driving.

Until I get to the place where we first met.

"Your usual?" the bartender of The Barrel asks as I slide into my regular spot at the counter.

My eyes go from the stool where the brown-haired girl who changed my life had once sat over to the shelf of liquor. "Give me a glass of Johnnie Walker," I tell her, pulling out my credit card.

Her eyebrows raise at the request, then the corners of her lips. She used to serve Georgia too, so she knows where the order comes from.

“That kind of day, huh?” she guesses, setting the glass in front of me.

I take a sip. “You have no idea, Shelly.”



MY MOOD IS still shitty days later when I sit down on the green suede couch. Arms crossed, I wait silently for the brunette to sit across from me and adjust her glasses.

“Where did we leave off?” the good doctor asks, setting her notebook on her lap. I’m sure if she looked at it, she could remember exactly where we stopped the last time.

Leaning back, I say, “I believe you were picking at old wounds.”

The softest chuckle comes from her, a welcoming sound that perks my ears up. “I do have a tendency to do that.”

Draping an ankle over one of my bent legs, I settle into the cushions. “Don’t you know wounds will scar if you keep touching them?”

One corner of her lips pulls up. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about this profession, it’s that everybody has scars in some form. Whether they’re visible or not.”

“Deep.”

Her eyebrows go up expectantly, as if I’m just supposed to spill my guts to her without any type of foreplay. When she realizes she’s not getting anything, she breaks the silence. “There’s nothing wrong with being divorced or feeling a certain way about it.”

My eyes briefly go back to her ring finger before I look up again. “Are you speaking from personal experience?”

“We’re not here to discuss me.”

Evasive. A thoughtful noise rises up my throat. “I’ve never been good at opening up to people either,” I tell her, lifting my good shoulder. “My first girlfriend said I was emotionally unavailable. I believe she also used the word cold.”

My therapist stares at me for a moment before jotting down another note. “You must have felt comfortable enough to open up to your ex-wife.”

The non-question makes me smirk. She's smart. Not asking me directly what made me open up to Georgia, but still keeping the door open for discussion. I've used that tactic before when I've questioned perps at the station. The trick is getting them to offer you the information without having to ask anything at all.

"You ever think of becoming a cop?"

She smiles a full-blown smile, not one of those small teases that I like pulling from her. It's pretty—brightens her face. I like it. "No. I could never do what you do. I've always been a behind-the-scenes kind of gal."

"I'm sure the people you deal with aren't always easy," I comment. "It's probably not as different as you think."

God only knows what goes on in her clients' lives. I've dealt with some interesting people in my time—people who make a lot of dumb decisions that hurt them and others. At least I can do something about it by getting them help or walking away if they refuse. I can't imagine having to sit here and listen to people drone on about things that I can't change unless they're willing to put the effort in to make a difference.

She shakes her head. "No, they certainly aren't always easy. In fact, most of my clients are quite...stubborn." Those lips twitch upward as she looks at me. "But I wouldn't want to do anything else. This is what I worked hard for, and I'm proud to be here."

"Even on days you're with people who don't want to be?" I doubt, brows arching in genuine curiosity.

The good doctor smiles. "Especially then. I've found that everybody is seeking help in their own ways. Even my most cynical clients get something from these sessions. Sometimes, it's as simple as a person to talk to. That makes a big difference when people least expect it."

I think about that as I study the room to avoid looking at her. I can feel her eyes on me as I examine the walls and decorations she put out at the start of fall.

Scraping a palm down my jeans, I say, "I didn't open up to her right away."

She silently stares at me.

"Georgia," I elaborate. "Our relationship started on...unique circumstances. I wanted to help her because I was the reason her world seemed to flip upside down. I never thought..."

I never thought she'd go and turn mine upside down.

Her pen reappears in her hand. “Tell me about it,” she replies softly.

I drop my head back on the top couch cushion and stare up at the drop ceiling. “Where do I begin?”

“How about you start off where you ended things last time?” she suggests.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lincoln / Seven Years Ago

I STARE AT the letter my mother passed me as soon as I walked into their house for Saturday brunch, rereading it three different times to make sure I'm not hallucinating.

"I got in," I murmur, shaking my head in disbelief at the academy invitation. Slowly, I peel my eyes away from the letter to where my parents are waiting with eager expressions across the kitchen.

My mother's blue eyes brighten as she clasps her hands together, and pride illuminates my father's familiar face that he all but cloned when they had me. He says, "We knew you would, son. When do you leave?"

Scanning the paper, I blow out a breath. The next academy is soon. "Three weeks."

Less than a month to get my affairs in order, including putting in my notice for work. Maybe they'll let me take leave just in case the academy doesn't work out. Not everybody makes it through. I work with a couple of people who barely got past the first month of the grueling physical training the instructors put them through. Then again, they weren't in the military, being punched in the gut and run ragged for doing dumb shit the way I was for four years.

Mom walks over and wraps her lean arms around me. "I'm so happy for you, Lincoln. You've always wanted this."

I wrap an arm around her back, encasing the small woman who put up with my shit despite probably wanting to put me up for adoption a time or two.

Dad joins us, patting my shoulder with a smile that matches Mom's. "Let's skip brunch and go somewhere to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" my little sister asks, walking into the room, staring at her phone. The dark-haired, blue-eyed girl is a perfect mixture of our mother and father, unlike me, who looks like my father's brown-haired, brown-eyed doppelgänger. Mom used to say we looked like the decedents

of Humphrey Bogart, but I think that's just because her favorite movie is *Casablanca*.

Dad and I have the same masculine, gruff features, whereas Hannah has the softness of my mother, which makes Dad nervous about her getting older. He says I'll have to instill the fear of God into the teenage boys she goes to school with down the line, but I think he's more than capable of doing that himself. His gun case is on full display in the living room, and he's already told her he's not afraid to use them on pimply-faced preteens.

"Your brother got accepted into the police academy," our mother chimes.

Hannah finishes texting somebody on the flip phone she convinced Dad to buy her before sliding it into her pocket. "Cool. Does that mean I can have your apartment while you're gone?"

I snort at the eleven-year-old. "No chance, pipsqueak."

"But you won't even be there!" she points out, getting a soft chuckle from our dad and a disapproving sigh from our mother.

I'll be staying on campus for the next thirty weeks, sharing a room and bathroom with God only knows how many people. Just like the military. I can't say I'm looking forward to it, but I know the end game will be worth it because this is what I've always wanted.

"I need somewhere to come back to on weekends, Hannah Banana," I answer with a shrug, reaching over and messing up her hair until she bats my hand away. "And I'll only be gone a few months, not years. What's an eleven-year-old going to do with a whole apartment? You can't even cook your own dinner."

"I'm almost twelve," she grumbles, fixing the hair I made out of place. "And I can make macaroni and cheese...in the microwave."

I hold up my hands. "I stand corrected. I should have a spare key made for you, stat."

The sarcasm isn't lost on her as she glares at me, which only fuels my amusement. At eleven—*almost twelve*—she acts more like a teenager than she does her age. God help my parents when she really is full of hormonal angst at fifteen the way I was. If they thought I was a handful, I have a feeling the girl who barely comes up to my chest is going to give them a run for their money.

"What about the steakhouse?" Dad suggests, grabbing his wallet from the counter.

Hannah whines, “I don’t like the steakhouse. And I promised Rosie that I would become a vegetarian with her.”

My parents and I look at the sixth grader in stunned silence. How the hell does she even know what a vegetarian is? And why would two eleven-year-olds even want to eat that way all of a sudden?

“Han, your favorite food is chicken nuggets,” I remind her, dumbfounded. “Your two main food groups in life are macaroni and cheese and chicken. I don’t think you’d survive on anything else.”

Mom pinches the bridge of her nose. “I knew I shouldn’t have let her go on that field trip. They went to a farm last week, and she fell in love with the animals.”

Dad laughs, nudging Hannah. “Tell them about the cow.”

Mom shoots him a scolding look before turning to me and putting a hand on Hannah’s shoulder. “She asked the tour guide what one of the cow’s names was, and he said it was—” She covers my sister’s ears and spells out, “L-U-N-C-H.”

Hannah still hears her, moving Mom’s hand away from her. “It was *Lunch*, Lincoln! I didn’t get it until Bobby told me they were going to *eat her*. She was all alone in a tiny pen waiting to be taken away to be made into *cheeseburgers*.”

Dad’s eyes water, trying not to laugh, which doesn’t make keeping a straight face easy. Clearing my throat, I ignore my father’s reddening face and say, “That, uh, that’s rough. But you do realize hamburger and chicken are two different animals, right?”

“Duh.” She crosses her arms. “Me and Rosie agreed to never eat meat again in honor of our friend.”

Their friend. I can’t with this kid. She’s always had such a kind heart.

“I give it a week,” I murmur to Dad under my breath.

He grins. “I give it a day.”

Mom shoots us a look. “Behave you two,” she chides, turning to my sister. “The steakhouse is your brother’s favorite, and we want to celebrate his achievement. I’m sure they’ll have other options that aren’t meat. Last time we went, they had macaroni and cheese and salads.”

Hannah makes a face. “I don’t like salad. Dad says that’s rabbit food.”

Dad shrugs when Mom shoots him a look. “It is.”

Hannah relents to the idea with a sour expression pinching her nose. “Fine, but when Lincoln becomes a real cop, he better make lots of money

so he can spend it on me.”

“Hannah!” Mom scolds.

I snicker. “A real cop,” I repeat to myself. Why does that make me think of a certain brunette who’s been in the back of my mind since I woke up alone two days ago? I flick Hannah’s nose. “*If* I make it through the academy, I’ll be sure to buy you something nice with my first check.”

“You *will* make it, baby boy,” Mom reassures, patting my chest as she reaches for her purse hanging off the chair. “Now, let’s stop with the theatrics and go get something to eat.”

Dad and I are the last ones out the door, his hand on my shoulder as he says, “You’ve become quite the young man. I’m proud of you, Lincoln.”

Swallowing, I smile at the person I’ve looked up to for years. I haven’t made life easy on him and Mom. I liked to party with my friends, stay out all night and drink, and got suspended from school one too many times until I was on the brink of expulsion. There were times I’m sure they wanted to ship me off to become somebody else’s problem and were more than shocked when I decided to join the military at eighteen to get my life in order. But they supported me every step of the way, sending me packages from home and letters and calling me any chance they were allowed to.

Hearing him say he’s proud swells the organ in my chest more than I’ll ever admit. Neither one of us is sappy, so I don’t get mushy on him. “I appreciate that, Pops.”

The entire ride to the steakhouse, I peer out the passenger window as the girls talk in the back seat and find myself thinking about Georgia Del Rossi.

What kind of man does *she* think I am?

And, more importantly, why do I care?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Georgia / Seven Years Ago

I REALIZED MY life was going to change the moment I'd allowed somebody to tear past the walls I had all but promised to protect until marriage. Until that moment, I never truly understood the weight of the promise I made to my stepmother about the future or why it was so important to obey.

"There are traditions," Leani tells me, overseeing the way Mrs. Ricci does my hair for a charity event the family is hosting. The curls seem extreme, but Leani tells me it's what Daddy wants, so I suffer through it. "You're old enough to hear the important role you'll play within those traditions. You are to behave like a lady. No misbehaving, no talking out of line, and most vital of all, for when you are older, no handing out your virtue. It is not a gift to be given, but a prize to protect. Do you understand?"

I nod to appease her, even though I don't understand at all.

"One day," Leani says quietly, caressing my cheek, "that virtue will be the key to your future. Our future, Georgia. Us women have the power to dictate just how strong our alliances are by giving it to the right person. Always remember that."

Back then, Leani seemed almost...motherly to me. Like she had a plan for us that I played a key role in. And I always had a gut feeling that the role she referred to was very different than the one she spoke to me about that day.

The memory comes crashing down when my father's booming voice demands, "Where have you been? Your room was empty when we got home from dinner, and nobody knew where you were because your phone was off."

I'd turned it off at the bar because I knew they'd put a tracking app on it. It was when Lincoln made me his offer for an escape that I'd made up my mind, and there was no going back from it. Not now.

Mrs. Ricci shakes her head from where she stands off to the side in the kitchen, silently urging me to keep quiet. She'd tried giving me momentary happiness, and I ruined it with my selfishness. Would she be reprimanded for my actions? I hoped not.

I'm startled when a large hand grips my face, jerking my head up at an angle that hurts my neck. "*What did you do?*" he growls.

I hadn't had time to look at myself in the mirror when I'd snuck out of Lincoln's bed this morning. All I wanted was to leave, knowing I couldn't erase the soreness settled between my legs, or the memories my brain kept replaying of everything Lincoln had done to me. Everything his mouth and fingers and...*other* parts had done to me. I wasn't completely naive. I'd read enough romance books to know exactly what I was getting myself into when I agreed to go home with him, and I knew there would be consequences.

But I never expected my father to shake with rage so violently when I got here.

Guilt bottoms out in the pit of my stomach as Leani walks over and gasps, a hand dramatically flying to her mouth. "Is that a *hickey*?"

Mrs. Ricci makes a choked noise behind my stepmother as she watches my father examine my neck before dropping his hand.

"Georgia," he says slowly, his voice so low that I feel my soul quaking. "What did you do?"

I try to speak, lips parting, but nothing able to come out. When my silence feeds the growing tension in the room, I swear the man in charge can smell it.

"Was it rape?" he asks plainly, those brown eyes nearly black as they find my face. "Tell me it was rape."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up when he says the *r* word. After what feels like an eternity, I finally find my voice. "N-no, Daddy. It wasn't."

Leani closes her eyes, and so does Mrs. Ricci.

Quietly, I add, "It was my choice."

If it's possible, my father stands taller than he was before. His anger, the pure rage, radiates off of him and into me. "You let somebody *defile* you the night you learned you were to be engaged."

It's not a question and not one I plan to confirm. He must sense it. See the way I shift on my feet in feigned confidence. My hair could be out of

place despite the way I finger-combed it in the Uber home. Lincoln had a firm grip on the strands many times last night, so God only knows how disheveled it still looks. Maybe everyone can smell the men's cologne lingering on my clothes that had been discarded so recklessly around a foreign apartment not even twelve hours ago. Last night feels like a fever dream, but I know it isn't when I see the judgmental expression on my father's tight face.

"You little sl—" When he steps closer, I inch back, flinching when I see his hand rise until I hear, "Sir, don't."

Suddenly, Mrs. Ricci is there, stepping between me and the man who swings his hand in our direction.

He uses the back of his hand to slap the housekeeper across the face. The cracking sound is sickening, making me suck in a breath as the beloved employee holds her face from the harsh strike.

"I will deal with you later," he informs her before turning back to me. "After all we've done for you, you whored yourself out to God only knows who. Antonio and Luca Carbone won't want you now that you've tainted yourself. You have *no idea* what you've just done."

Whored myself? I've seen my father angry, but never like this. And I've never, *never* heard him call me such ugly words.

"You ruined everything," he growls, eyes darker than I've seen them before. There's no color that humanizes him as his fists clench at his sides. "You have no idea what you just threw away, Georgia. I have done nothing but protect you, and you ruined it. Just like your mother."

"Daddy, I couldn't go through with—"

"With what?" he booms. "The Carbones are a well-known and well-off family. They have connections, Georgia. Connections you do not want to be on the bad side of. I would know."

Dread cools my skin. "I don't understand."

"And you never will," he says in a low voice that I've heard him use on people he works with when he's about to fire them. It's cool and indifferent, like he's stopped caring about them and their actions. "If you want to see what life is like without me and everything I have done for you, then so be it."

"Daddy—"

"Get out."

The words leave me gaping. "W-what?"

He waves his hand in the air as he storms toward his study. “This is what you wanted, is it not? You wanted to choose, and you did. You did not choose wisely, my dear. You did not choose your family. Your mother. Your future. You serve me no purpose now that the Carbones and their affiliates will back out of the deals I struck for the sake of our future. So I’d suggest you get out of my house before I disown you completely.”

Mrs. Ricci pales, our eyes finding each other as the study door slams closed behind my father, who is no doubt doing whatever damage control he can to salvage his relationship with the Carbones.

Swallowing, I say, “Mrs. Ricci...”

Her face is still red from the impact of my father’s hit, her head shaking to quiet me. “I can’t help you right now, Georgia. You made your decision. I told you there would be consequences based on what you chose.”

Leani’s eyes roam over my face, but she can barely look at me. “I thought you would change things,” she says quietly. “But not like this.”

She walks upstairs, no doubt locking herself in her room like she always does when my father is upset. Soon, she’ll drown her sorrows in a bottle of wine until Mrs. Ricci has to help her.

All I can say to the only person who has ever truly been on my side is, “I’m sorry.”

Mrs. Ricci closes her eyes, wincing when she touches her face. “You wanted out, and you got it. But I have a feeling you have no idea what you just started. I don’t think any of us truly do.”

What does she mean? “I didn’t know he would do this...” She has to believe me. “I couldn’t marry him. Not Luca. Not anyone unless it’s *my* choice.”

The only thing she does is nod with a pinched smile on her face. She reaches out and touches my cheek. “I know, dear. I know.”

Dipping my gaze to the floor, I take a deep breath. “I’ll get some of my things.”

She murmurs, “Be quick,” before disappearing into the kitchen, leaving me in the silent foyer all alone.



THE SMELL OF fresh hair dye burns my nostrils, making me shift on the bed, where I watch Millie apply the new pink color to her strands over the bathroom sink. “You should do something fun with your hair now that you don’t have people breathing down your neck,” she calls out, rubbing in the color with the gloves that came with the box. “We can bleach it. I’m sure it’ll be fine since you have virgin hair.” She giggles. “It’s about time that’s the only virgin thing about you.”

Lips twitching, I touch the ends of my hair and toy with the strands. “God’s favorite,” I murmur more to myself than the girl who befriended me on my first day of private school. She told me she hated wearing skirts and wanted to start a petition to get the girls to wear pants like the boys. She never did, and eventually, she loved the skirts as she got older. She’d even got written up a couple of times when she made them shorter and violated the school’s strict dress code.

My best friend puts her hair up and covers it with a clear cap to contain the mess while the color sits for thirty minutes. “Okay, maybe not his favorite-favorite considering everything that’s happened, but the Del Rossis are stuck up anyway. You’re better off without them.”

She’s clearly forgetting that I am one, not that my father seems to acknowledge that. It’s been five days since he told me to get out, and I haven’t heard a word from him, Leani, or Mrs. Ricci. I even checked my phone to see if it was still working. It was.

He’s proving a point.

That I need him. That the mistake I made was going to cost me. I can feel it already working, no matter the number of distractions Millie tries offering me since I showed up on her parents’ doorstep with a suitcase full of clothes.

I hug my knees to my chest. “Are you sure your parents don’t mind me being here?”

Her mother owns a clothing boutique in New York City that the *New York Times* has written about, and her father is a divorce lawyer in Tribeca. They used to wine and dine with my father and stepmother at the country club where they met, so when I showed up holding nothing but a Gucci bag with only enough clothes for a week or two at their doorstep, they didn’t look as happy as I’d hoped they’d be to see me.

In the short time I’ve been here, there has been whispered talk and forced smiles whenever I pass by the couple who told Millie I could stay for

a few days.

The girl in question waves it off, wiping off the access dye from her forehead with a wet washcloth. “It isn’t like they’re ever around. I’m pretty sure my dad is sleeping with his secretary, and my mother found out about it. If they’re not busy fighting about him always being at work, they’re out pretending to be the perfect couple around their friends.” She makes a gagging noise, doing a full-body shiver. “It’s honestly disgusting.”

I’m quiet, not wanting to point out how uncomfortable her mother looked when she left for work this morning. Mrs. DeMatteo frowned at the borrowed clothes I took from her daughter’s closet before closing the door behind her, which Millie didn’t seem to think twice about before telling me she was going to drive us into town to go shopping since I refused to leave the house the first two days after I showed up.

“Anyway,” Millie goes on, not realizing that I’m barely tuning into her rants. “You’re sort of lucky. My parents are always on my case about something. Yours let you go do whatever you want. That’s most twenty-one-year-old’s dream.”

Being iced out by their family? I highly doubt that. “It doesn’t feel very freeing,” I mumble, walking over to the window when Millie picks up her cell and starts texting someone. I stare out onto the street, my brows pinching, when I see a black car parked on the far side of the road with something sticking out of the rolled-down passenger window.

“Millie?” I ask, a heavy feeling settling into my stomach.

She doesn’t reply. When I look over, I see her smiling over whatever is on her screen. I bet she’s talking to the boy she met in one of her college classes. She’s told me his name, but I can’t remember it. It’ll be somebody different in a month if it’s anything like the boys she had flings with in high school.

Sighing, I turn back to the window and watch the vehicle sit there for ten more minutes before eventually pulling away. The feeling nipping at my stomach never goes away as I turn away from the window and watch my friend’s fingers fly across her keyboard with a big grin on her face.

“You would love college,” she says absentmindedly, her eyes never lifting from her phone. “You always liked the academic stuff, and the girls I’ve met there are actually pretty cool.”

I can’t help but feel like I’m being replaced now that she’s making other friends. She’s mentioned some of the girls who’ve talked her into pledging

at one of the sororities at NYU, but I didn't think she'd gotten close to any of them.

"Sam is telling me about a party happening tonight," she says. "Maybe I can take you now that you're off your dad's leash."

Millie has never filtered her words before, so I'm not surprised she's being so blunt now. But a leash? "I'm not a dog."

All she says is, "Duh."

It's sometime later when she tosses her phone onto the bed, done talking to her new best friends about college stuff that I'll never understand. "Come on, you can help me wash this stuff out. My scalp is starting to itch."

I follow her into the bathroom and wait until she adjusts the water to the temperature she wants before she dunks her head under the faucet.

As I wash out the neon pink, she says, "Seriously, though. You should do something rebellious now that you're free. Blue would be a wild color on you."

I blanch. "I think I'm good on rebellion for a while," I say over the water, nose wrinkling from the ammonia radiating from her head.

"Bitch, please," she says over the running water. "Sleeping with someone is hardly the end of the world. Which I'm totally proud of you for doing, by the way. You pulled a WWMD—what would Millie do. I'm honored. But they'll get over it eventually. It's not like you have to walk around with a scarlet A on your chest."

Millie never understood how the Del Rossi family worked. Half of the time, I didn't either. While she was sneaking out to parties and making out with boys, I was stuck at charity events, forced to mingle with high society. I wasn't allowed to have regular birthday parties with friends but dinner parties with guests who loosely knew Nikolas and Leani, celebrating with people I barely even knew. Some had kids, but most were younger than me or as uninterested in being there as I was. And I never got to have cake or choose which dessert I wanted because Leani always catered from the nicest restaurants she could find, choosing options that no teenager wanted to eat.

I never told Millie about my arranged engagement to Luca Carbone because I didn't want to talk about it. And, frankly, I don't think she would have cared. As far as she knew, I snuck out and slept with a random cop at a bar just because that's what she would do.

If she only knew how much deeper it was.

“I don’t want to dye my hair blue,” I finally tell her, passing her a towel once we’re finished and not going into details.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I frown and wonder what will happen to my hair now that I’m no longer there. Should I cut it? Let it grow? My father loved my long hair because my mother always put it into pretty braids or curls. He never let me get it trimmed past my shoulders.

Millie is right.

I can do what I want now.

Change things.

Cut my hair. Dye it. Experiment with clothes and new makeup. Who’s going to stop me?

My friend bumps me out of the way of the mirror to style her hair. “Give me twenty minutes to get ready, and we can go out to lunch. There’s no food here right now.”

I walk back into the bedroom, glancing out the window to see the same black vehicle has returned. An eerie feeling makes the hair on my arms stand on end.

When Millie walks out of the bathroom thirty minutes later, there’s a frown on her face as she lowers her phone.

“What?” I ask, sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Er...” She looks away, scratching the side of her neck. “My mother said I need to help you pack your things.”

I gape at her, hugging my arms around myself as I draw my feet up to the edge of her mattress.

She sits beside me. “You can’t stay here anymore,” she murmurs, fidgeting with the cell in her hand.

Staring into my lap, I nod silently. What is there to say? I’ve overstayed my welcome. It was only a matter of time before I had to figure something else out. “I’ll get my things.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just...” An apologetic look weighs on her face. She actually looks sorry, which isn’t typical for her. “She said they’d take my tuition money away if I let you stay here any longer. Harsh, I know, but I need that money. I like college and...” Her shoulders lift weakly, as if to say I’m not worth the trouble.

But I get it.

I might have ruined my life, but I don’t want to ruin hers.

She catches my wrist. “Hey. It’ll be okay. Like I said, your dad will forgive you. We live in the twenty-first century. I’ve done way worse.”

Trying to be optimistic, I force a smile that takes every ounce of energy in me. “Maybe you’re right.”

But she’s not.

She’s not a Del Rossi, so it’ll never be the same for her.

She smiles back, but it doesn’t meet her eyes when she glances back down at her phone and reads something on the screen. Clearing her throat, she pushes up from the bed. “I’ll give you some more stuff to wear to get you by.”

She doesn’t ask where I’ll go or if I’ll be okay. I guess Millie has always been that way.

So, I simply let my smile grow in appreciation, look out the window one more time, and see what looks like a flash from the car window still parked on the curb.

Closing the curtain, I begin silently planning where to go, knowing I can’t go back home.

CHAPTER NINE

Lincoln / Seven Years Ago

THE USUAL WING Wednesday tradition that the guys I work with at the deputy's office turns into a farewell celebration at The Barrel.

"All I'm saying is that hell has to be frozen over," Stiles, the eldest deputy muses, nudging me with his shoulder, "for this one to be sober right now."

Jefferson laughs. "He's got goals that go beyond getting laid tonight."

Stiles's eyes flash at Jefferson, the new deputy who the guys like to rift on. Me included. "You telling me you're *not* trying to get laid, Jeffy Boy?"

I grin at Stiles, coming to Jefferson's defense before everyone turns on him. "When was the last time *you* got any?"

Another one of our friends adds, "And your hand doesn't count."

Snorting, I finish the rest of my water. "Take it easy on him, fellas. Stiles can't help it if all the single women at the station are hesitant over his divorce history. Nobody wants to be unlucky number three."

They all laugh, smacking Stiles's back in sympathy and talking about who they think the hottest officers are that they work with. I tune them out, studying the bikers roughhousing by the pool table, who are three sheets to the wind and still likely to ride their bikes home later. I'm ninety percent positive the guy with the scar across his face is one I've arrested for drunk driving before, but I remind myself it's not my problem tonight.

Unfortunately, the focus turns to me, breaking me out of my thoughts. "What about you, Hawk?" Stiles questions, sipping his umpteenth beer of the night. "You haven't exactly been on the prowl. If you don't have any luck getting some, then we're all screwed, pretty boy."

Shelly, the bartender who served me the night I'd taken Georgia home, snorts. I give her one look, a cautious sidelong glance, that has her quieting and going to serve a group of men at the other end of the bar.

"Like Jefferson said, my focus needs to be on preparing for the academy," I answer them, pushing the empty glass away. "Not women."

I haven't been able to stop thinking about Georgia since the morning she left though, and it's annoying as hell. I'm the one who usually does the Irish goodbye, so the role reversal makes her a permanent fixture in the back of my mind.

Shelly clears her throat when she walks back over, a glint in her eyes still. "Another water, Officer?"

Humming, I look at my watch. "One more, and then I should get going."

The guys all protest. "Come on, dude. It's your big night. None of our schedules will line up again by the time your ass is gone. You're going to call it early before the party really starts?"

Typically, I'm the last to leave, and it's not normally willingly. I put up a fight every time a bar closes down or somebody tells me to go home. It was a big source of contention in my last relationship, where things would get heated whenever she'd try to get me out at a reasonable time. I'll admit, she put up with more than most people would in the six months we were together. I couldn't blame her for ending things when she did. I needed to grow up, and she needed somebody more stable. That wasn't me at the time.

I tip the woman who passes me and grab a water before downing at least half of it. "I'd stay but—"

My words are cut short when I see a familiar brunette walk through the door wearing painted-on jeans that sit low on her lean hips and a low-cut top that exposes the curve of her pushed-up breasts.

Damn. She's prettier than I remember her being last week, if that's even possible.

"Shit." Someone beside me whistles. Stiles, I think. "I don't know who that is, but with legs like that, I think I want to know her."

Jefferson looks between Georgia and me, an inquisitive brow raised and a smirk curling his lips when he sees how hyper-focused I am on the girl stopping a few feet inside the doors and skeptically staring at the bikers who are drunkenly catcalling her. "I think someone else is thinking the same thing," he muses, hiding his smile behind his beer glass.

I stand, drumming my hands against the bar top. "I'll be right back, boys."

"Whoa." McAdams halts me, grabbing my arm before I can step forward. "You know who that is, right?"

I don't answer because I don't owe him shit. I like McAdams, but he's a gossip. The more you tell him, the more the rest of the station knows by next shift.

He leans forward, letting go of my arm when he sees the way I glare at him. "That's Georgia Del Rossi." When I have no reaction, he sighs. "There are rumors that her family's construction business has ties with..." His brows go up, waiting for me to catch on.

Del Rossi.

Christ, that's why she sounded familiar.

Didn't her credit card have Nikolas Del Rossi's name on it the night we met? I remember hearing mumblings about The Del Rossi Group, a local construction business serving downstate New York and Jersey, being loosely associated with some heavy hitters in New York City. Last I knew, there were a few insiders spilling names within the five mafia families, and Del Rossi wasn't one of them. Since their informant never brought him up, they focused on more important people.

My voice is low enough to stay between us while the others talk about work shit. "Are you really telling me *that* girl is connected with a family associated with organized crime?"

He holds up his hands. "It's what I've heard. Nikolas Del Rossi's former business partner was making waves with some of the bosses in the city while still dabbling with deals down in Atlanta, where their first business was. Guess there were some conflicts of interest between families that got in the way when his contact in New York heard about who he was working with in the South. They didn't like him outsourcing his business. I don't know all the details. Ask Beauregard. They've been trying to find a way to get Del Rossi since they have his former partner talking to cut himself a deal. From what I gather, they've been doing surveillance on him for a couple years to find evidence."

Beauregard is an investigator who works undercover with a lot of informants. If McAdams heard it from him, it's the truth. And if they've been surveilling them, there's a good chance Beauregard knows about my personal experience with Nikolas's daughter.

"I don't know, man," I murmur, eyes going to where Georgia shifts on her heels and searches the bar for an empty spot.

She seems too innocent for the kind of lifestyle that comes with ties like that. She *proved* she's innocent in more ways than one the first time we met.

Somebody with a family like that could be as soft as her and certainly not as tempting.

Probably against my better judgment, I pat his shoulder. "I'll take my chances."

The guys all hoot and holler as I approach Georgia, where she's stopped, looking around at all the bikers lining the room with tense posture as a couple of them make crude comments and gestures with their hands.

She freezes when she turns to lock eyes on me, hand clenching her purse strap when I slide a hand into my pocket in front of her.

I ignore the idiots I call my friends who are making a scene. "I was hoping to see you again."

Her throat bobs with a thick swallow, and I can't help but wonder if that's nervousness in her eyes. Did she want to see me too? Or is that hopeful thinking?

"I wanted to apologize for the other night," I go on when she doesn't reply. "I had no idea you were a..." Her cheeks turn pink, so I don't finish the sentence. "I can usually read people better."

When she lifts her gaze, I'm pierced with a set of narrow golden-amber eyes. "And what read do you have on me now?"

"You're upset," I state matter-of-factly, scoping out her dilated pupils. Internally, I grin. "But you're also turned on. I bet you're thinking about that night right now. Tell me, Georgia. What was your favorite position?"

Georgia straightens, the heels on her feet making her almost come up to my six-foot-one height. "We're in public."

"Are you embarrassed?"

She doesn't answer, but she does turn red.

She *is*.

Huh.

"Your family seems well-known around here," I offer to gauge her reaction. Her shoulders go back as the grip on her purse tightens. Interesting. "And from what you said, your father has connections with people far above my pay grade."

I think back to our conversation about the captain. That does little to prove her father knows anybody other than a few people of authority in the State Police. He's a businessman who probably mingles to build a lot of connections in the community. Doesn't mean that extends to the mob or anybody else, like McAdams claims.

She crosses her arms, pushing her cleavage up. “Your point?”

I lift my shoulders casually, keeping my eyes above her chest no matter how tempting the mounds are. I remember how perfectly they fit in my hands—how delicious they tasted when I sucked on the pretty pink nubs that had her panting. “My point is that I didn’t know anything about you when we met, and the only thing I know about you now is how you taste and what you sound like when you’re coming.”

A subtle breath escapes her.

“And maybe I want to know more,” I conclude.

Georgia switches her weight from one foot to another, doing another scope of the bar and frowning at the people around us. She sticks out here, and she’s uncomfortable. So why did she come back? I’d like to think it had something to do with me, but I don’t let that go to my ego.

Eventually, her tongue slowly drags across her bottom lip, painted a softer tone than the red they were the first time we met. She’s not here to gain anybody’s attention, not like last time. “The only thing you need to know about the Del Rossis is that their reputation means everything to them. I’ve learned that the hard way recently.”

Her tone changes as her eyes skate around the room, going to the bar where I’m sure my friends are all staring at us.

“Did something happen?” I ask quietly, cop-mode activated as I study her for something I didn’t see before.

An empty smile curls her lips. “You could say that. My father kicked me out.”

I blink, thinking I must have misheard her. “I don’t understand. They kicked you out for what, exactly?”

“For that night,” she murmurs, rubbing her arm. “Apparently, it didn’t take a genius to figure out what happened when I got home.”

I didn’t even know she lived at home. Not that I’m judging. If I hadn’t found my apartment, I would still be too. “You’re an adult. You can do whatever you want.”

When our eyes meet, I see the dulled light in hers as if someone drained them. “Not when you’ve been promised to somebody else. I ruined my father’s plans for me by...*tainting* myself. His words, not mine.”

It means I’m free, she’d said that night. I didn’t get it then, but I do now. “Promised to someone else. As in...You were engaged?” I ask skeptically, a

heavy feeling weighing down my gut. I'm no saint, but I've never intentionally gone after taken women.

"Not by choice," she replies.

I blink.

Blink again.

Is she really suggesting she had an arranged marriage set up by her father? Who does that in this day and age? "And now you're not."

"And now," she responds, adjusting the purse over her shoulder and taking a deep breath. "I am homeless since my friend's family told me I couldn't keep staying with them, jobless because I have no experience other than knowing how to dress pretty and smile for the camera, with no connections of my own. I'm an outcast. But, yes, *Officer*. I'm no longer engaged since that's all you seem to care about."

"It's Lincoln," I tell her.

"You're an officer, are you not?"

"I'm a lot of things, sweetheart," I say easily, getting her cheeks to pinken over the pet name. "And a monster isn't one of them. In fact, I have a proposition for you. Consider it before deciding."

Wariness scrunches her nose. "What proposition could you possibly have to offer me?"

"A place to stay, for one."

Her eyes widen.

"I'll be gone five days a week for the next few months," I explain. The timing really couldn't have worked out better. The academy requires I stay on campus Monday through Friday, but we can go home on weekends. "You'll have an apartment to yourself for the most part. I'll be back on the weekends. My place is hardly what you're used to, I'm sure, but it's something."

All she does is stare at me, clearly speechless over the offer.

"Like I said. Think on it."

A nagging feeling pulls on my gut, one that tells me I probably shouldn't be doing this. But I'm the reason she's in this position. The military shaped me into the type of person who offers help to someone in need. The apartment isn't much, but it's better than nothing.

Eventually, she swallows. "Why?"

"Because I feel a little guilty," I admit, lifting a shoulder dismissively. "But also because I've always had a thing for saving damsels in distress. I

guess it's a hero complex."

"And what would you get out of it?"

"A chance to feel like I'm doing right by somebody, I suppose."

She looks skeptical, not that I blame her. Most guys would probably expect a lot more. If nothing else, sex. But if giving her somewhere safe to go helps her get onto her feet, then I'll do it. If nothing else, it makes me feel better.

Because there's no way McAdams can be right. Most families connected to the mafia are close. They wouldn't kick out one of their own, especially if they know something they shouldn't. It doesn't add up.

"Let me give you my number, and you can let me know what you decide," I say, pulling out a card for work that has my cell listed.

It takes her a minute to accept it, glancing down at the paper. "Lincoln Danforth."

"The one and only."

When she looks up at me, I wink.

She tucks it away in her purse. "I'll think about it."

Her feigned confidence is back, and suddenly, I respect her a lot more. Because it's obvious she's gone through hell, and she's still standing. Still fighting. All for a future for herself.

"You do that, Peaches."

The nickname makes her eyebrows furrow.

"I'll never forget how sweet you tasted," I say, making her gape at the implication. I hope she remembers what it felt like to have my face buried in her pussy, what it was like to look down as I made her writhe until she shattered apart around me. "I'll hear from you soon."

"And if you don't?" she asks as I back away from her and toward my friends.

I grin. "I will."

CHAPTER TEN

Lincoln / Present

I'VE BEEN TO the white colonial-styled home plenty of times over the last ten years, but this time it's different. There's a tension in the air that makes it harder to breathe as I walk up the uneven brick pathway leading to the front door, my heart hammering in my chest as I raise my hand to knock.

But the door opens before I can even hit it, revealing a petite redhead on the other side, like she's been expecting me. I stare at Matt Conklin's wife, swallowing thickly and unsure of what to say.

"It's about time," is how Marissa greets me.

I push past my discomfort and find my voice. "I'm sorry for avoiding you. It wasn't fair of me to leave you suffering alone that way."

She sighs. "Lincoln..." She shakes her head, looking over her shoulder at the brown-haired little boy playing video games on the couch before turning to me again. "I—we were never alone. Cooper and I have had a wonderful support system through it all."

I look from her to her son and then down at the ground. Suddenly, a hand reaches out and squeezes my arm, lifting my gaze. She steps aside to let me in, saying, "I just wish you would have realized sooner that you have people too."

It isn't until I pass her that I see the distinct bump on her stomach. "You're...?"

Her smile turns sad as she rubs her sloped midsection. "We found out a few weeks before the..." She looks down, clearing her throat. "We found out a few weeks before the shooting. He was so excited to be a father of two."

Jesus. Conklin was going to be a dad again. He hadn't said anything to me. When he'd found out about Cooper, I was the first person he told. Not even his parents or hers knew until they did a big reveal during the holidays.

Closing the door behind me, she looks at her son and says, “Look who’s here, Coop.”

My godson turns around, launching off the couch the second he sees me. “Uncle Hawk! Wanna play video games with me?”

I tussle the five-year-old’s hair. “I won’t be able to stay long, kid. Maybe another time. I just wanted to come check on you and your mother.”

“Mommy said you were gonna come by but that you were really busy,” he says, making me look over at Marissa. She shrugs, then nods toward the kitchen for me to follow her.

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner. Why don’t you get back to your game while I go chat with your mom? I’ll make sure to see you before I leave.”

His disappointment fractures my heart, but he nods after glancing briefly at his mom. I follow Marissa into the kitchen and accept the glass of water she offers me. “I’d give you a Corona, but I don’t keep them around anymore. Matt is the only one who liked them.”

I sit down at the table with her, clenching the cool glass in my palm. “Water is fine.”

She studies me, her dark eyes dancing along my face before moving to my left shoulder knowingly. “You guys used to say water was for pussies and drink beer with every meal when you got together.”

Chuckling, I stare at the drink. “The way we saw it, if girls could have mimosas in the morning, we could have beer.”

Marissa rolls her eyes. “Except mimosas barely have any alcohol.”

“Not when we made them,” I muse.

A small smile tugs on the corners of her mouth. Matt had gotten her tipsy a few times when he made her mimosas. “I’m glad you stopped by, Hawk. How are you doing? *Really*. None of those bullshit answers you give everybody else.”

She really wants to know? “I came here to make sure you were okay, not to talk about me.”

She’s quiet for a second before nodding, putting a hand on her stomach, and caressing it lovingly. “Things were rough at first. I didn’t know how I’d do things without Matt because he was such a staple in our lives. He may have gotten on my nerves sometimes, but he was the best husband and father. We made a good team.”

I nod in agreement. “You did.”

“But I remembered how much Cooper needed me,” she says, her voice lower as her eyes go to the other room. “And our little bean. To be honest, I wasn’t sure she’d survive. The stress was too much, and my doctor thought I might have miscarried after the funeral.”

“She?”

Marissa’s smile grows. “Yeah, it’s a girl. Matt always used to say he was terrified of being a girl dad, but I know he would have been a great one. She would have had him wrapped around her little finger from day one.”

I have no doubt in my mind that’s true. “My lieutenant said you stopped by to grab the rest of his stuff,” I note, taking a sip of water to quench my parched throat. “I thought about coming by sooner, but I had no idea what I could have said to you. Nothing would have changed what happened, no matter how badly I wish it could.”

Her eyes go to the table, staring absently for a minute. Then she closes them, takes a deep breath, and lifts her gaze. “I was mad at first. So mad. But not at you. At...life. The world. I didn’t know how it was fair that I lost the love of my life and had to go on raising two children like I was strong. Because I wasn’t. There are still hard days, and it’s been almost six months. If I didn’t have my friends and family here, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Throat bobbing as guilt creeps up it, I set the glass on the table and sit up. “Marissa—”

“I know you.” She cuts me off, her tone firm but soft at the same time. “I know you’ve never handled your feelings well. You tended to shut down and close yourself off to the world like your emotions were a burden. That’s why I kept reaching out, even though I knew you wouldn’t let anybody help you. I lost my soulmate, sure. But you witnessed it. You lost your best friend. Your colleague. And you were hurt trying to get him out of there. We both lost somebody that day and maybe even lost pieces of ourselves along the way. But I’ll always be grateful to you for at least trying to save him.”

Wetting my lips, I shake my head. “I didn’t, though.”

Marissa reaches out and pats my hand. “No,” she murmurs. “But you tried. You could have died too, but it didn’t stop you.”

“It should have been—”

“Don’t,” she stops me, eyes getting glassy. “I don’t want you to do that to yourself. Your life is no less important than his was. Do you hear me?”

How can she say that? “We both know that he had a lot more to live for than I did. That’s all I mean by it. Whether you want me to say it or not, I would have changed places with him in a heartbeat if I could. I should have never asked him to go there with me. It’s...”

It’s my fault.

That’s what I don’t say.

But she knows what I mean.

She looks away, wiping under her eyes with the tip of her finger.

“I came here to say how sorry I am for being such a dickhead all these months,” I tell her, pushing up to stand. “I love you guys like a second family, and I let you down. I let a lot of people down.”

Marissa looks up at me, tears on the brink of falling again as she furiously swats them away and blinks rapidly to dry her eyes. “You’re here now.”

Is that enough though? It doesn’t feel it. “I have to finish mandatory therapy to go back,” I admit. “It got me thinking about you and Cooper and...” I lift my shoulders, feeling the twinge of pain radiating in my bad one. “And everybody that’s important to me.”

Her hand stays on top of her stomach. “You will always have a place here, Hawk. Remember that next time you need someone. Cooper has missed having you around, and so have I. We aren’t going anywhere.”

All I do is dip my chin and slide a hand in the front pocket of my jeans. She smiles at me, cementing the sentiment. It eases the tightrope that’s been holding my heart together for some time.

“Next time you come over, you’ll have to tell me about Georgia,” she says, stretching her legs out.

One of my brows goes up. “What’s there to tell?” I ask, playing dumb.

A knowing smirk lifts half her lips. “I still have friends around who know what you drive and where she lives. Are you going to tell me she keeps having plumbing problems that you go over and help her with? Or are you going to be real with me?”

There’s a sarcastic reply on the tip of my tongue that I swallow. She’d see right past it anyway. “I better go say hi to Cooper before I leave, or he’ll be mad at me.”

She makes a thoughtful noise that sounds awfully like a laugh.

Because she knows damn well that I haven’t quit Georgia.

Not fully.

Not yet.



THE DOOR CRACKS open into the waiting room, where I'm huddled up in an uncomfortable chair, staring at pamphlets on the wall about bipolar and multiple personality disorder, OCD, and a slew of other depressing diagnoses. The doctor I'm slowly getting used to seeing once a week pokes her head in. "I'm sorry I'm late, Mr. Danforth. Come on in."

She seems frazzled, her face feigning nonchalance, but her eyes glazed with something panicked as I step past her.

"Are you all right?"

She closes and locks the door before gesturing for me to take my usual seat. "That's my question," she replies, bemused. "But I'm fine. It's been a long day, is all. Please, sit down."

I take my time making myself comfortable as she walks over to her desk and digs through her bag, resting on the office chair. I take in her body, noting that the clothes she wears do little to complement the curves I'm almost positive are hiding underneath. I see it when she wears skirts and dresses—the feminine form that a lot of guys, including myself, can appreciate.

It's not normal for her to be unorganized, but whatever happened today has obviously jarred her enough to be off her game.

Sitting down at my spot, I watch as she goes through her desk and bag, then studies the space around her until she finds whatever she's looking for. With her back toward me, I see her straighten and pause, and then I hear her take a deep breath to collect herself.

"If you need to reschedule, I'll understand."

She turns to me, a professional smile gracing her face that seems forced. It's a mask I'm familiar with because I wear one too. "I can't let you get out of this that easily," she says, the amusement cutting through some of the other harbored emotions on her face.

When she sits down, she sets the notepad on her lap and settles in.

I study her for a moment. "You forgot a pen."

She looks down and closes her eyes, sighing at the realization.

“I’d hate for you not to be able to write notes about all the red flags I’m waving,” I joke half-heartedly.

On her way back with a pen in her hand, a small smile appears on her mouth. We’re climbing to the double digits, making me think I’ve still got it. I like making women smile, especially when it’s obvious they don’t want to.

“I wouldn’t call them red,” she tells me. “Maybe beige.”

“Maybe you’re color blind,” I counter.

This time, I get a gentle laugh from her. “That could be,” she agrees, settling back into her spot and wiggling her pen at me before setting it on top of her notepad.

She can’t seem to sit still, shifting and fidgeting in ways she never did before.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” I ask again, noticing the slight wrinkles in her silk shirt that’s haphazardly tucked into her black pants. “It’s not my business, but I know when someone is having an off day. I’m practically an expert at them at this point.”

Her smile wavers as she flattens a hand down her shirt as if she knows exactly what I’m noticing. I couldn’t care less about the wrinkles; it’s simply an observation. “I had a pet emergency earlier this morning that ran all day since it’s just m—” She stops herself, her lips twitching. “It was a bit chaotic for me, but everything is okay. I’m here. You’re here. Let’s talk about you.”

I’d rather we not. “It’s hard doing things on your own. I’ve always prided myself on being independent and figuring out solutions to problems, but I found comfort in having somebody to share the burdens with sometimes.”

She tilts her head thoughtfully. “I suppose we’re never truly alone.”

That’s not the first time I’ve heard that lately, is it? “Marissa told me that.” When I see her brows rise slightly, I elaborate. “Marissa Conklin. Matt Conklin’s wife. I saw her earlier this week.”

“How did that go?”

I’ve thought about it a lot this week. “It went better than expected.”

“Did you think it would go badly?”

If I were in her shoes, I’d probably be pissed. But Marissa isn’t me. “I’m not sure if I expected an angry mob with pitchforks or simply an angry

woman throwing some much-deserved heated words at me,” I admit, staring out the window leading to Main Street below us.

We’re two stories up, so the only thing I see is the brick buildings across the road. Middle Point has a historic downtown of old storefronts that have since been converted into apartments above newer businesses on the first floor. It’s a pretty area. Quiet but bustling, especially during leaf-peeping season, when tourists come to see the fall foliage as the leaves begin to change.

When I turn to the woman sitting quietly across from me, I rest my hands on my lap. “Instead of getting reamed out like I deserve, I got a woman who somehow put all of that hurt aside to tell me she was grateful for me. *Grateful.*” I scoff to myself, still unable to let that soak in. “She basically told me I’m not alone and that I shouldn’t beat myself up over what happened.”

The good doctor nods. “I’m inclined to agree.”

My eyes roll. “Of course you are.”

Her pen scribbles across the paper.

“She’s having a baby,” I say, still picturing her round belly. Matt always said he wanted another kid. I told him he was crazy, but he always laughed it off. “*Just you wait,*” he says, *bumping my arm with his elbow.* “*It’s a whole new feeling when it’s your own kid.*”

But that day never came, and I’m fine with it. Kids have never been a priority for me, and that’s probably for the better.

“How does that make you feel?” she asks next, watching as I reminisce.

How do I feel? “Happy for her, I guess. Sad for her too, given the circumstances. She has to raise two kids by herself. Matt will never...” That familiar, warm ball of emotion works its way up my throat. “Matt will never see his daughter walk or talk or do any of the big milestones.”

Because of me, he’s going to miss so much. I don’t know why Marissa isn’t more pissed at me for taking that away from her—from all of them.

“Have you ever considered having children?” she asks, pulling me from my head.

The sky is relatively clear, reminding me that I need to take advantage of the weather to get some things done around the house when I get back. “It was a thought that crossed my mind a time or two, but parenthood isn’t for everybody.”

“Meaning?”

How do I explain this without sounding like an asshole? “You’ve known me long enough to see that I’m a little emotionally withdrawn. If I can’t be emotionally available for a relationship to work, I sure as hell can’t provide the kind of emotional availability a kid needs.”

“That’s very self-aware of you.”

“Or sad.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s sad at all, Mr. Danforth.”

The formality has me staring at her for a second as her pen taps against the notepad. “I *want* to want kids. Most of my friends are married with families. They’re settled down. Happy. I don’t have it in me to get to that point.”

“You don’t have it in you to want children? Or be happy?”

That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? “I was happy once,” I murmur.

“What happened?”

I meet her eyes, leaning back and draping an arm across the back of the cushion. “I let a woman I barely knew move into my life and change it forever.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Georgia / Seven Years Ago

THE APARTMENT IS...QUAINT. I wonder if this tiny one-bedroom is what's in store for my future. If my family cuts me off like my father threatened to, then this may be foreshadowing what's to come.

I could sell things. I know the designer tag on my bag could get me plenty of money on its own, and that's not including the clothes inside; everything from Hermes to Versace fills it. Things I never cared as deeply about the way my stepmother did. She said it was less about self-expression and more about making a statement to society, as if the house we lived in, or the multi-million-dollar business my father ran, didn't let people know the Del Rossis had money.

I've been living in Lincoln Danforth's apartment for five days, and not one person, not even Millie, has reached out. I'd expected my best friend to ask how I was at least once, but the silence I got instead cut deep. I'll admit, she was never great at being my friend. There were times she'd get so caught up in her boy of the week that she'd stop talking to me until things ended with them. Then she'd get mad when I'd call her out for it and give me the cold shoulder until she decided to stop being dramatic. But this was different. She knew my father didn't want me back at the house. She had no clue where I was going to go or if I'd found somewhere safe.

And still nothing.

Mrs. Ricci had my number too. Was she fired for taking the hit meant for me? Or was my stepmother able to save her for stepping in? Leani loved Mrs. Ricci. Despite my father's reminders that the help was just that, Leani treated our housekeeper like extended family. She and I both had a soft spot for the older woman with kind eyes and a warm smile.

My father knew how close I was to her—how she was my sole ally growing up. He was never happy when he found out she'd sneak me food I wasn't allowed to have or go out with her to run errands for a little freedom when I was supposed to be at home. Frankly, I never understood what the

big deal was. But he always made a scene whenever I wasn't locked inside my gilded cage like a princess in a tower waiting for her white knight to rescue her.

He wants to ensure I have nobody.

Nothing.

I'm sure it's his doing that Mrs. Ricci, Leani, and Millie have been radio silent. At least, that's what I tell myself. Because thinking about the alternative, that nobody actually cares, hurts far worse.

Living alone is...odd. Not quite scary but also not liberating either. Every creak in the night, every foreign sound that perks up my ears and stirs me from sleep, leaves it hard to find peace. Lincoln told me the sink faucet in the bathroom leaks sometimes, and for the last day I've heard the faint *drip, drip, drip* coming from that direction without a clue how to make it stop.

Apparently, there are also mice. *Actual* vermin. And when he heard the horrified sound I made after he explained they come in through the baseboard heating, he laughed and told me he'd check the traps when he was back on the weekend.

Traps. There were dead mice in *traps* somewhere in this apartment.

That made sleeping nearly impossible the first night. The second night wasn't much better. I was up almost the entire time thinking I heard something in the walls when it was more than likely my imagination playing tricks on me. By the third, exhaustion had aided me in finally getting at least six hours. And last night, when I'd accepted that my phone wasn't broken after checking it four different times to make sure it received messages, I fell asleep with a heaviness in my heart.

Lincoln had my number too, after I'd called him about his apartment offer. I hadn't wanted to, but I soon realized my options were limited. It was either finding a shelter to take me, tucking my tail between my legs, and going home like my father wanted or this.

Besides giving me the address and telling me when he was leaving so I'd have the place to myself, I haven't heard from Lincoln either. The strange thing is, I don't know whether to be grateful or sad.

Because somebody who's barely more than a stranger was willing to give me a place to stay with no benefits. He doesn't expect sex or even for me to like him. But I think I do. It isn't every day that somebody would give you a place to stay, but he did without thinking twice. And not hearing

a thing from him makes me wonder what exactly I'm getting myself into whenever tightness clenches my stomach.

I recognize the feeling.

Disappointment.

He'd mentioned coming back tonight—that his new schedule was only Monday through Friday, with weekends home. I didn't ask why he was away because I didn't want to push for details that weren't my business, and he didn't enlighten me. But as each day passed by, when I struggled to create meals from his meek pantry and tried ignoring the odd looks I got from his neighbors whenever I went outside to get some fresh air, I started becoming curious about the man whose bed I slept in.

Like what cologne he wears that makes his sheets smell so good. After the first few nights, I got used to the woodsy scent and how it wrapped around me—how the soft cotton T-shirts I borrowed from his dresser cocooned me with the same smell, mixed with some sort of floral laundry detergent that I'd bet money he doesn't do himself.

A girlfriend certainly wouldn't do it, or else I wouldn't be here. Does he hire somebody to clean his apartment and do his laundry? It's cleaner than I'd expect a man's place to be, let alone a bachelor. Mrs. Ricci used to tell me to hold my tongue whenever I wished for a husband when I was little. *"Boys are dirty creatures, Georgia," she tells me as she folds laundry. "You should enjoy not having to deal with them while it lasts."*

At the time, I was excited for the day when I could run my own household that I lived in with whoever I fell in love with—my husband—the person I'd chosen, like my mother and father had before me. I'll never understand how so much changed, or when that distant, naive dream morphed into something completely different.

I suppose it started when I was a teenager when my father would look at me with pain in his eyes and say, *"You're growing up."* He made it seem like a bad thing, and maybe it was.

Maybe he knew when I was thirteen that there would be a day when he had no choice but to pass me along to somebody else. Had he known what would happen when I was twenty-one? I didn't want to believe it.

But I was starting to wonder.

My hands run along the walls, which are all painted the same color beige. There are no pictures or paintings, but at least it's color I didn't have at the Del Rossi house. The furniture there was all the same dark wood, the

walls all the same barren white and covered in hideous family portraits my father would make us sit through. Here, the furniture is mixed-matched. The carpets in the open living room are blue, the tile in the kitchen it leads to is red, and all the cabinets, countertops, and appliances are white.

I've been around The Del Rossi Group long enough to know that everything in the apartment is made of cheap leftover materials the owner used to piece this place together. My father specialized in concrete foundations but had other businesses that spun into contracting and interior design. I used to enjoy listening to his meetings and sneaking into his office to see the blueprints of whatever property they were planning to build.

It was through my father's head contractor that I learned landlords didn't want to invest too much in renovations for their rental properties, so they used whatever materials they had left from old projects, whether they matched or not.

Oddly enough, I like the quirkiness the small space offers. The building is in a quiet residential area of Middle Point, surrounded by families and retired couples who seem...normal. Not controlling or overwhelmed by wealth like my father has become over the past few years. It's a chance to breathe without anybody telling me what to do, what to wear, or how to act.

I miss my father, Mrs. Ricci, and even Leani.

But I'd be lying if I said I hated this.

My thoughts are broken when I hear footsteps coming up to the front door. Heart going into overdrive when I hear two feminine voices from the other side; I bolt toward the bedroom door when the lock is undone and the door pushes open.

A brunette woman with silver streaks in her hair walks in with a little girl behind her carrying a bag in her hands. "—set up in, Oh!" She stops dead in her tracks when she sees me in the corner, her eyes wider than mine as she takes me in.

"I didn't know Lincoln was seeing anybody," the little girl says loudly, looking between me and the woman she looks so much like.

Quickly, I shake my head at them. "Oh. No! No, we're not...I'm not..."

The little girl crosses her arms over her chest and gives me a stare-down that would put Millie's to shame. "Are you a booty call then?"

The older woman's face turns red as her attention snaps to the child. "Oh my God, Hannah! I don't even want to know how you know what that is."

The child, Hannah, rolls her eyes. "I watch TV, Mom. I'm not a baby."

I suck in a deep breath until my lungs stop stinging so much. "I'm not Lincoln's anything," I force myself to say.

"Then why are you in his apartment?" Hannah interrogates, making me swallow my words. "Did you break in?"

Her mother sighs, pinching her daughter's arm. "Excuse her," she tells me with an embarrassed smile. "We were going to surprise Lincoln with some of his favorite cookies before he got home. We didn't know anybody would be here."

"He's never mentioned you," Hannah adds, rubbing the spot her mother pinched.

Her mother closes her eyes, squeezing the bridge of her nose in exasperation.

I'm not sure why, but my stomach dips, knowing I'm a ghost in his life—existed only in his reality. Maybe that's the smartest way. After all, we're nothing to each other.

A blip in the timeline.

Soon, my father will tell me he's sorry and to come home.

"I can leave," I quickly say, cringing when I realize I'm still in the clothes I took from his room. It's clear the oversized T-shirt isn't mine, but all of my other clothes are dirty, and I didn't know where I could go to wash them.

"No, no," the woman says. "Stay. We'll only be a minute. Lincoln is due home soon, so we wanted to drop this stuff off. Then we can get out of your hair."

Running my hands nervously down the front of the shirt that still faintly smells like Lincoln, I find myself nodding. I don't know where I'd go anyway. A restaurant. Maybe the diner I saw down the road when I went for a walk the other day. Their sign says it's open twenty-four seven.

"I'm Dee," she introduces, sticking her hand out after setting a grocery bag on the counter. "Lincoln's mother. This is his little sister, Hannah."

I hesitantly walk over and take her hand, shaking lightly the way I was trained to. Not too firm, but featherlight. Ladylike, according to my stepmother. She'd scolded me for shaking too firmly before. "I'm Georgia."

Her eyes brighten. "What a lovely name."

Hannah murmurs, "It's a state."

Once the shyness wears off slightly, I manage to smile at Lincoln's sister. "My parents—" My throat tightens at the thought of my late mother. "—met in Savannah, Georgia. They didn't like the name Savannah, but they liked Georgia, so..."

Dee's smile stretches. "I love that. Our Lincoln was named after the car. His father always joked he couldn't afford the 1928 Lincoln Model L he always wanted to buy and restore because he had a child to support, so he named our child Lincoln to say he had one."

"I'm not named after anyone," Hannah chimes in, almost annoyed by the fact.

"It was the only name we could agree on," Dee tells her, sounding like they've had this conversation multiple times before. She turns to me and gives me a once-over. "You're an adorable little thing. My son would be an idiot not to make you into something." Her wink has my face turning as red as hers was moments ago.

Hannah climbs onto the stool at the counter and digs through the bag. "Can I have some of the cookies?"

"We brought them for your brother," Dee reminds her as she watches her daughter take one of the chocolate cookies from the plate covered in plastic wrap.

"It's a delivery tax," Lincoln's sister replies, biting into the doughy treat unabashedly. "He owes me."

Dee doesn't even bother scolding her this time as she empties the rest of the bag out to reveal another plate of cookies and a card with Lincoln's name written on the front. Is it his birthday? I don't dare ask because that'll lead to more questions about who I am to him. Clearly, not a friend if I don't know when his birthday is or how old he may be turning. Is he older than me? The same age? Younger? A man built the way he is, all six feet of toned, lean muscle, makes it hard to tell.

Clearing my throat, I rub my arm. "I'm a bit...estranged from my family at the moment. That's why I'm here."

Dee's blue eyes sadden when they meet mine. Lincoln must get his brown eyes from his father. I store that tidbit of information away.

I shrug, hoping to come off nonchalantly. "It will work out eventually. I'm sure of it." My voice weakens, making it hard for either of the girls in front of me to believe. But I want to believe what Millie said, because they're the only family I have left.

His mother's smile returns, this time smaller, filled with sympathy. "That's very sweet of him to look after you like that. I'm glad you have each other."

I almost feel guilty when I say, "I'm glad we do too," even though I don't have him at all.

At the end of the day, I have nobody.

But I feign a smile and hope it meets my eyes. I'm well-versed in saving face. I've been doing it for most of my life.

"Smile, Georgia," Leani commands, tilting my head up and fixing my hair. Her smile is tight, and her eyes are distant. "In our world, a pretty face and a good smile go a long way. The second you let people know you're unhappy, it will be used against you."

Fixing my hair absentmindedly, I stand straighter and let those words sink in. Sometimes, I wondered if Leani had two different personalities—the one she showed my father and the one she let slip when I was around. But it seemed like the frail version of her who drowned her sorrows in wine tended to win out more times than not.

Dee pats my hand and helps her daughter finish laying out the goodies they brought. I almost tell them to stay, to be here when Lincoln returns—to ask them questions or hope they enlighten me on who Lincoln Danforth is so I can know him better.

I don't though. I say goodbye, feeling both of their eyes on me up until the door separates us. When it latches, I hear Hannah say, "But there's only one bed," on their way to their car out front. "I don't sleep with my friends in one bed." Then I hear an "Ow!" followed by a car door opening and closing, silencing them both.



MY MOOD is somber by the time the door opens two and a half hours later. I sit up on the couch, which is directly next to the door in the cramped living space that only has room for the couch, a cheap coffee table, and a small flatscreen perched on a short stand tucked near the bay windows.

Lincoln looks tired. Exhausted, actually. There are bags under his eyes that I used to see on my father whenever he'd have meetings at work that

would make him late for dinner. I remember the fights it would create between him and Leani, but my father always won. Usually, taking his cold dinner into the study and slamming the door to smoke or drink or whatever it is he did when he'd had enough of us.

His eyes find mine instantly, a smile lifting her lips. "Georgia."

"Lincoln."

He locks the door behind him, setting his belongings down and staring at me for a moment longer before turning to the kitchen. "Are those cookies?"

"Your mother and sister brought them."

Lincoln's shoulders tense halfway to the plate on the counter. "You met my mom?"

Is he upset? "You didn't warn me that they could stop by. I would have left if I'd known," I say defensively.

He scrubs a hand down his face. "I'm not mad, Peaches. I'm surprised, is all. And I don't have access to a phone during the week. Training is rigorous. They don't want us distracted."

I bring my legs to my chest, hugging them close to me. "What training is it, anyway?"

His brows go up. "I didn't tell you?" When I shake my head, he chuckles softly to himself. "I'm in the State Police Academy."

"You're already a cop though."

"A deputy," he reminds me, grabbing a cookie from the tray and biting into it. "Maybe after I graduate, I'll finally get to know the captain as well as you do."

He's teasing me. I think. "I thought you said it would be bad if you got to know him."

He lifts a shoulder, walks over, and drops down beside me. Not at the other end of the couch but on the cushion next to my feet. Shoving the rest of the cookie into his mouth, he grabs my legs and extends them over his lap.

I stare in confusion as he pats my calf, squeezing and rubbing the muscles with an easy smile on his face. "There are usually only two ways somebody that high up the chain knows your name. You either did something very good or very bad. Most of the time, it's the second."

Watching him massage my legs is oddly...attractive. He doesn't even think twice before switching from one to the other. "My family knows

Captain Chamberlin from the country club. He and my father play golf together while his wife and my stepmother spend time at the spa. They get invited to a lot of charity galas my father hosts. I've had to dance with him a couple times."

I cringe, remembering the rancid smell of alcohol on his breath as he told me about what a good man my father was. I'm not sure how much he'd had to drink that night, but I remember him getting a little handsy during the second song my stepmother made me dance with him to. His hands tended to linger farther south than I liked.

"They're important public figures in the community," Lincoln says. "I'd be surprised if they didn't shake hands and kiss babies whenever they could."

The comment has my brows furrowing, but I don't reply right away. I'm too transfixed by how good the pseudo-massage is. I clear my throat and try pulling my leg away when my leggings start rising up my shin, revealing the prickle of dark hair sprouting. "I haven't been able to shave," I admit in embarrassment.

His hand comes down on my ankle to stop me from moving away, his thumb caressing the stubble. "It's just hair, Georgia. Not the end of the world. If you need razors, I can pick some up for you at the store tomorrow to have here."

He'd buy me razors? "That's nice of you."

Despite the prickly stubble meeting his fingertips, he doesn't stop. "Is there anything else you need? A certain type of shampoo you like? Soap? Make me a list. Or we can go together and grab some stuff to last you for a while."

A while. "Why are you being nice to me?"

His fingers pause briefly on my leg. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Does he need me to point out that we're strangers? I don't. "So, you're training to be a police officer?" I ask to change the subject, peeling my gaze away from how his hands move over the tight muscles in my calf.

"A state trooper," he explains, a secretive smile curling his lips. "Better money, better benefits. I've been waiting for this opportunity for a long time."

"You always knew you wanted to be one?"

His nod is nostalgic as he leans back, keeping a hand on my shin and using the pad of his thumb to lazily caress the skin under the leggings. "I've

wanted to be a cop since I was a kid. Every Halloween, I'd dress up as one. My mom will tell you the same story she likes to share with everyone—that I'd go door to door asking people if they had any bad guys they needed me to get rid of instead of asking for candy."

I try picturing a little Lincoln in a cop uniform. "I think that's cute. I never went trick-or-treating. The Del Rossis were above the 'silliness' that came with dressing up in costumes and begging for sweets. I tried getting my stepmother to let me go with friends from school, but she'd always tell me no."

I'd always been a little envious, especially when the girls I went to school with brought bags of candy in with them with stories of their Halloween adventures.

"Never?" he asks in surprise.

"The Del Rossis don't do Halloween," is all I say with a loose shrug. Mrs. Ricci would always give me a bag of candy that her children collected and told me to hide it well.

He watches me for a second before squeezing my shin. "That's a real shame, Peaches."

My cheeks heat. "Is that nickname necessary?"

"Do you not like it?"

I still remember what he said the first time he used it, fighting the heat creeping up the back of my neck, thinking about what he'd said about my *taste*. "It's not that. It's just..."

His lips stretch wider, knowing good and well what I'm thinking about but not calling me out on it. "It's just what?"

"Crude."

"I can be a crude person."

No kidding.

"You talk about your stepmother," he says, changing topics. "What about your mom?"

The invisible knife in my heart turns, piercing me at a whole new angle. "She passed away when I was little," I reply quietly, staring at my lap.

His palms stop massaging me again for a brief second. "I'm sorry to hear that."

I peek up at him through my lashes. "It was a car accident. I was four."

He nods, moving his hands to my feet to start working them. "We should go out."

I gape at him, my foot twitching in his hold as he presses into the arch. “What?”

“You and I,” he says, moving a finger between us, “should go out on a date. Get to know each other better.”

I blink slowly. “Why?”

“For one, you’re living with me.”

“I’m temporarily staying here while you’re gone,” I correct quickly.

He nods sarcastically. “Of course, sweetheart. You’re apartment-sitting and I appreciate it. I’d hate for my plants to die.”

I look around in confusion, wondering if I should have been watering plants while he was away. He hadn’t said anything about that.

Then I realize he has no plants.

Lincoln chuckles when I glare at him. “Secondly, I’d like to know more stories about your upbringing. I know your mother passed, your father remarried, and you have strict rules that don’t seem like they belong in this century. You’ve never been trick-or-treating; you used to get dragged to boring-ass charity events where you’d dance with people five times older than you, and it sounds to me like you hated every second. I want to know what else haven’t you done. What do you like to do? What did you want to be when you grew up? I want to know what makes you...tick.”

That’s...a lot. “I still don’t know what I want to be when I grow up,” I admit. “Is that lame?”

He shakes his head. “That’s pretty normal. What do you like to do?”

I think about it. “Read. I like to read.”

“Maybe you can see if the library is hiring.”

I perk up. “There’s a library?”

His chuckle is soft. “Yeah. There’s a public library not far from here. A block or two over. I can take you if you’d like.”

Some of the tightness eases in my chest. “I would like that.”

“You never answered me,” he points out.

About the date. “You told me before you didn’t expect anything of me.”

“I still don’t,” he reassures, moving from one foot to the other. “You can say no. I don’t force women to date me. Frankly, I don’t need to.”

Jealousy, abrupt and ugly, settles into my chest at the thought of him with somebody else. It makes no sense to me, but I feel it all the same.

“But,” he adds, voice lowering, “I think you want to go out with me.”

“Is that so?” I challenge.

He simply hums.

I cross my arms, debating turning him down solely for my pride. Why does he have to be so cocky? So confident?

His hand trails up to my knee before moving back down, stroking my leg before continuing to massage the tense muscles. "It's up to you, Georgia. I could use a drink. Maybe a burger, if those aren't too beneath you."

Hamburgers? "Why would burgers be beneath me?"

"You're a Del Rossi. If they didn't let you trick-or-treat, they probably refused to keep something as lower class as hamburgers around. I'd bet the money I made today that you were used to getting served finger-food sandwiches with the crusts cut off and that nasty tar-tar shit at those fancy galas."

I go to argue but stop myself short.

He's not wrong.

He knows it too. "So?"

I look down at where his hand rests on my leg leisurely, not a care in the world plaguing his body. "Just drinks and a burger?" I ask.

He nods. "That's all, Peaches."

Right now, I have nobody. Nobody except him. And the thought of getting to know him doesn't seem so scary.

I take a deep breath. "Okay."

Lincoln grins. "Come on, then. I'm hungry."

"Now?" I doubt, watching him stand and offer me a hand up.

"No better time than the present."

My eyes focus on the palm extended out to me before I let out a small breath and accept it, getting pulled up until I'm chest to chest with him.

His fingers squeeze mine once as his eyes dip to my mouth. They linger there for a moment before he lets go of my hand and steps back. "I'll let you get ready."

A funny feeling settles into my chest.

Something light and fuzzy.

And I don't hate it.

An hour later, I'm on my first date with Lincoln Danforth, who I learn is twenty-four, loves his hamburger bloody, his whiskey neat, and has a dominating personality that should probably frighten me.

It doesn't.

If anything, I find it attractive.
I find *him* attractive.
And that scares me more.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lincoln / Seven Years Ago

THE TWENTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD TAKING up *temporary* residence in my bed is far more intriguing than she should be. When I was her age, my only focus was getting fucked up with my friends, fucked by women, and getting out of the Marines in one piece. With every little detail I drew out from her in the course of a four-hour dinner, I realized how different our circumstances were.

My parents let me do whatever I wanted growing up. Even when I screwed up, they didn't make it the end of the world. Everything was a learning experience that they hoped I would take something from. And most times, I did.

Georgia didn't have that. In her world, there was no room for error. Everything had to be perfect. Not a hair out of place or downtrodden smile. She sounded more like a trophy to be shown off at the events she talked about than a human being, and that pissed me off way more than it should.

"No offense," I tell her when I pay the tab and wait for the receipt. "But your father sounds like a dickhead."

She winces, but I don't feel bad for telling the truth. I'm sure she's not used to hearing it because people kiss her father's ass. I have no intention of doing that.

"He's a difficult man," Georgia murmurs, staring at the bar top we ate dinner at.

I chuckle, picking up the pen the new bartender gives me with the receipt to sign. "That seems like it's putting it mildly."

We're quiet as I calculate the tip amount before sliding the card back into my wallet.

"His job makes him stressed," she defends. Why, I don't know. If I were her, I wouldn't speak too kindly of the person who tried pawning me off into a loveless marriage and then kicking me out when I refused to be part of it.

I guess that's where me and the girl beside me differ.

McAdam's be damned, I want to help her—I want to learn why her family was so quick to turn their backs on someone who seems so...fragile.

Kicking her out was feeding her to the wolves. Anybody could have gotten to her. So what was the purpose?

"How did your dad get into his business anyway?" I question. "You make him seem so regal. That's hardly the kind of person I picture running a concrete company."

She shifts in her seat, shaping her straw wrapper into an accordion. "It was because of his former partner, William Murphy. They went into business together down in Georgia. Uncle William—" She flinches at the name, and I make a mental note to ask her why. "Er, William did some contracting work in the Atlanta area. He's my mother's brother. My father and him decided to create their business, MDR Inc., that's since been renamed The Del Rossi Group after William was arrested."

"What made them move the business to New York?" I wonder aloud.

Georgia glances over at me from the busywork she makes with the wrapper. "I'm not entirely sure. Family, I guess. Maybe better business opportunities. I remember William telling my father that there was a real estate boom and they could make a lot more money if they targeted wealthier families near the city. My father had some distant family on Long Island, so it was enough to make them move the business north."

The contracting boom in the nineties made a lot of people like her father wealthy. I've got family on the island who made a good profit on selling their homes, which had been worth a fraction of what they are now because of the developing land around them.

"Where is William now?"

Georgia frowns. "Why so many questions?"

Is she uncomfortable? "I'm curious. You don't have to answer. I'm just trying to figure out your family dynamic. It's different than what I'm used to."

Nibbling her lip, she sits up and drops her fidgeting hands into her lap. "He was arrested, like I said. I'm not entirely sure what the charges were or where he was sent. My father said it was none of my business when I asked why Uncle Will never saw us anymore. I assume he's out. I mean, it's not like he killed anybody. At least, I don't think he did." She winces at the doubt lingering in her tone.

“What did your father say about William?”

She frowns. “That Uncle William got in over his head and had to pay the consequences.”

How...ominous.

“My father took over the business, changed the name, and started expanding,” she continues, lifting a shoulder. “I don’t know much more than that other than he’s been stressed since William went away. I used to go in and help organize paperwork, but he stopped letting me do that a few years ago. He said that was no place for a girl like me.” Her lips twitch. “Whatever that means.”

Her father keeps her in the dark about a lot of things it seems. “You miss him,” I note, seeing the dull in her eyes. They’re not caked with makeup like they were before. I like her better this way, not wearing any type of mask or pretending to be somebody she’s not.

All she says is, “He’s my father.”

As someone who believes family is important, I understand. Maybe not very well, but blood is thick.

“Come on, Peaches,” I say. “Let’s go home.”

Her eyes turn to me.

Home.

I can tell that word does something to her.

A few hours later, I’m staring at the brunette who fell asleep on my couch watching some reality show she put on when we got back. She’d been quietly curled up on the couch, absorbing the mindless drama playing out on the screen.

Looking at her now, I can’t help but be glad she’s away from Nikolas Del Rossi. Her face is usually painted in carefully contoured makeup but is bare to me now, with frizzy hair resting over her shoulders and her guard down in the baggy clothes she stole from my room. She’s half tucked under the throw blanket my mother bought me when I moved in, cuddling with the ends looking...peaceful.

The facade she wore the night we met was just that—a girl playing make-believe in borrowed clothes that weren’t her own, drinking her problems away the way I’ve done one too many times to count. She hoped to find something to free her from the metaphoric shackles her family put on her. I guess it was ironic that she found somebody with handcuff keys.

Picking her up, she stirs and settles into my chest as I walk around the couch and toward the bedroom. “Where...?”

“Shh. Go to sleep. You can have the bed.”

She stiffens as I lower her onto the mattress, her eyelids fluttering open to stare up at me. The second her gaze locks on mine, my heart clenches in my chest.

“I’ll take the couch,” I reassure her, ignoring the weird feeling taking over my ribcage. I get a good glimpse of her naked face, my eyes roaming over every dainty, feminine feature. From her full bottom lip to her long lashes that flutter as her eyelids close, I soak her in.

The woman lying here has been shaped by the choices made for her. And I can’t help but wonder if she’ll conform to them or figure out who she is without the people who’ve influenced her life.

But I want to help her figure it out.

Just as I’m closing the door behind me, I hear the quietest, “Linc?”

It stops me in my tracks. *Linc*.

I’ll be damned if the softly uttered word didn’t do some shit to my heart. “Yeah, Peaches?” My voice is raspy, so I clear it.

“Can you...?” She pauses, stirring. I can feel her eyes on me even though I can’t see them in the dark. “Can you lay with me for a while?”

She’s asking me to sleep in here with her?

As if she senses my hesitation, she whispers, “I think I’d sleep better.”

There’s only a moment of hesitation before I walk back into the bedroom and close the door behind me. I hate sleeping in pants, but I don’t dare remove my joggers. With her, layers probably aren’t a bad thing to mask how she makes me feel.

My fingers linger on the shirt I’m in. “I can’t sleep with a shirt on,” I tell her, tugging on the material.

“That’s okay.”

I pull it over my head and drape it on the floor beside me, crawling into bed. “Come here,” I coax, opening my arm for her to curl into.

She doesn’t hesitate, settling perfectly into the nook of my arm. I hear the softest inhale as she nestles into me, her body relaxing after only seconds.

I lean my cheek on top of her head and close my eyes, listening to the steady sound of her breathing before sleepiness greets me. Then I press my

lips against the crown of her skull, hug her closer to me, and find myself thinking, *I could get used to this.*



TWO WEEKS GO by of grueling days being physically and mentally tested. Eight people leave the academy. They say a third of us will be gone before we even reach the halfway point.

When Friday comes around, I'm bone-deep exhausted. Stressed. Pushed to my limit. I don't blame the people who decided that moving forward wasn't worth it. It's not an easy process, but that's why they put us through it. State troopers need to be ready for anything—at their breaking point so they can learn how to control and move past it.

I'd like to think my time in the military prepared me for the bullshit I deal with five days a week, but that doesn't mean I'm not glad to go home when Friday afternoon rolls around. In fact, being in the car driving almost two hours back to my apartment is the first time I can breathe easier.

Especially knowing that I have a warm body to fall asleep next to like I did the last two weekends. It'd been unexpected but welcome. I didn't cross any boundaries, made sure to keep my morning wood far away from her when I woke up, and simply enjoyed being able to cuddle someone again.

When I pull up to the apartment, there's an eagerness to my walk that wasn't there earlier when I dragged my sorry, sore ass off the campus. Opening the door, I stop when I see the absolute mess covering the kitchen. There are dirty dishes everywhere, flour coating the counters, and an equal amount of flour caked to the girl standing in front of a tray of what looks like black hockey pucks.

Kicking the door closed, I drop my things on the couch and walk over to where Georgia holds out a plate to me with a timid smile.

"Hey, you," I greet, stopping myself short from bending over and pressing a chaste kiss to her cheek.

Boundaries, I remind myself.

I pick up one of the cookies and take a bite, but my smile quickly fades. I gag from the strong salty, burnt taste and spit it out into my hand no matter how hard I try swallowing it. "Is that...?" I search the mess of ingredients

on the counter and see the canister of salt. “Did you use salt instead of sugar in these, Peaches?”

Georgia frowns, examining the plate and then the counter where the line of ingredients is. “I don’t think so?” It sounds more like a question than an answer, so I nod with an amused grin and toss the cookie back onto the plate.

“I really appreciate what you tried to do,” I say honestly, fighting a smile. “But those are...I don’t know a nice way to put it. Those aren’t edible, sweetheart.”

The frown on her face deepens.

Taking the plate from her, I set it on the counter and pull her in for a hug. “Don’t look so sad. It was a nice thought.”

She’s stiff for a second. “I found a recipe in your cookbook,” she murmurs, her hands slowly finding their way around my waist. “Your mom said you liked cookies, so...”

She’s quiet.

Then she says, “I didn’t think I’d mess it up.”

I take in the familiar scent of my shampoo before kissing the top of her head. I’d gotten her new shampoo and body wash that smelled floral and girly before I left last week, but I like it a little too much that she still uses mine. Smelling myself on her makes me hard.

Pulling away, I ask, “Have you ever baked before?”

Embarrassed, she shakes her head. “I helped Mrs. Ricci make brownies once for some charity thing my stepmother was hosting at the house. She let me crack a few eggs. I got more shells than eggs in the bowl.”

“Happens to the best of us,” I reason, recalling the older woman’s name from the stories she shared on our first date. She looked at her like a mother figure. Somebody who cared for her in an otherwise cold household. I was glad she had Mrs. Ricci.

“My stepmother walked in and saw me helping her and scolded me for distracting the help. Then she got mad over my dress being dirty.” The tiniest smile appears on her face from the memory. “Between us, I’d done it on purpose. I hated that dress.”

Chuckling, I use the pad of my thumb to wipe some of the flour off her cheek. “You tested her a lot, didn’t you?”

The way Georgia lifts her shoulders in nonchalance tells me I’m not wrong. “In all fairness, she tested me more. I don’t think she liked me very

much.”

I’m not sure who *wouldn’t* like her. “Why do you say that?”

Her tongue wets her bottom lip. “Because I’m my mother’s daughter. And my father’s second priority.”

“Second?”

“His business was always number one. If my mother were alive, I’m pretty sure I’d be bumped to third place because he loved her that much. Leani is probably in his top five, but barely. She knows he still loves my mother.”

“You deserve to be somebody’s first priority,” I tell her softly.

She peers at me through her thick lashes before quickly dropping her gaze when she sees me watching her. “One day,” she murmurs.

I study the kitchen. It looks like she took every pot, pan, and tray out to find the ones she needed. “We should try cleaning up in here before the food gets stuck on everything.”

She steps back, grimacing at the sight. “I thought I would have more time to clean before you got home.”

“I tried calling you to let you know when I’d get here, but it wouldn’t go through. I think your phone is dead.”

The color in her cheeks deepens. “It got shut off. I think my father wants me completely cut off from everyone. My credit card...” She winces. “My card was declined at the dollar store when I tried buying the flour for the cookies. The nice older man behind me ended up paying for it.”

Eye twitching, I press my lips together. Nikolas is throwing a hissy fit that she didn’t come back home. Isn’t he worried about her? Wondering where she is? *Who* she’s with?

“Has anybody reached out?” I know the last time I asked, she hadn’t heard from anybody.

Softly, she admits, “No. Nobody.”

Fuck. “Come on, then.” I hold out my hand for her to take.

She stares at it. “Where are we going?”

“It’s not safe for you to be without a phone,” I say, taking her hand. “I’ll get you one.”

“Lincoln—”

“It’ll probably be cheaper to put you on my plan, so don’t worry about it.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I repeat, cutting her off from arguing. I don’t like the idea of her being alone with no way to get ahold of anybody. “God forbid something happens, you’ll need to be able to call for help. Okay?”

Her eyes go to the floor.

I tilt her chin up with my finger. “Don’t. We’ll get this figured out. Until then, you can pick something out at the store.”

She swallows, her eyes saddening. “I’m sorry.”

My brows pinch. “For what?”

“For this.” She gestures around us. “I didn’t expect any of this. That’s not why I came home with you that night. If I’d known it would lead to this, I might not have bothered. I would have...I *should* have stayed home. Or I should have tried getting Millie to come get me at the bar. Something. Now you’re buying me groceries and a phone, and it’s...a lot. It’s too much.”

If she hadn’t gone out, she’d either still be under her father’s hand or somebody else’s. The thought of her engaged makes my blood boil, and I barely know this girl. “Better me than somebody else,” I tell her, hating how my jaw tics at the thought of another man touching her. “And, for the record, I like being able to help you. And I especially like coming home to you wearing my clothes and smelling like my soap. If the circumstances were different, I’d show you exactly what that does to me. But I won’t. I’ll be a gentleman. For now.”

Her chest rises and falls slowly.

“Get dressed, and we’ll go to the store.”

She stares at me for the longest time, then takes me by surprise and wraps her arms around my waist, her pillowy breasts pressing against my chest. “Thank you.”

My heart does a little flip, but I try pushing away the feeling as I brush my lips against the top of her head. “You don’t have to thank me, Georgia. That’s what...friends do.”

“Friends?” she asks.

“It sounds better than temporary roommates,” I point out, resting my chin against the crown of her skull.

She pulls back, studying me. “Friends.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lincoln / Present

NOBODY BUT MATT Conklin knew the truth about my rocky relationship with Georgia. I'd trusted him fully with the details I couldn't even tell my family or else they might have talked me out of the inevitable choice I made.

I wish I could have gone back and confided in my father, telling him every reason I asked Georgia the question I thought I'd only ever ask one woman in my lifetime. But I didn't. I lied to them and to most of my coworkers, and I got Conklin killed because of it.

It keeps me up at night, waking me from nightmares that are nothing more than memories stitched together like a film that replays in my mind. Every night, it's the same one.

I see him getting out of his patrol car.

I hear him approaching the front door.

Then I hear the gunshots.

One.

After.

Another.

After another.

After another.

It happens in slow motion, just like it did that day. When the first shot rang out, I couldn't get out of the unmarked patrol car fast enough. No matter how quickly I propelled myself toward the front of the house where Matt Conklin was serving the arrest warrant, it wasn't fast enough.

The drill times I beat in the military, and the praise I'd gotten for my physical conditioning in the academy didn't help me when it mattered most. By the time I'd gotten to Conklin, it was too late. He'd fallen, and the next two bullets had found me as I dragged him out of range.

Every time I have that nightmare, I'm reminded of how badly I failed.

Marissa and my therapist can tell me all they want that it wasn't my fault, but I made the call that led us there. I asked him to serve Jakob Volley instead of the other officers. I led us straight into danger.

Because of me, Marissa is a pregnant widow, and Cooper is fatherless.

I'll be damned if I'm going to let that go without getting the justice they all deserve.

Peeling the blankets off me, I walk into the kitchen for a glass of water and guzzle the whole thing in seconds. The window above the sink looks out over the back deck, and my eyes find the glass table where I'd had Georgia splayed out in front of me weeks before she'd finally signed the divorce papers. When I'd gone back out there the next day, I saw the imprint her body left behind and was grateful Mom hadn't been over to clean.

Knowing sleep will evade me, I don't bother going back to bed. Instead, I get my phone, pour a glass of whiskey, and sit in the living room. The flat screen is blank, only turned on once in a while when I need to drown out the silence. Georgia used to watch it more than I ever did, making me sit through trashy television shows that made my brain bleed half the time. But I sat and endured them because she liked them, and seeing her content made me content.

Stretching my legs out, I stare at the tumbler of amber liquid that reminds me of a unique pair of eyes. I used to love it when she stared at me. No matter what I was doing, I could feel them locked in with interest that she tried her best to hide.

Especially in the beginning.

But she couldn't.

I suppose that was the honeymoon phase.

Or maybe it was a delusion.

Picking up my phone, I hover over a familiar name in my contacts and hesitate before hitting the phone button until it dials out.

A groggy voice greets me after three rings.

"I can't sleep," I murmur, draping my head back and staring at the wood ceiling. Georgia wanted to paint the wood, but I couldn't do it. It would have hidden the natural beauty of each dark, polished knot that gave it character.

There's a pause. "Do you want me to come over?" Georgia asks.

I take a deep breath.

I should tell her no.

That I'm fine.

Don't go. I have a bad feeling.

I should tell her it was a mistake calling.

But I'm always making the wrong decision when she's involved.

So I say, "Yes."

Twenty minutes later, the door opens to the living room, and a lean body slips in through the shadows and makes its way toward me, sitting on my lap and wrapping a lean arm around my neck.

She put perfume on for me because she knows I like it; the scent engulfing me as a pair of soft lips trail over my jaw. It's not the same as when she used my shampoo, but it's familiar. And sometimes, I welcome familiarity.

"Surprised you picked up," I tell her, brushing hair out of her face that's still frizzy from sleep.

Her palm cups my cheek as her thumb strokes my bottom lip. "I'm surprised you called."

She leans her forehead against mine, feeling the subtle breath exhale from my parted lips. We sit like that for a while in comfortable silence. She places her palm over my heart, feeling it *thump, thump, thump* against her.

I lift her palm to my lips, not wanting her to feel what she does to me. How my heart reacts to the traitor on my lap. "I thought you were seeing somebody," I say, each word caressing her skin as her eyes slowly close.

It feels like forever before she whispers, "I already told you..." She moves her hand away from my mouth and replaces her lips with it in a barely there kiss. With her mouth still grazing mine, she says, "He's not you."

My eyes close as she kisses me again, each peck lasting a little longer than the last until I finally give in.

After all, I didn't call her to talk.

Reaching between her legs, I stroke her until the softest moan rises from her throat. "I almost feel bad for him," I murmur, dipping down to nip at the crevice of her neck.

She grinds down on my lap, waking my dick up. "Don't lie."

I smile against her throat. "I said almost." Licking the spot above her pulse, I reach into her leggings to feel how wet she is for me. "I bet he

doesn't make you feel this way. He probably thinks you're tucked in bed at home right now, doesn't he? Safe and sound and *loyal*."

A drawn-out moan rises from her throat as two of my fingers enter her. "Linc..."

"He'll learn soon enough," I tell her, pulling out and standing up as I carry her over to the couch to lay her on her back. I hover over her so we're face-to-face, moving her leggings down and taking myself out. "You'll only ever be loyal to your family."

She doesn't say anything before I'm surging forward, filling her until her back arches off the cushions.

Then again, she knows there's nothing she could say anyway.

Because it's true.

Matt Conklin wasn't the only victim of the Del Rossi family.

We all are.



IT'S BOILING IN the room today, making the long-sleeve shirt I opted for overkill.

The good doctor is wearing a sleeveless top tucked into a gray skirt, and there's a blazer draped across the back of her chair. "I apologize for the temperature," she says when she sees me tugging on the collar of my shirt. "Something is wrong with the heater; it won't turn down. I'm still waiting to hear back from the landlord about getting someone in here to fix it."

It's sweltering, but I try not to make a big deal of it. "Do you want me to take a look at it?"

She presses out a wrinkle in her skirt before looking at me. "Are you handy with that sort of stuff?"

I sit forward on the couch. "Some might say I'm handy in a lot of ways."

The remark comes out flirtier than I mean it to, but I deliver it unapologetically.

Giving me a slanted look, she shakes her head at some silent thought she has. "I appreciate the offer, but I'll wait until maintenance takes care of it."

I lift a shoulder. "Suit yourself, doc."

Walking over, she sits down with her pad and paper and crosses one leg over the other. "How has the last week been?"

"Like any other week."

"Did you see anyone? Friends? Family?"

Her prying question makes tidbits from the other night with Georgia flash in my mind. I fucked her on the couch first. Then ate her out on the kitchen table. And then I took her to the bedroom, put handcuffs on her, bent her over the side of the bed, and made her come again before finishing us both off with her on top of me.

One of my favorite places used to be buried inside her, making her scream my name until she came around me. Obviously, I still enjoy being there. But it's different now. Each orgasm I give us is another step closer to the ending I'll have to accept one day.

By the time the sun rose, I was more than ready to get out of the house before Georgia woke up. I didn't want to see her victorious smile. Or worse. The loving one. Instead, I put on my running gear, went for my morning jog, and came back to see her car missing from the driveway.

She'd put on a pot of coffee for me and left my favorite mug by the machine with a handwritten note beside it.

They weren't the only ones I was loyal to

I'd scoffed, crumpled up the paper, and threw it in the trash before I left.

Choosing not to relay that information to the woman watching me, I sit back and nod. "I spoke to Marissa. Asked how she was."

"Did you see her?"

"No." She's quiet. "I've been busy."

Her nod is slow, disbelieving. "Last time we spoke, you brought up how unconventional your relationship was, but that you enjoyed having a companion to share the burdens. You could have that again."

"You offering?" I ask teasingly.

She eyes me when I flash her a charming smile that's gotten me laid a time or two when I was younger. "I simply mean, you don't need to be in a romantic relationship to have companionship. They aren't mutually exclusive things. Friendships can be just as fulfilling, if not more, in some cases."

“And what? You think Marissa and I should be BFFs now that her husband is gone?” I question. That would never work. I can be there for her and Cooper, but there’s too much history, too many memories that having me around frequently would bring up. I won’t do that to her or their son.

That damn pen lifts. “I’m sure Marissa could use somebody who understands the pain and loss she feels. Not everything has to be about crossing lines.”

This time, I stay quiet.

The clock ticks with each passing second that turns into minutes, both of us sitting in silence, watching one another.

Eventually, she breaks it. “You seem a bit off today, Mr. Danforth.”

“It’s Lincoln,” I tell her, sick of the formalities. There are only a few people who call me that, and I’m none too fond of any of them. “And I’m sorry I’m not my usual forthcoming self. I know you’re used to me talking your ear off.”

The slightest twitch lifts the edges of her mouth—an amusement she refuses to let me see. It doesn’t turn into a smile, but close. “I know you’d rather be anywhere else, but you’re here. And while you don’t typically like to offer a lot of information, you still give me some. If there’s something that’s making you reluctant to, I can reassure you that there’s no safer place to speak than within these walls.”

“You mean in the pits of hell,” I grumble, tugging my shirt away from my body again.

“If you’d like, we can reschedule—”

“I’m here,” I relent with a sigh.

“Is something the matter?”

“Life,” I mumble, evading her eyes.

“Let’s talk about it then.”

I think about Georgia’s note, which is probably halfway to the dump now. “I suppose you want to know more about my failed marriage since that’s been a recurring theme in these sessions.”

“We can talk about other things,” she notes.

She knows I won’t. “Where did we leave off?”

Repositioning, she settles her notepad onto her lap and gets comfortable. “You helped a woman in need by letting her stay in your apartment while you were away.”

My lips curl up. “You make me sound like such a white knight.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit,” is all she replies with before waiting for me to enlighten her.

“Nah, doc.” I shake my head, my knee bouncing as old memories are dug up. “Don’t make me the hero in this story.”

“You’re certainly not the villain.”

A dry laugh passes my lips. “That depends on who you ask.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lincoln / Seven Years Ago

CLICKING THE DOOR closed behind me, I let my eyes roam over the borrowed clothing that exposes soft skin and expensive-looking matching black lingerie.

My body reacts, remembering what she felt like under my hands, under my mouth the first night. “Georgia,” I greet, dead bolting the door and leaning against it to take her in.

Nervousness coats her face as she rises onto her knees. “Lincoln.”

I walk over to her, my hand going to her hair, caressing the back of her skull, and wanting nothing more than to wrap the silky strands around my fingers to pull. “This is a nice thing to come home to.”

She bites her bottom lip, her hands moving to grip my shoulders.

“What are you doing, Peaches?” I ask when they start sliding down my chest, her palms exploring the muscles along the way until they stop at the waistband of my jeans.

“I’m not sure,” she admits, her fingers working to unfasten my belt. I’ve never really thought of inexperience as one of my turn-ons but seeing her shakily struggle with the buckle does something to me.

It makes me want to *teach* her.

“I want to...thank you.”

“Thank me?” I repeat in confusion.

“For everything you’ve done. The phone. Letting me stay here...”

I should tell her she doesn’t have to, but my brain is too distracted by each experimental touch of her featherlight fingers along my body.

This is the last thing I expected to come home to after spending two hours trying to convince my buddy Michael Knight to give me whatever intel he had on Nikolas Del Rossi. He wouldn’t offer me much, especially when I told him it was for personal reasons. “*That’s a rabbit hole you don’t want to fall down, Hawk.*” Which only makes me want to fall down it more.

If I tell Georgia I'm trying to look into her family, what would she say? Would she feel betrayed? Ask me to stop? Tell me to let her know the things her father clearly won't let her in on? I don't know, and my gut tells me not to bother risking it.

I told Knight, who I worked with for almost a year before he got promoted to the BCI, to let me know if anything interesting popped up. I'm not sure if he will, but it's worth a shot.

All of that goes out the window when I feel Georgia's hands on my body.

"Is this okay?" she asks, biting her bottom lip when her knuckles lightly graze over my hard length.

I watch her stare at me, studying every inch like she's never seen anything like me before. Then again, her experience is minimal to none based on our last experience together.

"More than okay."

I let her have control. For now. Mostly because I'm enjoying the ample attention my eyes give her breasts as she undresses me. First, the belt goes. Then the button and zipper of my jeans. She hesitates for a moment before tugging the denim down until they slide down my thighs, leaving me in my boxers and a ratty old T-shirt that smells like cigar smoke from the expensive Cuban stogie I bribed Knight with.

The way she stares at the growing bulge trapped behind my boxers only has me getting harder. And when she reaches out to cup me? *Jesus fucking Christ*. It's game over.

Wanting more, I wrap a fistful of hair around my hand and pull hard enough to make her look at me. "Is this what you want, Peaches?"

All she does is swallow.

I tighten my grip, getting a sharp intake of breath from her as her hand tightens around my aching cock. "Use your big girl words," I coax, my hand trailing down to grip her throat. "I want to hear you tell me what you want."

Her breathing picks up, and I feel her throat bob with another nervous swallow. "I-I..."

My eyebrows go up in wait, my fingers itching to tighten even more around her pretty little neck. I can tell her what *I* want to do to her, but that'll come later.

Then, to my complete but delighted surprise, she whispers, “I want you to fuck me.”

Fingers twitching around her throat, my nostrils flare. When we lock eyes, something in me snaps.

And suddenly, it’s me who’s in control again.

My lips crash into hers, my tongue and teeth dominating her mouth as my fingers work their way under the robe to slide it off her. When she’s bare to me in only a skimpy bra and panty set, I waste no time stripping off those items too until her perky breasts are in my hands and her pussy is readily available.

“Touch yourself,” I instruct.

She gapes. “W-what?”

I take her hand and lower it between her legs, putting her fingers directly where I want them. “I said, touch yourself.”

“I’ve never...” Her words fade when I use her hand to show her exactly what I want her to do, paying special attention to the nerves that have her lips parting wider as I apply more pressure.

Leaning forward, I press my lips against her ear and keep my hand on hers, working her together. “You’ve never touched yourself before?”

She releases a sharp breath. “N-no.”

My hand twitches around hers. It’s strange how turned on I am over the admission, but my dick is so hard it hurts. “We’re definitely going to have to change that,” I tell her.

In the back of my head, I make a note to buy a toy for her to use on herself when I’m gone.

When I let her go, I dip my head to the crook of her neck and trail kisses along the column of her throat, licking and nipping and sucking along the way as my hands play and tweak with her hardening nipples.

The first sound of her whimpered moan, as she plays with herself, has my eyes flaring and me shedding the rest of my clothing.

Kissing her again is brutal and demanding and needing all at once. It ignites a fire in my stomach that quickly has my dick at full attention. I grip her hair and lower her so she’s face-to-face with me. I stroke myself, watching her watch me twitch as if she’s mesmerized by how I grow.

Knowing she’s never done this before, I say, “Taste me. You can’t do it wrong.”

Hell, I don't think there's anything she could do that would fuck this up. Tentatively, she opens her mouth and—

Fuck. She proves me right.

I've always liked getting my dick sucked, but this is a whole different experience. The way her lips move over me experimentally, how her tongue gets in the way but brushes the perfect spot, even how her teeth graze me just gently enough to get a bite of pain without it actually hurting, makes me the hardest I've been in a long time.

Pulling her away from me when her mouth gets me good and wet, I claim her lips before she says anything, guiding her up to standing. She gasps when I pick her up, getting her to wrap her legs around my waist until my cock nudges her.

"I'm going to be very honest with you," I say, pressing her against the wall. "I don't think I can be gentle with you right now. So tell me what you can handle."

I inch myself in and stop when her lips form an O, her head dropping back against the wall as she wiggles her hips and takes me deeper. Her arms wrap around my neck and squeeze. "I don't want you to be gentle."

It's a miracle I don't come right there. "This may hurt," I warn, moving inside her.

The choked noise coming from her as I use my body weight to pin her against the wall has me hesitating only briefly before she dips her head into the crook of my neck and kisses me.

I hear one word. "Please."

There's something she's trying to distract herself from. I'm tempted to ask, but something tells me we're a lot more similar than either of us knows. Because I never want people butting into my business without me offering the information either. I want to escape it.

Just like her.

So, she lets me fuck her right there, no bed, no couch, just us. And each thrust feels like goddamn heaven, her body caressing me and feeding the fire trapped under my skin and scorching me internally.

Quickly, I pull out and bring her to the kitchen, bending her over the breakfast nook and bringing one of her legs toward her chest to rest on the cool countertop to get a deeper angle. And when I jackknife forward, the moan I'm rewarded with only stirs me to continue relentlessly.

The sounds between us as her body accepts me makes my stomach tighten and my dick twitch with an oncoming orgasm.

I reach for the small box I keep on the counter and open it to reveal a pair of silver handcuffs. The rattle is music to my ears, but nothing like when I put Georgia's hands behind her back and listen to the cuffs *click* into place.

Reaching under her, I pay special attention to the button of nerves with one hand, tweaking and pinching and rubbing it until the sexiest sounds come out of her while keeping a firm grip on the handcuffs with my other.

Seeing her like this, submissive, willing, splayed in front of me to do whatever I please with, makes this end way sooner than I want.

"I'm going to come," I warn her in a strangled voice, picking up the pace and wanting her to fall apart with me.

Moments later, I can't hold back any longer, pulling out before I completely lose it inside of her. And seeing her back covered in me has me half-gear up for round two.

Gently, I lower her leg down until she's securely on the floor. When she's cleaned off with a kitchen towel, I stand her up and kiss her again. Once. Twice. Leaning my forehead against hers, I find myself smiling as I tug her into my body.

"Don't worry," I promise, lips trailing over her jawline. "We're not done yet. I owe you at least two orgasms. And I know how I'm going to deliver the first one."

She gasps when I lower to my knees and remind myself exactly how she got her nickname.

My sweet Georgia Peach.

"And when we're done, we're going to go online and buy you a vibrator so you can get yourself off when I'm gone," I purr, right before I reacquaint my mouth with one of my favorite parts of her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Georgia / Seven Years Ago

THERE'S SWEAT STICKING to a very naked, very muscular torso that I've become well acquainted with over the past two months. Two whole months of...*that*. Tall. Lean. Tan. How can somebody be that tan when it's not even July yet? It's not fair.

If Millie were still my friend, she'd say I'm dickstruck. In my defense, she would be too if she saw Lincoln shirtless and mowing his lawn. But she's not around. And based on the light online stalking I did using the account with a fake name that she helped me set up years ago, Millie isn't exactly torn up over our ended friendship. She's out partying with college girls who are the exact opposite of me. Does she even wonder how I'm doing? This is the longest we haven't spoken, and the pictures and videos of her dancing and laughing don't make it seem like she's as hurt by that as I am.

My father never liked her from the day they met at the country club, complaining to Leani as soon as we got into our car to leave that her parents didn't discipline her enough. "*A girl like that will be nothing but trouble.*"

Maybe he was onto something.

Forcing the thought of my former best friend out of my head, I focus back on the muscles of Lincoln's arms flexing as he pushes the mower along the small section of grass in front of the building. His abs look fake, but I know firsthand they're not. I've touched them. Maybe even licked them. Once.

Or twice.

The man outside has been coming home looking exhausted every weekend but still seeing family and friend and making time for me. He stays up to watch shows I know he hates, takes me out to dinner, and covers the bill without a second thought. I haven't figured out if the motive has to do with what happens between us behind closed doors, but I'm not mad at it.

Lincoln is attractive. I'd thought so from the moment he sat down next to me at the bar. I could feel his eyes on me leading up to him making a move, and I tried not to notice that he was beautiful in a rugged kind of way. Manly. Unapologetically so. But the time he's spent training at the academy has made him leaner, his muscles more defined, and his features sharper.

I shouldn't be staring.

Nope.

I step back from the curtain I've been peeking out, biting my lip. How could somebody who looks like that not have been scooped up by now? He said he never struggled to find interested women, so why me?

The train of thought leads me to heated memories of the past few weeks. I never knew how good somebody could make me feel. Or how good I could make *myself* feel on the days Lincoln is gone. He'd stuck to his word and bought me a black vibrator, showing me how to use it. I've never liked being woken up before, but I've learned not to mind when Lincoln turns it on and presses it between my legs in the middle of the night.

It's no wonder my father drilled abstinence into my head for so many years. If I'd known *this* is what I was missing out on, I would have left a long time ago. Millie told me about sex, but I never quite believed the hype whenever she'd go into details about her own personal experiences.

Despite all the good things I've gotten to experience, I still miss my family. I miss the security I felt in my routine, no matter how uptight it might have been. My days spent here are full of job hunting that goes nowhere because the second my last name is read on applications, no matter how entry-level the job is, I get passed on.

I can only assume it's another way my father keeps one foot in the door, always there, always ensuring I never stray too far. Everything he's done is to remind me that he'll always be around—that I need him. But how could I forget?

No matter the obstacles, I've always found a way through. Mostly thanks to the sweaty Adonis doing landscaping outside. It didn't hurt that I sold a few pieces of my designer clothing online either. It gave me enough money for groceries and a little to set aside. For what, I wasn't sure. An apartment of my own wasn't obtainable, but I knew staying here forever

wouldn't be an option either. Eventually, Lincoln would want to move on with his life, and I wouldn't blame him.

When the door cracks open, I turn to see the man in the forefront of my mind wiping himself off with the shirt he'd started out wearing when he went outside. "If it's already this hot now, it's going to be a brutal summer," he says, tossing the damp shirt onto the couch. "Maybe they were right about global warming."

My eyes wander down the front of him, appreciating the view and not giving thought to his comment on the current state of climate change.

His stomach moves, and I realize he's laughing. "Peaches?"

I clear my throat, forcing my eyes up. "It's very...sunny out."

Amusement lifts the corners of his lips at my distracted response. "Like what you see?"

My cheeks heat as I look away.

But he won't let me.

He walks over, using his finger to turn my head back to him. "I like it when you watch me."

I peek up at him through my lashes.

"Did you enjoy the show outside?"

How did he know I was watching him?

His eyes darken the way they do before clothes start coming off, and my heart picks up, nearly pounding out of my chest. "I always know when you're looking, Georgia," he says, reading my mind.

God, that's...dangerous.

The fingers on my chin move upward to brush hair behind my ear, the path of his touch igniting a familiar fire in my stomach that he always creates.

He asks, "What's your favorite color?"

It's an odd question. "Why?"

"You always wear green," he notes, hooking his finger in the neckline of the hunter green shirt and tugging on it until my tan bra peeks out. His finger lingers just above the curve of my breast.

"I like it."

I'm not sure what he's talking about anymore. The shirt? Or what's underneath?

I stare down at his hand, silently willing him to cup me like he does at night when we're cuddling in bed. He'll turn me onto my side, pull me into

him, and wrap his arm around my waist, resting his hand around one of my breasts before falling asleep. I've gotten used to the strange sleeping position over the weekends. "I'm not sure what it is. It used to be purple. It changes with my mood."

A thoughtful noise comes from him. "What is your mood today?"

I don't hesitate. "Contentment."

Half of his lips quirk up.

I ask, "What's your favorite color?"

His eyes flicker across my face before his lips form a secretive smile. "Amber."

I don't have time to process that when he says, "Come on." Leaning forward, he presses a kiss to my temple before stepping away. "My parents are doing pizza at their place."

"And we're going? Like...together?"

Amusement lightens his face. "If we stay here, we're going to be naked until I have no choice but to go back to the academy," he informs me, lust heavy in his tone. "I figured I'd give you, and your body, a break. And my mom makes really good pizza. You'll love it."

He's inviting me to his parents' house. He's never made it seem like he wanted me around his family whenever he'd go visit them. Since he never asks me to tag along, I never ask to go. I'd find myself at the public library, reading books in their quiet nook or using their computer to find job listings online. Or doing the occasional social media stalking to see how people have moved on with their lives without me.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" he questions casually, his eyes tracking my fidgety movements.

"I wouldn't want them to get the wrong impression of us."

"And what impression is that, Georgia?" He leans down, crowding my space. His fingers go to my hair, playing with the ends before trailing them up, up, up until they're on my face.

I suck in a breath, unable to think straight as those fingertips dance along my cheekbone and down to my jaw, where they start getting closer and closer to my mouth. He's not playing fair right now.

"That we're..." I swallow when his index finger starts tracing my bottom lip. "That we're more than friends."

His finger stops at the corner of my mouth. "I don't fuck my friends, sweetheart."

His blunt statement has me blowing out a short breath as I try to calm my heartbeat. "Are you really telling me you've never had friends with benefits before?"

If he says no, he's lying. Because what does that make us then?

"I have casual sex," he answers nonchalantly. "Unattached commitments that are very clear from the start. Like I said, I don't fuck my friends. That gets messy."

Didn't he call us friends, though?

Something funny bubbles in my stomach. If he doesn't sleep with his friends, what does he consider me? "So, we're not friends?" I find myself asking, nervousness hollowing my words as I anxiously wait for his answer.

His brown eyes, which are softer than my father's, scan my face. "No, Peaches." My heart plummets to the bottom of my rib cage. "We're definitely more than friends. Trouble is, I don't know what that means yet."

Oh. Oh. "Maybe I should stay here."

I know his family means a lot to him, so I don't want them to misunderstand whatever this is, if not even Lincoln or I can define it.

"I already told them we'd swing by," he says, moving his hand away from my face and straightening. "I don't know about you, but I don't think they'd be that far off to assume something anyway."

All I can do is blink.

"Normally, I know where I stand with people," he admits. "But I think you need to figure out what you want before we can make any rash decisions. I'm a patient guy. So until you know what that is, we'll go eat some pizza with my family."

I don't know how I feel about that.

About any of this.

"Linc..." I stop myself, knowing that convincing him to let me stay here is pointless. "Never mind."

By the time he's done with his shower, he comes out and sees me holding up a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label that I bought online.

During one of our nights out, he told me that it's his favorite whiskey, but that he doesn't buy it often because it's pricy.

"To bring with us," I say when he looks between me and the whiskey with furrowed brows.

He blinks. “How did you buy that? That’s expensive liquor, Peaches.”

I never told him that I figured out how to sell my belongings on an app I downloaded. I figured he’d tell me not to and then try covering all the costs for us both, just like he’d insisted for the phone bill.

“I sold a couple things,” I murmur, shifting on my feet. “It’s not a big deal. I wanted to contribute so you don’t always have to.”

Lincoln stares at me for the longest time before his eyes dip to the bottle again. Then he says something under his breath that sounds a lot like “fuck it” before walking over, grabbing my face, and kissing me.

It’s...intense.

Not demanding or rushed or hard.

It’s different than what I’m used to, like all the other kisses we’ve shared are somehow incomparable to this.

And before I know it, it’s over.

Before I can say a word, he leans his forehead against mine and shakes his head. Fingers twitching in my hair, he releases me. His voice is hoarse when he murmurs, “Yeah. Definitely not friends.”

I’m not sure what flashes in his eyes, but his touch is tender, his fingers threading with my free hand as those eyes drop to the bottle that I soon learn is his father’s favorite whiskey too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lincoln / Present

THE LADDER CREAKS under my weight as I reach up to secure the next section of Christmas lights above the window. “Remind me why we’re doing this *now*?”

Hannah watches me from the ground, squinting past the sunlight beaming down on us. She uses her hand to shield her eyes. “Because Christmas is in two weeks. Duh.”

Grumbling as I line up the next string of lights, I look down at her. “Exactly. Why did you guys wait until two weeks before Christmas to decorate? Before you know it, you’ll need to take everything down. It’s a waste of time.”

My little sister shrugs. “You know, if Mom had her way, we’d start decorating before Thanksgiving. But they’ve been preoccupied.”

“With what?” I ask, lifting the nail gun and fastening the next section to the house. “They’re both retired, and Mom only babysits twice a week now.”

Hannah is quiet, causing me to look over at her twisted expression.

I pause what I’m doing, setting the nail gun down on top of the ladder. “What is it? There’s something you aren’t telling me.”

She makes a face. “How do you know?”

“Because you’re a horrible liar,” I state, tapping my eyebrow. “When you’re keeping secrets, your eyebrow starts twitching, and you can’t look people in the eye.”

Hannah forces her gaze up but flinches as soon as we lock eyes. Her right eyebrow twitches despite the effort she puts in to keep it still.

When she realizes I’m right, she throws her hands up. “Ugh. Fine. They told me not to tell you because they didn’t want you to worry.”

Alert has me stiffening. “Is one of them sick or something?”

She nibbles her bottom lip. “Dad was diagnosed with diabetes a while ago, and it’s gotten hard to manage even with the pills they gave him. He

needs to go on insulin.”

Jesus. “Why didn’t they want you to tell me?”

Evading my eyes again, she kicks the ground with her shoe, sending a pebble rolling down the driveway. “Because you’ve had enough to deal with on your own. They didn’t want to add to it.”

Of course they didn’t. They’re always trying to put my feelings first. I’ve told them to stop worrying about me, but they never listen. “I want to know what’s going on in all your lives.”

Hannah peeks up at me. “Do you?”

Her question strikes a nerve. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She holds up her hands in surrender. “I’m just saying that you tend to get so caught up in your own stuff that we’re usually not a priority. I’m not trying to be a bitch, but it’s true.”

Am I that much of an asshole they think I wouldn’t care about their problems? “I’m constantly around here helping out. We have a meal once a week together and catch up. Do you really think my head is so far up my ass that I don’t give a fuck about you?”

My sister groans. “You’re getting testy. I don’t want to fight.”

“Then be real with me.”

We lock eyes, except this time, she doesn’t look away. “You want real?” she questions, crossing her arms. “Fine. We get that you’re in a bad mood because of everything that’s happened lately. You’ve had shit luck, and we all feel for you. But you won’t talk to us about any of it, so we have to walk on eggshells whenever you’re around because we don’t know when you’ll blow up. Not working full-time makes you mad. Taking time to heal makes you mad. People caring about you makes you mad. Georgia makes you mad. Your friend dying makes you mad. You’re mad at yourself and the whole world. But what are you doing about it, Lincoln?”

Shoulders squaring, I grind my teeth. I have the right to be mad, don’t I? That doesn’t mean I’m incapable of feeling other things too.

“I’m in therapy,” I tell her, picking up the nail gun and grabbing the next section of string to hang.

“Which you always bitch about going to,” she points out. “So how much is that really helping if you’re fighting it every time you go?”

Sure, I don’t love talking about all the ways my life went south, but that doesn’t mean I don’t utilize the time. Reluctantly, maybe. But I show up. “I talk about shit in it, Hannah. It’s not like I sit there for an hour in silence.”

Any more. "I'm just not going to come here and tell you everything I talk about there. That's none of your business. And, frankly, you should be thanking me for not dragging my bullshit here. I don't know what you want from me."

"I don't *want* anything," she replies.

Then why are we even having this conversation? "It's good to know that the family thinks I'm too emotionally damaged to give a fuck about anybody other than myself. Guess I have a new topic to talk about during my next session."

Hannah scoffs in exasperation, knowing that arguing won't get her anywhere. But what did she expect? I care about my family, even when they're annoying and pestering me about things I don't want to discuss.

Gripping the nail gun tightly I pause before saying, "Dad's okay, right?"

My little sister only pauses for a second before answering. "Yeah, he'll be all right. It's just an adjustment for him. For all of us."

I nod. I'll have to talk to him when I get inside to make sure there's nothing I can do to help.

As I shift my weight on the ladder to reach over and hold the strand of lights into place with my left hand, a shooting pain sends shockwaves down my whole left side until I'm teetering backward and sucking in a breath.

"Lincoln!" Hannah screams as I fall, the nail gun tumbling in front of the ladder as I drop onto my back behind it.

The impact steals my breath away, making the pain in my bad arm seem dull in comparison.

Groaning, I blink a few times before seeing Hannah hover above me, blocking the sunlight. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. Are you okay? Did you break your back? How many fingers am I holding up?"

She shoves five fingers in my face. "Stop," I groan again, closing my eyes and shoving her hand away. "Give me...a minute."

I hear the front door open, followed by a frantic, "What happened?"

"He fell!" Hannah tells our mother.

"Should I call nine-one-one?"

I say, "No," the same time Hannah screams, "Yes."

Opening my eyes, I take a deep breath before slowly moving my fingers and toes, then my hands and feet, and do a silent examination of my body. I hurt, but nothing feels broken. I count to three and then force myself to

slowly sit up, my mother and sister helping me until I'm seated beside them on the pile of leaves Hannah was supposed to clean up days ago.

"I'm fine," I tell them, rubbing my back and wincing when my bad arm pops. Trying to breathe through the traveling pain, I release it and pat the ground. "The leaves broke my fall."

Hannah blows out a breath before falling onto her butt in relief. "See, Mom? All those times you and Dad got mad about me not cleaning up the yard just saved Lincoln's life."

"I wouldn't go that far," I muse dryly.

She shrugs, taking the credit anyway.

Mom examines me, completely ignoring her daughter. "Are you okay? What happened, honey?"

Moving my head to the right makes the left side crack. It feels good, so I try doing the same on the right side with no luck. If anything, it pulls on all the wrong muscles and adds to the intensifying pain throbbing there. "I moved my bad arm the wrong way and lost my balance. That's all."

The two women frown at me.

"The doctor said it's healed," I tell them, rolling it and hissing through the bite of pain still lingering there.

They share a look, probably trying to figure out who I'm trying to convince—they or me.

"Stop doing that," I grumble at their silent communication.

Mom sighs. "Maybe we should take you to the doctor to make sure you didn't do more damage. We don't want your recovery to be delayed any more, do we?"

I shake my head, making myself stand and stretch out my sore muscles. It hurts like a bitch, but I don't want them worrying. "I don't need to see a doctor."

Hannah picks up the nail gun where it landed in the bushes. "I'm just glad this thing didn't go off and shoot one of us. All I can think about is that episode of *CSI: Miami* when the nail went through that guy's eye." She gags, setting the tool onto the ladder carefully and backing away like it'll pull its own trigger if she moves too quickly. "I think we should call it a day."

I'll agree with her there. "I'll finish this tomorrow."

Mom walks us toward the front door. "Don't worry about it. Your father can get one of the neighbors to help him finish."

“I can do it,” I insist, following her inside. “I just need a break for today. I don’t go into work until tomorrow afternoon, and it’s not like desk work is strenuous. This is good for me.”

I can tell my mother wants to disagree, but she doesn’t. She sits me down on the couch and comes back from the kitchen with an ice pack in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other.

“Speaking of Dad,” I say, eyeing my mother as she sits across from me. “I think we need to talk.”

She instantly looks at Hannah, who checks out of the scolding before she gets a lecture. “I’m not having this conversation. I’ll be in my room. Good luck.” As she passes me, she pats my head like a damn dog and adds, “Glad you’re not dead, big brother.”

I roll my eyes.

Mom sighs.

And the entire time she updates me on Dad’s health, I can’t help but wonder if I really have become *that* selfish that they think they need to hide things from me.



I GET A call from the good doctor about rescheduling our next appointment for personal reasons, and I can’t help but feel a little disappointed. Mostly because one hour of each week has been filled with something other than sitting alone feeling sorry for myself, working out, arguing with my family, or working.

I don’t love talking about my past, but I like the weight that lifts from my chest whenever I walk out of the building afterward. It’s small, but I can tell the difference.

I chalk it up to companionship—that little extra need for...*something*. Even if the topics we talk about leave a lot to be desired.

When the silence at home gets to be too much, I find myself grabbing a bottle of booze off the bar in the dining room, my car keys from the table by the door, and driving fifteen minutes outside of the town limits until I’m pulling up to the white colonial home with CONKLIN in gold lettering on a boulder by the front entrance.

I knock twice before the door opens and lift the bottle of scotch in greeting.

Marissa looks at the liquor, then at me. "I can't drink that," she reminds me, gesturing toward her stomach.

I grin and show her the sparkling cider I bought on the way here. "I'll drink enough liquor for the both of us then."

She steps aside. "Is that your way of saying you're sleeping on my couch tonight?"

Stepping past her, I shoot her a wink. "Only if you tuck me in."

"You're an idiot, but Cooper will be happy you're here. He's been talking about you guys playing video games since the last time you popped by."

I set the two bottles down on the kitchen counter and stare at the stove where two pots are resting on the front burners. "Where is he?"

"I told him he had to clean his room before he had any fun," she says, stirring whatever is in the first pot and glancing over her shoulder at me. "Have you eaten? We're doing spaghetti and meatballs. I just tossed some garlic bread in the oven to toast. If you're going to drink, you might as well absorb some of the alcohol."

My stomach rumbles at the talk of food, making her chuckle. "I could eat."

She grabs three plates from the cupboard and sets them on the counter beside her. "No better plans tonight?"

I watch her dish out the food evenly on each dish from where I lean against the sink across the room. "Plans changed, and I didn't want to stay home. It gets too quiet there."

Sympathy carves into her face as she passes me a plate loaded with spaghetti and meatballs slathered in her famous homemade red sauce. "I know that feeling well."

We're quiet as I grab a fork from the drawer and sit down at the table. She prepares Cooper's plate, then hers, before going to the end of the stairs and calling up to the five-year-old in his room.

She walks back in, props her hip against the fridge, and watches me. "Why here?"

I stop eating to look at her.

"You could go anywhere else," she notes matter-of-factly. "So why did you choose to spend your night with a hormonal pregnant woman and a

child?”

Setting my fork down, I lean back in the creaking chair and answer as honestly as I can. “Because I needed somewhere to go to quiet my thoughts without making poor decisions, and this was always a safe place.”

Her smile is small. “It always will be.”

My eyes lower to my food as footsteps run above us toward the stairs. “I could have seen Georgia,” I admit quietly.

“What made you change your mind?”

Wetting my lips, I watch the hallway for Cooper to appear before focusing back on her. “I decided I needed a friend more.”

“Georgia definitely can’t make spaghetti like I can,” she teases. “It’s the sauce.”

I grin. “You must have made millions selling the recipe to Ragu.”

She chuckles. “And you wouldn’t believe what Betty Crocker offered me for my world-famous brownies.”

Snorting, I go back to eating as Cooper slides into the room with a bright smile on his face when he sees me. “Mom, can I play Super Mario with Uncle Hawk since I finished my homework? Please?”

She holds out a plate. “After you eat, and only if Uncle Hawk wants to play video games with you.”

Cooper’s hopeful gaze turns to me.

“Sure, bud. Let’s eat dinner first.”

That night, I don’t think about anything outside mindless video games and the inner ramblings of a five-year-old. I shoot the shit with Marissa, we drink, and I fall asleep on their couch so I don’t have to go home to the thick silence that I hate so much.

I wake up in the middle of the night to a text from Georgia consisting of two words.

Georgia: Can’t sleep

I stare at the text, my fingers hovering over the keyboard to tell her to give me twenty minutes. But my head feels fuzzy from the booze, and there’s a reason I came here. So, I decide to turn my phone off, roll over, and fall back asleep.

She can call her new boyfriend if she needs somebody tonight.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lincoln / Present

A KNOCK ON my office door has me glancing over from the case file loaded on the computer screen to one of the newer troopers who just graduated from the academy a little over a year and a half ago. Kevin Dickers is fresh-faced and nervous, feigning confidence as he straightens to full height when I sit back in my seat and dip my chin at him in greeting.

“What’s up, Dickers?” My eyes go from him to the thick folder in his hands. “Got something for me?”

He looks over his shoulder before stepping in, gaining my full attention with an arch of my brows when he closes the door behind him. “I was hoping you had a couple minutes to talk.”

I’ve barely had more than five conversations with the kid, so this seems a little out of the ordinary. “Something on your mind?”

His fingers clench around the folder. “I don’t know if you know this, but Sergeant Broughton asked me to go through Conklin’s files and make sure there weren’t any open cases we missed in the system.”

Eyes darting to the manilla folder again, I recognize the illegible chicken scratch on the top. “I figured somebody was going to. Didn’t know who they assigned to it.”

Frankly, I didn’t want to, or I’d be pestering the person nonstop about what they might or might not have found. When I got back from my medical leave, I had more important things to focus on. Like the meetings with the senior investigator and lieutenant about what had happened that day. It was Conklin’s body cam footage that got me out of facing Internal Affairs and being questioned. I was only on the last few minutes, my body blocking the camera feed as I grabbed his body and dragged him to safety.

They decided the big focus was on remembering Conklin and healing, not sending me to face IA while I still tried recovering.

Kevin scratches his throat. “Look, I haven’t brought this to Broughton yet. When I read through it, I figured you’d want to look at it first.”

“What is it exactly?”

He extends the folder out. “Conklin wrote your badge number in the margins next to some other stuff I couldn’t quite make out. The guy’s handwriting wasn’t great.”

Conklin’s handwriting *was* atrocious. It was a good thing reports and tickets were all typed up and printed or else nobody would be able to figure out what he was saying.

When I open the file, I see a list of names. It extends halfway down the page, with a handful of names highlighted and a couple others underlined or circled. Arrows connect a few names to others, with addresses next to them.

My blood goes cold when I see one of the addresses listed.

123 Cover Creek Road.

Jaw grinding, I close the file.

“I wasn’t sure if you saw that already,” he says, dropping his voice in case anyone passes by the room. “It seemed like he was going to show you that eventually. Before...”

Before I told him to meet me at 123 Cover Creek Road to serve Jakob Volley with an arrest warrant where he’d inevitably breathe his last breath.

Nostrils flaring, I ask, “You said you didn’t show Broughton this?”

He shakes his head, his throat bobbing at the tone I’m using. “I didn’t think it would be a good idea. Sir.”

Sir. Christ, the kid looks like he’s about to piss himself. I lean forward, tapping the top of the folder. “I’ll buy you breakfast for the next two months if you keep this between us. Pretend you never saw it. Feel me?”

He shifts, his eyes going from the file to the door, back to me. “I wasn’t going to say anything anyway. You don’t need to buy me breakfast. I...” His throat clears. “I don’t think you remember me, but we’ve met before. Long before I was a cop. You helped my mom get out of a nasty relationship by giving her some tough love that she needed to hear. I was sixteen and didn’t know how to help her, but whatever you said made a difference. She pressed charges against her dumbass boyfriend, and you got him hauled away and helped her get a protective order against him.”

Studying him, I try picturing a pimply-faced teenage version of the cop in front of me. He does look vaguely familiar, and the case rings a bell. I wish I could say that was the only domestic I’ve ever responded to, but it was one of many. “I think I know who you’re talking about.” I rack my

brain for a name before snapping my fingers when something clicks. “Is your mother Danielle?”

He smiles. “Yeah. Danielle Corwin.”

No shit. “Small world,” I murmur, glancing down at the file. “Is she doing okay?”

Dickers nods. “She’s good. Better than. She got remarried a year ago. He’s a nice dude. Better than her usual type.”

Swiping my jaw, I say, “Good for her.”

We’re quiet for a minute.

Then he says, “I look up to you. Wanted to help people because of you.”

I can’t help but laugh. It’s short and dry. Bemused, if anything. “I’m not the kind of guy you want to look up to, kid. Trust me.”

His eyes are wary. “Because of Conklin?”

My teeth grind. “I’ve hurt people. Unintentionally, but still.”

He doesn’t answer right away. “You’ve helped a hell of a lot more people than you’ve hurt, Hawk.”

He doesn’t say more on the topic. He simply opens the door and steps out, leaving me with a, “Have a good holiday.”

I stare down at the thick folder, almost afraid to open it back up.

When I do, my eyes go to one name.

Nikolas Del Rossi.



A HAND DARTS out and slaps mine away from taking another pepperoni roll from the plate. “It would be nice if you saved some for the others,” Mom chides, waving me away from the kitchen with a dish towel. “Scoot. I need to finish cooking lunch before everyone else gets here.”

From the other room, I hear Dad and Hannah laugh over our family’s favorite Christmas movie—*National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*. It was tradition to watch it on Christmas Day, and we haven’t done it in a while since I typically pick up Christmas shifts so my coworkers with families can have it off.

“Who else is coming? I thought Uncle Sam and Aunt Becky couldn’t make it.”

She wipes her hands off before moving over to the stove where potatoes are boiling in a pot, stirring them a few times before putting the lid back on. "They couldn't. But our neighbors are coming by for lunch. You remember the Coleman's, don't you?"

Vaguely. "I didn't know you were close with them. Didn't Dad have beef with the husband over shrubs or something stupid?"

"That was silly man stuff they resolved years ago. They're friends now. And I think Hannah is even friends with their daughter. Have you met her? Oh, she's precious, Lincoln. You'll like her."

My eyes narrow at her chipper tone that seems far from innocent. "Since when did Hannah start hanging out with their daughter?"

Mom shrugs. "Opal is doing her master's program at the same college as Hannah. They see each other around campus. It must have spurred a friendship."

"And now she's coming here."

She looks up from what she's doing. "Yes. Now her whole family is coming here. I asked if they had plans, they didn't, so I invited them. Behave yourself while they're here and try to filter your humor. Some people don't get it the way we do."

Since when has she cared about my dark sense of humor being a bother to people? "Is there another reason you invited them?"

"Like what?"

I don't answer.

She sighs, putting her hands on her hips. "I'm being neighborly. It's important to have a good rapport with the people you live by. Plus, isn't it nice to be able to hang out with people your own age?"

People my own age. I knew it. "You're trying to set something up between me and their daughter."

"I am not!"

"Mom."

"Lincoln." She meets my eyes, but I can see right through the facade. "Okay, fine. *Maybe* I think it would be nice if you met Opal. She's very pretty. And she's in school to be a teacher, so she'll have a stable job when she graduates."

Unbelievable. "I don't need you to set me up with anyone, Ma. Least of all, the neighbor's daughter. I can find my own dates."

“Well, you’ve been doing a terrible job so far,” she comments nonchalantly, getting back to cooking.

“Most parents would encourage their kids not to rush into relationships right after getting out of serious ones,” I point out.

She harrumphs. “Well, most parents wouldn’t have to watch their child keep going back to the old relationship even after the divorce is final.” Looking up, she meets my eyes, knowing I have no room to argue. “I thought a little push might be good for you.”

“So you thought getting me to date the neighbor’s kid was a good idea?”

“Why would it be a bad one?”

I steal another pepperoni roll and ignore her disapproving stare. “I don’t have the best track record with women, for one.”

“You were in a relationship for almost ten years, sweetie,” she answers softly. “And you’ve been out of it for a while now. Don’t you think it’s time to put yourself back out there? I’m not saying you have to marry this girl, but talking to her won’t hurt.”

There is no way Dad or Hannah were in on this because they would have talked some sense into her long before now. “You do realize this could go very badly if I do something to upset Opal, right? Then you have to live next door to her disgruntled parents, and Dad and Mr. Coleman will have a lot more to be irritated over than grass clippings or whatever the hell started their argument years ago.”

She smiles. “Don’t upset her then. Problem solved.”

I roll my eyes, wondering if she thinks it’s really that simple. “Does Hannah know about this?”

“She knows her friend is coming.”

I’m going to assume that’s a no. “She won’t be okay with you trying to set me up with her friend.”

She waves it off nonchalantly. “That’s no business of hers anyway. Plus, she used to have crushes on your friends all the time when she was in high school.”

The difference is they never went out with her because of our age difference. Opal may be older than Hannah, but that doesn’t change how I feel about Mom’s scheme.

“Mom, I really don’t want to go out with Opal,” I tell her in a last-ditch effort to stop whatever fantasy is happening in her head.

She frowns. “Then who do you want to go out with? Because I’ve got to be honest with you, honey. Sometimes, I worry about you. The last thing any of us want is to see you stuck on somebody from the past.”

But that’s the problem, isn’t it?

Because Georgia isn’t the past at all.

Opening that file from Conklin reminded me that she’s still a big part of my life. So is her father and all of the lowlife assholes he’s used his connections on to try taking me down.

He may have gotten Conklin out of the picture, but I was going to make sure he didn’t take anybody else down with him.

Mom’s hand comes down on my arm. “I don’t like that look.”

“What look?” I ask coyly.

Wariness settles into her aging face. “The same one you had when you told me you would be fine when you and Matty went to that house.”

My stomach drops, and suddenly, I don’t want the half-eaten pepperoni roll in my hand.



THE GOOD DOCTOR watches me with one hand curled around the edge of the notebook she’s already written in once since I sat down ten minutes ago. “How was your holiday?”

Small talk. I haven’t been very talkative today because I’ve barely slept the last few nights. I wake up after three hours and give up when the nightmares take over. Instead, I sit in the living room with a glass of whiskey in one hand and the file Conklin put together in the other. He’d told me he needed to talk to me about something he’d found, but he never got the chance to.

The answers are in that file.

“They were...interesting,” I finally answer, mind still lingering on my nightly read. Names, addresses, and phone numbers circulate in my head, leaving me far from the therapy office.

She tilts her head. “How so?”

“My mom wanted to set me up with their neighbor’s daughter,” I explain, rolling my eyes.

I managed to talk her out of it before the Colemans got there, but it was obvious she was still trying to get me to talk to her when she conveniently decided to assign seating at the dining table and put me beside Opal rather than at my usual spot I've had for years next to Dad.

Thankfully, Opal was oblivious. Or maybe she chose not to notice how many times my mother would bring up my accomplishments for the sake of both our sanities. Hannah would cut in and remind her friend that I've had my fair share of problems too, bringing up my divorce and getting scolded by our parents.

But I didn't mind.

I didn't want my mother to make me sound like the golden child. Sure, I'm decent-looking. I work out. I take care of myself. But I have baggage. A lot of it. And being with me wouldn't be any easier than it was the first time around, so I didn't want my mom to sell it like I was a prize to be won. If anything, I'd be the defective toy someone would return after a few days of trying to make it work.

"How did that make you feel?"

"Uncomfortable." I pause, thinking about it while stretching my legs out in front of me. "And like a loser, if I'm being honest. I don't need my mother's help to get dates."

She studies me, touching the pen but not picking it up. "Have you dated since your divorce?"

I've had a lot of opportunities to, but I never bit the bait. "No. I haven't gone on a date since asking Georgia on one all those years ago."

"Why is that?"

Where do I begin? "Because I don't want to rush it. Now isn't a good time in my life. If I bring somebody into it, it won't last. I can't give anybody what they would need for a healthy relationship to work because I have to be selfish right now. I need to focus on getting better and getting back to work and—" *Finishing what Conklin and I started.*

I stop myself from adding that part.

"I just need to be the best version of myself before I can bring anybody into my life," I conclude.

A thoughtful noise comes from her. "I can respect that. In fact, it's admirable. Some people move on too quickly and find themselves in uncomfortable situations."

I know a few people who've done that, but I don't want it to be me. "I know my mom means well, but the last thing I need is somebody new coming into my life and pulling focus away from what's important."

"And that is...?"

I offer her the short answer. "Being normal."

She nods slowly, thoughtfully. "Do you think you'd be ready to move on even if you were approved to return to work? To get back to whatever you deem as 'normal' life? Or do you feel like there would be something, or someone, holding you back?"

I know who she's referring to without her saying Georgia's name. "I haven't seen her in weeks."

"That wasn't my question."

"But you're alluding to my relationship with my ex-wife," I counter, eyebrows raised. "You're asking if I'll stop seeing her. Isn't that right?"

"If that's what you think I mean."

My eyes narrow. "I'm not big on games, doc. I like when people tell me how it is."

Her lips curve upward slightly. "It's not my place to tell you how it is, Mr. Danforth. I'm here to listen, not to insert my opinion."

"But you have one."

"I have many," she agrees.

"So what are they?"

She's silent.

"Oh, come on." I sit forward, leaning my elbows on my bent knees. "I'm sure there's a lot you want to say. What's one of them? I can handle it. I'm a big boy."

For the briefest second, her eyes scale down the front of me. From my work boots to my stained work jeans to the black and white plaid shirt that I left the top two buttons undone on. But I see it, no matter how fast it happened or how quickly her gaze met mine again, as if her eyes never lingered at all.

She picks something nonexistent off her shirt. "I can see that," is all she says, professionalism thick in her tone.

Chuckling, I can tell she's trying not to cross any lines. I respect it, even if I wish she'd let down one of those barriers. "One free pass. Anything you want, say it. Don't hold back."

Indecision flickers across her face, and I wonder if she's actually going to give in. It feels like forever before she sets her pen down and interweaves her fingers together, resting them on her lap. Her nails aren't painted the way I was used to seeing on Georgia. They're short and neutral, not attention-grabbing. Neither is her makeup. She wants to blend in, not stand out.

"It seems like you're using Georgia as an excuse not to move on with your life," she says, her voice the same even tone it always is. "Why put yourself out there and truly heal from the past if you have somebody you're already comfortable with? I know a lot of people who choose to settle because they don't want to start over and be vulnerable with new people. But you shouldn't fall into that trap. You have a lot to offer somebody, Mr. Danforth."

I smile genuinely for the first time since starting these sessions. "You sound like my mother."

Her lips twitch before neutralizing again. "I wish I could say that's the first time I've heard that, but it's not."

"It's not a bad thing," I amend. "My mom is an honest person. She wants what's best for me. For some reason, she thinks I'm 'stuck' and need an extra nudge to get back into living my life again."

"What is it about Georgia that makes it hard for you to let go?" she asks next. It's a valid question, but not one I can answer easily.

Leaning back, I make myself comfortable on the couch again. "You can't erase history, doc. No matter how much you may want to."

"No," she agrees. "But you can learn from it."

There's no point in arguing with the truth, so I simply nod instead. "There are many reasons why letting go completely will be impossible."

"So, enlighten me," she presses lightly.

Swallowing, I wet my lips and let out a deep breath. "I always thought I would do it once."

"Do what once?"

"Marriage. Love." I shake my head, looking up at the ceiling and remembering everything that's happened since the day I told her I'd help her. "Our story was unique, but it was genuine. At least for me. I never thought I'd have to do it all over again."

Maybe I settled the first time around and told myself it was good enough, like so many people have done before me.

I wanted to believe Georgia was the woman for me. That it was fate who put her in my path. I told myself a lot of things to justify my actions.

To make myself believe I was right.

Because if there's one thing I fucking hate in life, it's being wrong.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Georgia / Seven Years Ago

IT'S BEEN MONTHS since I've seen my father, but it might as well have been years when I get the first look of his face. He looks gauntly. Has he lost weight? He was never good at eating routinely when he was busy and tended to snap when people interrupted him to bring him anything.

The dark brown hair on his head has filled in with silver, making him look so much older than his fifty-three. And the bags under his bloodshot eyes make me wonder when the last time he got a full night's sleep was.

"You know what I find fascinating, Georgia?" he asks, tucking his hand into the front pocket of his expensive slacks as he studies the shelves full of local history books that the library meticulously organized by alphabetical order.

He answers his own question before I can find my voice, too stunned by his presence to fully grasp that he's in front of me. "The company you keep. First, it was your little friend Emilia DeMatteo and her godawful hair and wild temperament, and now, a cop. A *cop*. One who, might I add, is a little too curious for my liking."

How does he know about Lincoln? How did he know I'd be here, for that matter? I only accepted the part-time job at the public library a few weeks ago, and my schedule isn't consistent on a weekly basis.

"I suppose I'm partly to blame for letting you go," he continues, not sparing me one look as he takes a book from the shelf and examines the cover. "I'll admit, it was a...rash decision made in the heat of the moment. But I didn't expect you to make the naive choices you have. A cop, Georgia? Really? I know I allowed you to linger around Chamberlin, but officers make things tricky if they're not in your back pocket."

If I had the choice, I wouldn't have lingered around Chamberlin or his wandering hands. "You kicked me out," I point out, standing taller in feigned confidence. "What was I supposed to do?"

When he looks at me, his expression is blank. Unreadable. There's no indication that he's sorry for what happened between us or that he's missed me. It's been almost five months. One hundred and fifty-two days since we've spoken or seen each other.

"You were supposed to come back home," he informs me, his eyes roaming over the hair that I've chopped to my shoulders. I'd debated dyeing it something drastic like Millie suggested, but I couldn't go through with more changes than I already had.

"I had a meeting at Dutchess," he tells me, speaking of the golf club he frequents. "And had quite the talk with Antonio Carbone and some of his... partners."

The way he says his name makes my skin crawl. I don't waste my time asking how Antonio or his son is because I have a feeling I already know. I'd imagine the man isn't very happy, considering he was promised a wife for his son, only for me to run away and ruin it.

"It has taken months to get him to speak to me after the little stunt you pulled," he informs me, piercing me with those disapproving brown eyes that scratch my soul. "There have been a lot of sleepless nights where I've worked hard to get back into his and his partner's favor. They are *not* the kind of men you break deals with, Georgia. I'm lucky Antonio was even willing to show up today and discuss moving forward with our business proposition."

My heart drops. "I thought the engagement was off," I say, voice no more than a notch above a whisper. "What proposition could he be willing to agree to?"

"The Carbone family's real estate business is expanding nearly as fast as the Del Rossi Group," he explains. "Combining the two would mean having an empire that could build, flip, and sell new homes in more areas. Antonio and I have mutual investors who feel this merger would benefit each business, allowing them to put stakes into one sole company rather than two. We were coming to an agreement before you decided to have your little act of rebellion."

I still don't understand where I come into play. "The Carbones are a respected family with the same traditions as you and Leani. It was my understanding that the engagement was off because of the circumstances."

"Consider it back on," he says firmly. "Luca is hardly a man with a clean reputation, as you well know. With some convincing, his father was

on board with our original agreement.”

A body chill shivers down my spine.

“Rumors can wreak havoc on a family, but sometimes they’re just that. Rumors. Surely, a woman such as yourself, raised by two reputable people, would never stoop so low as to put your family’s good name at risk. You’ve been taught better. Raised better. Have you not?”

I gape at him. He wants me to lie. Pretend the last five months never happened. “You lied for me and told them what I did never happened.” I realize, shaking my head in disbelief.

“As far as I’m concerned, your little indiscretion with the cop didn’t happen.”

“And where do they think I’ve been all this time? Certainly not planning my wedding.”

“Away,” he answers plainly.

“And they just believed you?”

“They believe what they want to. They believe what they *need* to, especially when fifty million is on the line.”

My eyes widen at the number. “So that’s my price tag? Fifty million dollars.” The number churns my stomach. “Why would marriage need to be involved if you could simply partner and merge your companies? If you have investor interest, then make a contract that benefits you and Antonio. I don’t need to marry Luca for anything to be signed.”

He steps toward me, his presence overwhelming as I become encased by the shadow he casts. “That’s where you’re wrong. Be smart, Georgia. All of those meetings you sat in on as a little girl and eavesdropped on as a teenager should have taught you that everybody needs leverage.”

Leverage. Is that all I am to him?

“This deal will make us both very rich men with very powerful assets, which means there needs to be a tie that ensures it does not go south. The investors don’t want to put their money into failing businesses without some reassurance, and I’ve already stretched myself too thin with the men expecting profit. Marriage is about creating allies, and you and Luca Carbone will be the basis of the one we are making for this new investment. It means being put on their good side, which we both desperately need. It’s time to come home. I’ve given you time to play house and make-believe, but now it’s time to be serious.”

He’s not asking.

He's telling.

Why would he think I'd agree to this? "I love you, even after everything. But please don't make me do this. You must have heard the awful things Luca has done to women—"

"Like use them? Sleep with them? It would appear, my dear, that you two aren't that different then. What have you been doing these past few months?"

We both know Luca's reputation goes beyond playboy status. "I'm not using anybody."

The statement tastes sour on my tongue like my body wants to reject the sentiment for the lie it is.

Because, deep down, I *am* using someone.

My father checks his watch. "I'll give you two days to gather what little you have at your friend's house before sending you a car. That should be more than enough time for you to realize how silly this whole charade has been."

"Is this what Mom would have wanted for me?" I question, hoping to reason with him. "You two were so happy. Don't I deserve to get the same chance at finding somebody to make me happy too?"

My father's eyes flicker before something dark flashes in them. "Your mother," he says slowly, "wanted you to have a future. She *died* for you to have a future."

What is he talking about? "She died in a car accident."

"Do not be naive, Georgia," he coolly states, his voice sending ice piercing through my heart. "I have shielded you all I can, but the payment is due for the favors I've asked. She couldn't get us out of it, and neither can I. It's time to come home."

I blink slowly, shaking my head.

He doesn't elaborate on the jarring reply that has a heaviness settled into my chest. "Whatever fantasy you've made for yourself in this life"—he scowls at our surroundings—"would make your mother roll in her grave knowing what she sacrificed for you."

My lips part, but nothing comes out except a pathetic, shaky exhale.

"You won't be happy if you stay here," he informs me, gesturing around the room. "Working a job that pays nothing. Living with somebody you barely know. Is this truly what you want, Georgia? Because it's certainly not what I want for my daughter."

The question weighs on my conscience.

What *do* I want? I know one thing I don't.

I don't want to marry Luca Carbone, no matter what it could do for my family. He knows me even less than Lincoln.

"What about what I want?" I ask him.

"You were born for better things than this," he tells me, not giving my question the time of day. If he actually gave a damn about me, he would care enough to answer.

He walks away, saying, "Two days" over his shoulder. "If you aren't ready in two days, there will be consequences. If you think Luca Carbone has a bad reputation, you haven't seen anything yet. The Carbones are important people, Georgia. Being tied to them as allies is far better than being tied to them as enemies."



WHEN LINCOLN PULLS up to the bookstore parking lot later that night, I don't feel the normal excitement I usually do. My brain has been wrapped around my father's parting words for hours, latching on to the unspoken threat that still makes no sense to me. Not even seeing the window display of my favorite author's newest book release, which I've been looking forward to for weeks, pulls me out of my mental slump.

"That book you've been talking about came out today. I checked." He opens his door and gives me a look, seeing if I'm going to follow. "I don't know what's going on in that pretty little head of yours, but you're thirty feet away from your favorite cold brew, and I'm pretty sure I saw them advertise those dry as hell chocolate and rosemary scones you love so much."

My stomach doesn't even rumble from the thought of the sweet treats waiting inside for me or the book I've been nerding out about since I got a library card at work and binged the first three books in the series for free.

"Peaches?" he says softly, his fingertips brushing away strands of hair from my face.

I clear my throat, not trusting myself when he touches me. Even the slightest gesture melts the layer of protective ice surrounding my heart that

my father put there himself. "Let's go in."

He frowns but slides out of his seat and walks around the front of his truck to my side. When he opens my door, there's a small, comforting smile on his face as he leans against the frame. "You can talk to me. About anything."

My eyes peek at him through my lashes. I don't have to look long to know he means it. "Do you feel like I'm using you?"

Lincoln's brows pinch. "No. Why?"

Wetting my lips, I fiddle with my fingers until he tips my chin up to meet his eyes.

"Georgia," he says softly, the pad of his thumb caressing my bottom lip. "Why would you think that?"

Briefly, I close my eyes and let myself enjoy the way his hand feels on my face. His warmth soaks into me, calming me. "Because my father says I'm no different than Luca Carbone."

Lincoln's hand stiffens. "When did you speak to your father?"

In the back of my mind, I hear a clock.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

And I know my time is running out.

Two days—less than that, since I spent most of the afternoon sulking in the bubble bath while Lincoln was at his family's house helping his father with some sort of engine restoration project. By the time he'd gotten back, I convinced myself to tell him about my father showing up at work.

But then he kissed me, and it warmed me more than the bubble bath had. And the words got stuck in my throat, lodging there and holding on for dear life to my vocal cords because I didn't want to believe what my father implied, and I was scared Lincoln would tell me he's right.

"He came to the library," I whisper.

Lincoln's hand drops. "Did he do something?"

His hard tone has me swallowing. "N-no."

The man in front of me looks over my face as if he needs to double-check for himself. "I need you to listen to me, Georgia, and listen good."

It's hard to look away when his voice becomes low and demanding, a husky undertone that has me watching him as his nostrils flare.

"There hasn't been a day when I haven't been willing to help you. Not because you asked but because you *didn't*. You're stubborn and determined to make something of yourself, no matter what gets taken away or what

obstacle is put in front of you. If I didn't want you here, I wouldn't have let you in. Understand?"

My heart is beating fast in my chest as I let my head bob up and down slowly.

"Did he say anything else to you?" he asks in a tone ten times softer than before.

Lips parting, I try forcing the words out.

Because Lincoln Danforth cares.

I'm not sure how much.

I'm not even sure why.

But he does.

And that's more than I'm used to.

"He wants me to marry Luca Carbone," I whisper, my fear-laden words thick as tears prick the back of my eyes. "Apparently, being a Del Rossi means coming with a price tag. And the Carbones are willing to pay it."

Lincoln's eyes, once a beautiful brown and glimmering with mischief, are now shadowed with anger. "He can't have you."

He can't have you.

Is that really up to me?

"Tell me," he grinds out. "Tell me what Nikolas said."

I hesitate only a moment.

Watch him.

Feel his anger radiate off of him.

Then I tell him everything.

His face turns from concern to frustration to anger. Each emotion clear in his eyes, flaring his nostrils and twisting his lips. Then, when I'm done talking, silent and worried about what he'll say, it's like a wave washes over him, and all that anger just...disappears.

I hold my breath, ignoring the sting in my lungs as I watch him watch me. His face is red and the veins in his neck pulse so badly I worry he'll combust.

I think about my father's threats toward him. Can I live with myself if I let him get between Lincoln and the life he's building for himself? I'm not sure I can.

Letting out a tiny breath, I say, "I don't want to be the person who holds you back from your future. I'm worried he'll do something to you if I don't

go. He wasn't making any sense. That man is not the father I used to know, Lincoln. He's different."

He straightens to his full height, his eyes piercing mine for a moment longer before uttering two words: "Marry me."

I blink slowly, surely not having heard him right. There's no way I could have.

He taps his chest. "Marry me instead. Not Luca. *Me*."

All I can do is stare in disbelief.

"It's not a romantic gesture," he offers, no apology in his tone but a softness trying to break through his otherwise hardened expression. "But it's a genuine one. Marry me, Georgia. We'll figure out the rest later."

The rest. Love. Happiness.

A shaky breath escapes my lips. "But his threat..."

"We'll figure it out later," he repeats, stepping up to me and cupping my face. His fingers curl around the back of my neck, pulling my head to his. His forehead rests on mine, his breath tickling my lips. "The way I see it, it's him or me. And I'd like to think being shackled to me wouldn't be so bad."

He's offering to marry me so I won't have to be tied to Luca Carbone. He's willing to sacrifice love for...what? Sex? Infatuation? Lust?

It's him or me.

It's not exactly a hard decision.

I've gotten to know Lincoln pretty well.

His tics.

His habits.

His heart.

The kind of generosity he's offered is what I would like to think my mother would have wanted for me. Not whatever future my father is set on me having.

"Peaches?" Lincoln asks softly. "I know I'm not the most romantic person, and there's a lot in life I can't give you. But I'd like to think I can give you peace, if nothing else."

Peace.

Chest swelling, I find it hard to swallow.

I don't know what choices my parents made that led me here, but maybe it was time to make my own from here on out.

So, I find myself nodding.

Because I don't know what else to do.

To say.

There's no ring.

No dress.

No venue.

Twenty-four hours later, two of his friends, Michael Knight and Morgan Vaughn, meet us at the courthouse to be our witnesses. I've never met them before. Barely heard them talked about. But they're there at a wedding that feels like a stranger's. A judge who knows Lincoln marries us. We sign some paperwork. Take a few pictures that feel forced and awkward.

Within two hours, I'm no longer Georgia Del Rossi but Georgia Danforth.

A wife.

And it feels so...fake.

But I remind myself it wouldn't feel real if it were Luca Carbone I was kissing to seal the vows I would be forced to repeat, no matter if I was in an expensive gown with a church full of people watching with feigned smiles.

I prefer it small. Intimate. That way, nobody can see the doubt in my eyes when I repeat those two words for the four other people in the room to hear.

I do.

The entire thirty-minute ride to a fancy steakhouse that Lincoln told his family to meet us at is spent thinking about what my father had said.

Whatever ridiculous fantasy you've made for yourself in this life would make her roll in her grave.

Maybe that's why there's a nagging feeling in my stomach again. I wish my mother could have been here to tell me it would be all right. That she was happy I had a choice. That she liked Lincoln as much as I'm starting to.

Don't be naive, Georgia, my father had scolded me. What did he know about her death that I don't? I'd spent the last decade and a half mourning the woman for dying in a car accident, but why do I think there's more to the story than he's letting on?

Two days later, a black Escalade pulls up to the apartment building, but it isn't my father who opens the door. It's Leani, and in her hands is a box of belongings that had once been mine.

She gets out, her face looking...different.

Tired. Frail. She stares at the thrifted pair of jeans I got for fifteen dollars up to the plain tee with a stain on it that I got for two with disapproval.

My stepmother looks wary as she lowers the box to the ground. “You could have changed everything for us. I had hoped you would.”

Looking at me one last time, then at the building that’s a far cry from the mansion I grew up in, she shakes her head.

“Be careful, Georgia,” is her last warning before opening the car door. She gives me one last once-over with a deep frown settled into her face before letting out a shaky breath. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to us now, but I know it will not be good. Use your new connections wisely. It’ll be the only way...” She stops herself.

She gets inside and drives away, her words making the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

In the box are clothes I tolerated once, some I even liked but couldn’t fit into my bag on my hasty exit, all cut and dirtied. Underneath them, a wedding dress. Probably an expensive one because they wouldn’t dare be caught dead buying something cheap. Not even to destroy it. The silk and lace portions that might have once been a beautiful gown are all torn.

There’s no note.

No explanation.

No threat.

But I hear the message loud and clear.

I betrayed them. Cut the final ties.

Luca Carbone be damned.

I am no longer a Del Rossi.

No longer an item to be bought.

And they won’t forget that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Georgia / Seven Years Ago

MY MEDIOCRE PAYING job at the public library that takes up three days of my week is slow and even a little boring, but a manageable pace I can handle, given my nonexistent experience.

It's three days a week I don't have to sit in the apartment waiting for Lincoln, *my husband*, to come home. His family was shocked, maybe even a little hurt that they weren't at our wedding, but they were happy for us. Genuinely happy in a way I know my father could never be.

His mother hugged me, his father followed lead, and Hannah congratulated me, asking why I lied about not being involved with her brother.

Being married is...odd. Nothing has changed. There's no ring on my finger or routine that's any different than before. The only thing we have to show for it is a piece of paper and the photographs that somebody took when Judge Tallahassee said, "*You may now kiss the bride.*"

I suppose it's good that nothing has changed.

Lincoln told me it would be fine when I'd bitten my nails to the quick as each day passed and I heard nothing of my father. As much as Lincoln insisted he couldn't do anything to us, I wasn't sure I believed him.

Because maybe *he* couldn't.

But what about the Carbones or the people my father and Antonio were associated with can?

Lincoln said he was using psychological warfare to keep me paranoid. If he was, it's working. Because as each day passes, I wait on the edge of my seat for the other shoe to drop. And it never does. It hovers just above the ground, teasing the anticipation for the final *thump*.

Rereading the same page of a new book I picked up, thanks to my pestering thoughts, I settle into my spot behind the counter. It's a slower day than usual, and I hate it. Because the fewer people I'm dealing with, the

more time I have to think. And being inside my head is not a fun place to reside right now.

I'm about to give up on the book altogether when somebody walks in, letting a swift breeze in that shuffles my hair.

"Checking out or dropping off?" I ask, finishing the sentence I'm on before tucking a bookmark in my spot.

I bolt up when I see the person standing a few feet from the desk. "Mrs. Ricci?"

The older woman looks different in blue jeans and a sweater that she never would have been allowed to wear at the house. My father always said professionalism was dressing for the part, and denim didn't belong. Even for the housekeeper.

She's studying the space I occupy, a softness to her face that looks older somehow. "I didn't believe it," she admits with a shake of her head before meeting my eyes. "They said you were working here."

They? "Who?"

It's not the only question I want to ask her. I want to know why she hasn't tried reaching out since I left. Why she'd let my father put such a large wedge between us when I thought we were friends—or whatever two people with our age gap could be. After a while, I'd given up hoping to hear from anybody. Her. My family. Millie.

My father wanted to isolate me, and he'd gotten his wish.

Mrs. Ricci takes a book off the stack that I need to reshelve and studies the cover. Her lips curve when she sees the half-naked cowboy on the front. "I wasn't surprised when I heard you'd gotten a job at a library. You loved reading since you were a little girl. Do you remember all those times you would ask me to read you to sleep?"

Hurt fills my sternum at her attempt at reminiscing. It seems misplaced. "You didn't reach out," I say, voice quieter than before.

Guilt crests on her face. "You know I couldn't. What your father wants..."

He gets.

Swallowing, I reluctantly nod.

My former housekeeper gives me another once-over, and I wonder if she's disappointed in what she sees. The clothes I'm wearing are cheap thrift store or clearance rack finds—a far cry from the designer brands I used to parade around in. I cut my own hair, so the ends are probably

uneven. I never packed my makeup in my haste to leave and only picked up the cheapest items I could find at the dollar store. I look nothing like the put-together girl she was used to seeing.

I've let myself be proud of how far I've come on my own despite the odds, but shame always finds a way to creep in somehow.

"Your father made it clear that I was not to reach out regardless of how badly I wanted to," she explains, setting the book down. "But that doesn't mean I didn't care. I do, Georgia."

"If you wanted to talk to me, you could have found a way. Even when we think we don't, we have choices. I got out. I figured out how."

Sadness sweeps over her face. "Life isn't that easy, sweet girl."

"I thought you would have fought harder for me the way you used to." I sit down and feel my shoulders drop.

Her smile saddens. "I have always fought for you. I told you to go that night. I took his palm for you when you came back the next morning. I wanted you to find your happiness outside of your family."

Guilt crashes into me when my eyes go to the cheek my father had struck. I look down at the book I've abandoned when the memory becomes too much.

"I'm here because I had to see for myself if you were okay. I heard you were working here. I..." She stops herself, reaching out to place her hand in front of me. "*I needed* to see for myself."

"So you *do* have a mind of your own," I comment dryly, staring at her nails. They're painted light pink. I wonder who does them now that I don't live there. I used to beg her to let me do them every two weeks, and she'd let me pick the craziest colors.

"You've changed."

I don't know if that's a good thing or not. "I needed to."

Mrs. Ricci takes a long moment to process that. I can feel her eyes studying me, but I refuse to glance up. "I can see that."

Waiting for more, an apology, *anything*, I realize it's all in vain.

I suppose anybody who worked for the Del Rossi family would have to be used to a certain kind of demeanor. Mrs. Ricci has worked for my family longer than most people. She's used to cool indifference by now. An apology might be too much to ask for.

"Georgia..." Hope blossoms inside me, but I try containing it the best I can. "Your father threatened Millie's parents. He said if Millie spoke to you,

he would take away her mother's store and her father's license. It's all they have. That's why Millie hasn't reached out. I'm sure her parents made sure of it. He can do worse. *Has* done worse because of the people he knows. And he's capable of more when he's crossed."

All I can do is gawk at her. She clearly knows more than she's letting on, just like everybody else around me. The question is, why won't anybody tell me the truth?

"I no longer work for him," she admits. "He didn't feel like my loyalty was to him anymore, and he's right. I've always had a soft spot for you—always stayed to ensure you had somebody when it was clear they couldn't be what you needed."

I'd guessed that my father threatened people to make sure I had nobody in my corner. He thought isolating me would bring me back to him with my tail tucked between my legs.

But it didn't.

"He fired you?"

She nods once. "I don't regret it. Once upon a time, your father was a good man. But now he's...confused. Driven by things that will be his ruin. His business dealings are getting dangerous, and the people he's associating with are putting pressure on him, which puts him in a peculiar spot. I have no reason to watch his downfall now that you've made it out."

What does she know that I don't? "Should I be concerned?"

Mrs. Ricci's expression turns contemplative, making me wonder what she's holding back. "I want you to be careful. You shouldn't underestimate what your father is capable of, especially when he's at risk of losing so much. The Carbone family are not the worst people he knows. There are others who wish your father harm, and they'll do whatever they can to hit him where it hurts. Remember that. Okay?"

Her warning makes goosebumps pebble my arms, but I force myself to nod.

It feels like forever before I'm able to form words, including the question that's prodded my conscience for weeks. "You knew my mother, right?"

A genuine smile returns. "I did."

"Did she...?" Pressing my lips together, I take a deep breath. "Did she really die in a car accident? Or was it something else?"

Her smile slips, only for a microsecond, before she replaces it with a tighter one. “That is a question you are better off not knowing the answer to, Georgia.”

The reply cements an ugly feeling in the pit of my stomach. “How am I supposed to be careful if everybody keeps me in the dark?”

Her eyes warm. “Oh, sweet girl,” she says, sighing. “Sometimes the dark is the safest place to be. Because without the light, you don’t see the monsters for what they really are.”

She steps back, turning her head toward the door before hesitating. “Was it for love?” she eventually asks, her eyes lingering on my empty ring finger.

I swallow, trailing the pad of my thumb over the space a ring should sit. “I heard once that you learn to love the person you’re married to. With time.”

The brown eyes that remind me of the warm hot chocolate she’d make me when I was little fill with something unreadable.

Rubbing my arm, I say, “I got a new number. Lincoln...he got me a phone. I can give it to you so we can keep in touch.”

A bittersweet smile lifts her lips. “I think it’s best if I let you live your life.” Her eyes dip down to my finger one last time before her smile wavers. “And perhaps it’s time I use my freedom to do something good for all of us. Don’t worry about me, Georgia. I’ll be okay. I just wanted to make sure you would be too.”

I want to ask her what, but she clenches her hands together and walks out the door before I can.

When a few minutes go by, I release a puff of air and think about everything she just said.

I used to be afraid of the dark as a child.

I thought I’d grown out of it.

But maybe I hadn’t.

What monsters linger there?

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lincoln / Present

MICHAEL KNIGHT THROWS a balled-up piece of paper at my face, snickering as it bounces off my forehead and onto his dirty garage floor. “We’re out of beer, Hawk.”

I hold up the bottle in my hand that’s still half-full. “Not completely.”

I’ve been nursing it for the last forty-five minutes, so the liquid inside tastes more like lukewarm piss than alcohol.

“You’re the only sober one,” Chris Vaughn points out, tipping back in his lawn chair.

Now I remember why I always hated being the odd one out who didn’t drink. “Last time I went on a beer run, you assholes said you’d Venmo me money and never did.”

My two oldest friends share a look, both grinning, before returning their focus to me.

It’s Vaughn who says, “You’re the money maker, Hawk. Us lowlifes don’t know what it’s like to be able to buy whatever we want whenever we want it.”

I snort at his dramatics. “That’s because you decided to have kids who cost ten times as much as a lifetime supply of twelve-packs.”

“Twenty times as much since this poor fucker got twins on his first try,” Knight muses.

I don’t envy the former marine sitting beside me. When he and his wife told us they were expecting twins, I could see the terror in Vaughn’s eyes. He loves his son and daughter, but I can tell they drain him a little more every day.

“You would have money too, if you didn’t leave,” I tell Knight, turning my focus on him. “I could have used you a time or two if you’d taken the exam.”

He talked about sticking out the State Police like I did, but he didn’t think he’d be able to handle all the bullshit that came with the ever-growing

policy changes. “Nah, man. Getting out of law enforcement was the best thing I could have done for myself. Too many politics involved.”

What job didn’t have politics attached to it these days? “But the pay is worth it. Then *you* could go on beer runs instead of making me the lackey.”

He chuckles. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“How is your business, bud?” Vaughn asks Knight, speaking of the security business he started from the ground up almost five years ago. He used to do security installations on the side when he worked for the state but took it on full-time when he left.

I can tell he’s happier now. There’s less stress from the job. He works on his own schedule rather than doing what other people tell him to do and when to do it. It was probably the best move he made, even if it meant one less ally I had when things got rocky.

Knight looks nostalgic. “Thriving, man. I wasn’t sure how well it’d do, but ever since we expanded to the five boroughs, we’ve never done better. People out there are used to being charged through the ass, so they choose us in a heartbeat when they see our competitive pricing.”

I’ve never thought about life after law enforcement. Not even what came after retirement. I’d get a good pension I could live off of, but what then? The job is taxing, which is why people get an early retirement at twenty years served. There’s a lot of life left to be lived after you’re done, so some people do part-time work at other agencies, while others focus on their families.

Then there’s me.

My path is wide open, but I have no idea what I’ll do with it.

“If you ever decide you’re done with the state,” Knight tells me, “I can use the help. You know we’ve expanded into PI work. You’d be a hell of a private eye.”

I do know that. It’s what got me into trouble at the end of my marriage. Not that I can blame Knight. I’d asked him to look into Georgia despite his warnings against it.

“You still seeing Lucy?” I ask him to change topics. He’d been in an on-again, off-again relationship for years. I always told him he could do better, but who was I to talk?

Knight stretches his legs out, letting me drop the previous conversation. “Nah, I think she got tired of my hours. She’s seeing some lawyer in Brooklyn.”

“Oooh.” Vaughn makes a face. “She switched to the dark side. Sorry to hear that, man.”

Knight shrugs. “It’s fine. Our sex life was becoming nonexistent anyway. I can’t remember the last time I got my dick sucked.” He’s thoughtful for a second. “Actually, I do. It was a couple weeks after the breakup. Met a girl at The Barrel. She was hot, but she used too much teeth —”

Vaughn groans. “We don’t need the details, bro.”

Knight scoffs. “Says the guy who told us all about his wife’s monster hemorrhoids that you basically fucked out of her.”

Vaughn pales. “Dude, it was brutal. I thought she had ass cancer when I bent her over the bed and saw them. Turns out, pregnancy can do that to you. She even named them they were so big.”

“Dude,” we groan simultaneously.

Vaughn holds up his hands. “You’ll get it when you two decide to grow up and settle down. Next thing you know, you’ll be going to the pharmacy to pick up hemorrhoid cream and adult diapers with witch hazel for your wife.”

Knight looks at me, watching as I take a long sip of my beer. It’s a long stretch of silence before I say, “Been there, done that.”

Vaughn realizes what he said. “Sorry, man. I just meant—”

“You don’t need to elaborate,” I cut him off, knowing he’ll just dig himself a hole. Standing, I tuck my wallet into my back pocket. “What kind of beer do you want?”

Vaughn clears his throat. “Hey, about Georgia—”

“I don’t want to talk about her.”

He presses his lips together and nods once.

Knight says, “Corona.”

I grab my truck keys and leave before I can hear them mumbling something about me that I don’t want to hear.



THE GROCERY STORE is quiet when I walk in. A few of the workers I’ve dealt with in the past offer me smiles in greeting, probably glad I’m not here to

deal with another larceny case.

I beeline toward the alcohol section, browsing the selection to kill time. My friends mean well, but their prying is grating sometimes. If I go back too early, they'll want to talk about shit I don't want to deal with. But if I stick it out here, they'll likely get bored and forget about the impromptu intervention they have planned for my arrival.

As I reach for the twelve-pack of Corona, I see a familiar head of brown hair attached to a petite frame. She's not wearing glasses or a skirt and there's not a notepad in sight. "Surprised to see you here, doc," I remark, causing Doctor Castro to startle.

She nearly drops the bottle of strawberry daiquiri, but I quickly catch it before it hits the linoleum. "Mr. Danforth," she says, accepting the drink I hold out to her.

"It's Lincoln," I remind her, noting how small she looks drowning in an oversized hoodie. "I'd say you can drop the formalities since we're in public."

Her smile is the same professional one she gives me during our sessions, but there's something tense in it.

I readjust the beer in my hand. "What? Are you going to pretend not to know me? You're going to hurt my feelings."

"Didn't you read the paperwork you signed when we began working together?" she asks, one eyebrow arched up.

"No," I admit. "Was I supposed to? I figured it was like the terms and conditions. Nobody reads those."

The softest laugh comes from her. "It states that we're not supposed to talk outside of sessions for privacy reasons. It's to protect you and your personal life."

Huh. "So you just ignore people?"

"I smile."

The smile on my face grows. "I think you want to talk to me though."

A crease forms in between her brows. She looks different without glasses. I've always liked them on her, but her face is open—her eyes not hidden behind the thick frames. "How do you figure that?"

"Simple. You haven't walked away."

Her gaze dips down to her drink, then at the box I'm holding. She doesn't try to dismiss me or walk away. I'm right, and we both know it.

“They’re not all for me,” I explain, not that she asked. “I’m hanging out with my buddies. They decided to make me the beer runner.”

“I’m glad you’re hanging out with friends.”

“Rather than my ex-wife?” I ask, a twinkle in my eye when I see her gaze meet mine.

That smile on her face wavers again, like there’s something she wants to say but holds back. “That’s no business of mine, Mr.—”

“Lincoln.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“I haven’t seen her in a while.”

Once again, I’m met with silence.

“Haven’t spoken to her in a while either.”

The good doctor looks down, her fingers fiddling with the bottle in her hand.

Quietly, I say, “Just in case you are wondering, Theresa.”

Her head bolts up at the sound of her name.

I lift a shoulder, not saying anything else.

Not until she speaks. “Do you do that with everyone?”

“Do what?”

“Flirt.”

Is that what I’m doing? “I’m not flirting.”

Her cheeks pinken at the assumption.

I grin. “Not yet anyway.”

She evades my eyes. “It’s not appropriate, Mr. Danforth.”

Her formality makes me chuckle. “One day, you’re going to call me Lincoln. Mark my words.”

The challenge in her straightened stance tells me she’s determined to prove me wrong. “I don’t think that day will come.”

Humming, I nod in reluctance. I don’t believe her, but I’ll let her believe I do. “That’s all right. I don’t force friendships. Or anything else.”

For the first time ever, I see her roll her eyes. It’s almost amusing to see her so normal. Gone are the business casual clothes. Her legs look good in a pair of denim jeans, and I even think she looks more attractive in the hoodie with her hair down. She’s not wearing makeup.

She’s simply...her.

I’d call her beautiful, but something tells me she wouldn’t like that.

“You’re not wearing glasses,” I note, scanning over her face again.

She readjusts the drink in her hands, shifting her weight. I make her nervous. Interesting. "I only need them to read and write."

"Have you ever considered Lasik?"

"Once or twice," is all she replies, clearly not wanting to continue the subject.

"Sweet tooth?" I ask instead, nodding toward her drink of choice. "I've never been able to drink the sweet shit without getting a horrible hangover."

Georgia loved sweet wine. I'd had her try a few different types when she admitted she only ever drank whiskey from her father's office. I'd indulge in a glass or two with her when we went out, but it wasn't my favorite.

There's hesitation only a moment before she sighs. "It's one of my many vices."

Interest has me studying her. "Care to share what your other ones are?"

Her eyes scan over my face, then lower to the twelve-pack in my hand. She takes a step back, smiles that professional smile, and says, "You should get back to your friends."

"You're not big on small talk, are you?"

There's a brief pause. "Only with some people. Have a good night, Mr. Danforth."

She's drawing a line between us and being sure to stay on one side of it.

But a nudging in my gut urges me to try walking over it.

I don't.

Because I like the good doc.

Respect her.

So, I say, "Good night, doc."

And watch her walk away with an extra tight grip on her daiquiri.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lincoln / Present

THE BALDING MAN cussing out everybody in the station has three yellow, rotting teeth in his mouth, patches of scaly skin on his face, and track marks near the crooks of both his arms. “I didn’t do anything, fucker,” he snarls as Dickens processes his fingerprints and gets his mugshot.

“That’s not what you said five minutes ago when you claimed you didn’t mean to hit your girlfriend, Mikey,” Dickens says. “Now turn to your left. Your other left. You should know the drill by now, man. Come on.”

Michael Welsh is a regular at the station, and it’s always the same story. “I didn’t! The bitch fell on her own.”

“Onto your fist?” I ask, rolling my eyes at the man’s contradictions.

He spits at my newly polished shoe, making my eye twitch. “You being a wiseass?” he asks.

“You want to add assaulting a police officer to your list of charges, or are you good?” I return, staring at the wad of spit in front of my foot.

It’s three in the morning, and I have no patience left for people like him—repeat drug offenders who are constantly getting reported for something. Domestic abuse. Criminal mischief. Possession. This is the fourth time in the past month and a half that someone from the station has had to bring him in for going off on his old woman. Right now, I’m running on coffee fumes and a prayer since being called in to help with the staffing shortage, which doesn’t bode well for the guy running his mouth. I don’t mind going outside of a regular detective’s nine-to-five schedule, because I’ve got nothing better to do. But the exhaustion weighing on my bones is increasing by the fucking second.

Once he’s secured to the bench, I start heading to my office to finish some paperwork when he stops me in my tracks. “I have information on Del Rossi,” he blurts out.

Dickens gives me a nervous look as my fingers grip the doorjamb.

“I know you’re interested,” he says, and even with my back turned, I know he’s directing it at me. “Because it has to do with your old buddy. What was his name? Conklin. Yeah, Matt Conklin. He came to see me a while ago about what I knew.”

Dickers clears his throat. “What kind of information, Welsh?”

“If I talk, I want a deal, or else you ain’t getting shit from me.”

The guy could be lying, which is likelier than him actually knowing something about my ex-wife’s father. Welsh associates with lower-level dealers in the area to get his heroin fix, not businessmen who own multi-millions-dollar companies.

But I’ll play the nice guy for now. “Look, bud. We’re not at liberty to promise you anything, even if you give us something good. We’ll still have to charge you for the criminal possession and assault second.”

Welsh leans his back against the wall and stretches his legs out as best he can with the shackle around his ankle.

“If you can provide us information on Del Rossi that we deem credible, you’ve got a chance at lowering or dropping some of your charges though,” I add. I don’t mention Conklin. As far as I’m concerned, Welsh doesn’t deserve to even utter his name.

The guy is a well-known perp in the system, mostly for drugs and domestics, which means there are more things for him to lose if the judge decides he’s had enough chances to clean up his act. So maybe he does have something up his sleeve that could help his case. Doesn’t mean I’m going to wake up one of the other investigators over something that’s probably bullshit.

“So, Welsh.” I rest the side of my arm against the wall and cross them over my chest until the fabric of my button-down stretches over my shoulders. “Why should I believe a word you’re saying?”

He’s oddly silent for somebody who was willing to sing like a canary only moments ago. If he does know something, he could be weighing his options and the consequences. If the wrong people find out he was talking to us, he could wind up six feet under like other snitches tend to.

“Word on the street says you’ve got a lot invested in the Del Rossi’s business,” Welsh says, nodding his chin toward my bad shoulder with a smug look on his face. “At least that’s what it seemed like when Conklin came to me asking questions. Something tells me you wouldn’t be

entertaining me right now if you weren't a little bit interested in what I have to say about him and Del Rossi, *Detective*."

My eyes narrow at his tone. It could be deductive reasoning that he knows my title—I'm not in a uniform like road patrol officers are. I get to wear suits. Nicer clothes that don't make my balls sweat in the wool that the state tortures us with year-round. But Welsh isn't that smart.

He's being fed information on me.

Question is, by who?

When the news reported on the shooting, they hadn't gone into the specifics of where I'd been shot or what my title was within the state. They'd focused on Conklin's untimely demise and noted the other law enforcement agent in critical condition.

Welsh is letting me know he's got an in with somebody who knows all the right details.

"Guess you better talk," Dickers tells Welsh, sitting on the edge of the desk in front of the bench Welsh is shackled to.

Welsh isn't paying attention to Dickers, though. He's staring directly at me. "Your friend asked me who I was getting my supply from. I wasn't willing to talk to him then."

Then why is he willing to now? "What makes you so interested in being the one who talks now?"

Welsh's nostrils flare. "Because they're everywhere. Always watching. Always listening. Always waiting. I can't fucking stand it. They show up and talk to my girl when I'm gone too."

"Who is 'they'?" Dickers asks, picking up a notepad from the desk. "Give us a name."

Dickers and I sit silently, waiting for him to tell us.

Welsh's eyelid tremors get worse. "I only have one. Little J. He gets his shit from the city. He knows a guy who knows a guy."

Isn't that always how it works? "So this guy is your dealer? What does he have to do with Del Rossi? I don't like my time being wasted."

"He said he had a big clientele list," Welsh tells me. "That Del Rossi was cutting into some of the supply and not paying full cost for it. Little J told me he didn't want to be punished for Del Rossi's addiction. That his boss was going to blame him for the money not counting right."

I suspected from past interactions that Del Rossi used. But I need to play dumb and let him confirm it. "That doesn't make any sense. Why

would Del Rossi take the drugs?”

“Little J said he looked like he needed to take the edge off.” Welsh shrugs. “But how the fuck am I supposed to know? J never said anything more about it. Just that Del Rossi was going to screw him over if he wasn’t careful.”

Dickers and I share a skeptical look.

“Who is Little J?” I ask him. It’s not uncommon for dealers to go by nicknames. I’ve arrested a guy named Shorty too many times to count. Then there’s Mr. Hush, who was dumb enough to get a custom license plate made with the name that basically advertised that he was a goddamn dealer.

Welsh snuffles, using his shoulder to wipe his running nose. “You already know who he is. Your buddy knew damn well who he was by the time he tried getting the info out of me.”

Conklin knew?

I rack my brain for a name, when something clicks.

Son of a bitch.

I push off the wall, heat rising under my skin like someone just lit a fire. “Thanks for the intel.”

“What about my deal?” Welsh calls out.

The district attorney might offer him a lesser charge if the information helps me, but I’m not sure I want to give him that. Welsh is the kind of asshole who deserves to rot behind bars.

“I’ll call the DA when I can. I’ve got more important things to do.”

“That’s it?” he yells.

Dickers follows me into the back office. “Do you know that name? It’s not one I’m familiar with and I’ve read up on the dealers in our area. If he’s a repeat offender, it’s not anyone we’ve arrested before.”

I grab the file that he gave me, opening to the fifth page.

There’s smeared black ink next to Jakob Volley’s name where Conklin put something in quotations. I thought the first word might have been “little” or “title,” but it was hard to tell what the letter next to it was.

But now it’s obvious.

Jakob Volley is Little J.

“Son of a bitch,” I growl, throwing a pen against the opposite wall and scraping a hand through my hair.

We’ve been close the entire time.

“Hawk?” Dickers says cautiously.

“Don’t talk to anyone about this,” I tell him, slamming the file closed and putting it back into my bag. “I already lost one man thanks to this asshole. I won’t be losing another.”

Grabbing my bag, I walk past a stunned Dickens and toward the back exit.

He follows behind me. “We still have two hours left of our shift,” he calls out. “What do you want me to tell the sergeant on duty if he realizes you left?”

“Tell him whatever the fuck you want,” I say right before the door closes between us, and the cold night air bites into my face.

The night Conklin was shot, I’d managed to pull us out of range from the shooter at 123 Cover Creek Road. It’d been the adrenaline that enabled me to work past my own injury to try tending to his. As he bled out on the ground, he looked at me with fading eyes and said one name.

Del Rossi.

That was the last thing he’d ever said to me.

It could have meant anything.

But I knew it had to do with Volley.

And if Del Rossi is using, it makes him even more unpredictable. It makes him a flight risk.



THE GOOD DOCTOR pretends we never ran into each other at the store—like the momentary interest I saw in her eyes never existed. It’s probably safer that way, so I let her control the narrative.

I’ve got bigger things on my mind anyway.

“You seem tense,” she notes, sitting in her usual seat across from me.

It’s impossible to get comfortable on the couch when my back and arm are killing me today. I slept like shit for the past three nights and spent way too much time at the gym trying to distract myself from Welsh’s information and the millions of phone calls I’ve made to try getting into Rikers Island, where Volley is being held.

So far, I’ve had no luck.

“My week hasn’t exactly been ideal,” I tell her, shrugging and ignoring the wince of pain that radiates from my injury.

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“No,” I say instantly, though my foot starts bouncing and giving me away. She watches me for a moment, jots down something in her notebook, and sets the pen down when I ask, “If you could go back and change something that happened in the past, would you?”

She’s thoughtful, the leg that’s draped over her other swinging lightly. “I suppose it would depend on what it was. Could I choose the event?”

“Sure.”

“Then...yes.”

I expect her to give me some crapshoot answer about how all of our experiences shape who we are, not this. “What would you go back and change?”

She’s quiet, her lips twitching. Then she says, “How about we go tit for tat? You tell me yours, and I’ll tell you mine.”

The fact she’s offering to tell me anything is impressive, considering she’s been locked down tighter than Fort Knox. I’m breaking down her barriers.

“If my mom got to choose, she’d probably make sure I never met Georgia,” I admit, staring at the stain on my jeans. It reminds me that I need a new pair. All of mine seem to have grease or grass stains on them.

“But you wouldn’t choose that?”

I find myself shaking my head. “No, I wouldn’t. Georgia and I were good for a long time. We learned to love each other.”

Our love story isn’t like any of my friends, and nobody knew that we only got married so she didn’t have to be stuck with the likes of Luca Carbone. If they did, maybe they would have talked me out of it.

My chest fills with a pressure that presses against my heart. “I would go back and tell Conklin not to look into the Del Rossi family,” I say quietly, my whole leg bouncing. “I would tell him to forget about everything. I can handle the pain that comes with divorce because it’s only for me to cope with. But I dragged a lot of innocent people into the mess that left him dead. That’s not fair to them. That pain is...”

All I can do is shake my head.

“When you asked him to look into her family, what do you mean?” she questions, her pen remaining on the notepad.

“Georgia’s father knew some dangerous people, and I wanted to make sure I could stop him from pulling his daughter into the middle of the mess he’d made.”

“Did she ask you to?”

“No.”

“But you chose to because...?”

“I loved her,” I say by default.

It’s not the entire answer.

I did learn to love Georgia.

But I also wanted to make sure Nikolas Del Rossi didn’t get the two things that he wanted most: his daughter back and my career to end.

I needed to make sure I took him down first.

“Conklin died helping me find answers,” I tell her, feeling my throat thicken. It’s harder to swallow past the lump that wedged itself in the middle of it. “He died to give me answers I still don’t fully have yet. His death just made more.”

I swore to him I would get him justice. Whether he heard my promise or not before the blood loss left him unconscious, I was going to fulfill it.

No matter what.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Since when do you need permission?”

She ignores my cool tone. “Do you think it’s worth finding those answers now that you’re no longer involved with Georgia?”

Let it go? “It’s almost ten years of my life.”

She nods. “Sure,” she agrees gently. “But if you’re putting your life on hold until you get those answers, are you really living at all?”

Looking away from her, I stare out the window at the slow fall of snow. January is always depressing because it’s cold, dark, and moody. There’s nothing to look forward to after Christmas. Everybody just waits for it to be warm again, staying miserable until spring comes.

I told Conklin I’d find out who was behind the shooting, and dammit, I was going to stand by that. Come hell or high water, Matt and his family are getting closure. That included bringing Nikolas Del Rossi down in the process.

“You never told me what you would change,” I say, changing the subject.

She must expect it because she smiles. But there's something weighing on her lips as we lock eyes. "I would go back and tell my husband that I love him. I wasn't home to see him off for a business trip that, unbeknownst to either of us, he would die on. Drunk driving accident. To this day, I don't remember what my last words to him were. But I know it wasn't 'I love you,' and I wish it were."

She lost her husband.

I guess she knows grief firsthand too.

"You wouldn't stop him from going?"

Leaning back, she picks up her pen and holds it tightly between her fingers. "I believe that fate leads us exactly where we need to be. I wouldn't have been able to stop him if I tried. He loved his job and had a big presentation that his firm counted on him to give. Fate can be cruel sometimes, Mr. Danforth. But it can also be healing if we allow it."

I stare at her.

She stares right back.

That's when I realize Theresa Castro and I have far more in common than I ever could have imagined.

I say, "I'm sorry for your loss."

And for the first time, she says, "I'm sorry for yours."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Georgia / Six Years Ago

THE FLICKERING CANDLE on the table illuminates the distracted face of the tired man across from me as he sips his IPA. I've learned those are his go-to when we go out. He hates anything sweet but also doesn't like anything sour. I figured that out when I ordered him a drink and told the bartender there wasn't a beer he didn't like.

I'd been wrong.

I can tell the grueling hours of road patrol have taken a toll on Lincoln. There are bags under his eyes from all the overtime he's been putting in on top of his twelve-hour shifts. I thought I'd see more of him once he graduated from the academy, but I see far less of him now that he's almost done with field training and set to go out on his own.

He yawns for the third time since we sat down thirty minutes ago, shooting me an apologetic smile. "Sorry," he says, sliding his half-empty glass out of the way. "Guess three hours of sleep isn't much, huh?"

I frown. "I told you we could have stayed in."

Our homecooked meals are nothing compared to Dallas Steakhouse, but I've improved thanks to his mother's lessons and the cookbooks she gave me that have some of Lincoln's favorite recipes marked. I'm a far cry from a Michelin chef, but I don't mistake salt for sugar anymore.

He leans back. "No way. I told you I was taking you out tonight for our anniversary. I'll just go to bed early when we get back. No big deal."

He always does this. Works his ass off and then manages to make time for me. Sometimes, I feel bad because there's nothing I can do to make it easier for him. I clean the apartment. I cook. I pack him lunches that aren't totally inedible. And when he comes home tired and stressed or fed up, I get on my knees and make him feel better until he's not any of those things anymore.

"It's just another day," I reply. "We don't have to make it into something it isn't."

“I disagree,” he counters. “I think it’s something to celebrate. That’s why I wanted to come here.”

“You’re too good to me,” I murmur, toying with the piece of bread I’ve only eaten half of.

“That’s not true, Peaches.”

But it is.

In the year we’ve been together, my father has made our lives... challenging. The library got a call that I’d been stealing money from the late fee lock box, which I don’t even have a key to. I was told not to come back until they finished their “investigation” and determined I was innocent. The head librarian, Marian, had always been nice to me. But even when she called and said I could come back two weeks later, she never looked at me the same. I’d asked her who accused me of stealing, and she said she couldn’t say for privacy reasons.

But I knew it was someone close to my father.

Because a month after that, Lincoln’s sergeant had gotten a complaint that he’d been using excessive force during an arrest. Since he was new to the job, he was still on probation and at risk of losing his job. Thankfully, body cam footage proved he hadn’t done anything against policy. It was still put in his record, though.

Two months after that, I’d been followed by a black car with tinted windows that nearly ran me off the road on my way home from work. I’d only had my license for six months after Lincoln and his father helped teach me how to drive. They found a used Chevy Impala with over one hundred thousand miles on it for cheap online and pooled together money to buy it for me so I had something dependable to take to and from work. Somehow, the accident had been deemed my fault, and I lost my license for a year and had to take a course on safe driving.

The car that had driven me off the road was the same one I’d seen outside of Millie’s house before she told me I had to leave. In my gut, I knew it was someone my father hired. I’m sure the person who called my job, and Lincoln’s, throwing accusations about us, was associated with him too.

Mrs. Ricci’s warning is still alive and well, replaying in my head every time something new happens to derail what life I’m trying to build for myself. I wish she’d taken my number or given me hers so I could reach out and ask her questions.

But maybe that's why she didn't.

She wanted me to live my life. Not fear it.

There are days I wonder if Lincoln regrets ever taking me home. When he's tired from work and figuring out how to make a relationship work that was built on nothing but sex and desperation, it's hard to fathom how he could be happy with me. Especially when I wasn't working for two weeks and he was going through an investigation of his own.

Regardless of my doubts, he shows up.

Every day.

He always says good morning and good night, checks up on me, asks how my day has been, and does what he can to be present.

We have date nights once a week, even if it's just pizza and a movie at home.

He brings me to the bookstore to browse.

Takes me to his parents' house for dinners.

He's allowed me into his life without a second thought.

It's more than I ever expected.

Sometimes, I think it's more than I deserve.

Lincoln grabs his drink and holds it while he studies me. "One day," he says, "you're going to realize there's more to you than your family, Georgia. You deserve a lot more than you think you do. I hope I can help you figure that out."

I swallow, staring at him in awe. How does he keep doing that? Surprising me, making me feel like the luckiest girl on the planet? He could have anybody. I've seen how women look at him.

Yet he chose me.

Got stuck with me.

Married *me*.

"You're not afraid of my father?"

His eye twitches at the mention of the man who's done his best to get between us. But Lincoln never lets him. "There's a lot to be afraid of in my job, Peaches," he tells me. "If I constantly looked over my shoulder at every little thing that could be after me, I'd never live my life."

That doesn't answer my question, but I have a feeling it's the best I'll get.

Because he doesn't want Nikolas Del Rossi to be part of the life we're creating. But I have a feeling it's not going to be that easy. Not when I see

his advertisements on billboards and bus benches and his picture plastered on the front page of every newspaper for whatever new business venture he's getting into next.

Nobody seems to wonder what happened to his dutiful daughter.

I've been wiped from the public's memory.

A traitor to the Del Rossi name.

"Get out of that pretty head, baby girl," Lincoln says, breaking me from my thought.

My eyes flicker up to meet his.

"Or I'll give you something to think about."

Thighs clenching at the husky tone that I normally only hear in private, I feel his foot hook around my chair and pull it toward him. A tiny yelp escapes my lips when my chair jerks forward, stopping at the table between us. I press my mouth closed when that same foot moves up, up, up my leg to part my thighs and press against the softest part of me. Suddenly, I'm grateful there are tablecloths on the tables, or people would one hundred percent kick us out.

"Lincoln," I whisper, tightening my thighs to trap his foot.

"Yes, Peaches?" he asks innocently, sipping his drink to hide a grin.

I can't speak. The words get trapped in my throat, and I'm forced to swallow them.

He sets his glass down and presses harder against me, making me suck in a breath as a rush of wet rushes to my panties.

Just then, the waitress comes back to our table with a smile on her face. "Would you like more bread?"

Lincoln doesn't stop what he's doing as he plays coy with the woman. "I don't know. Would you like more bread, Georgia?"

With a voice too high-pitched to sound normal to anybody who knows me, I say, "I-I'm good." I force a smile at the woman who looks strangely at me. "Thank you, though."

She nods, taking the empty bread basket from the middle of the table. "Your entrees will be right out."

Lincoln chuckles when she leaves. "Cat got your tongue?"

I suck in a breath when his foot retreats, leaving me aching for his touch. "More like a *hawk*."

His lips curl into a mischievous grin. "I like this side of you, Peaches."

I shift in my seat, feeling the dampness between my legs and frowning. “What side of me?”

“Sassy,” he remarks, his eyes roaming over my face, then down to the top half of me in a tight black shirt that shows off my curves. “Turned on and ready to fuck.”

My cheeks heat at his words. “We’re in public,” I scold him, eyeing the couples seated next to us in hearing distance.

He leans forward, dropping his voice. “I think you secretly like it.”

I’m silent.

His foot caresses my ankle, shifting upward again where I want him. “If I got you off right here under this table, I bet you wouldn’t complain.”

Releasing a shallow breath, I say, “You’re not playing fair.”

“No?”

I shake my head, feeling his foot stall on my calf. “You’re changing the subject to distract me from my question.”

His foot remains where it is, not moving an inch up or down. “I’m not afraid of your father. You want to know why?”

All I can do is move my head up and down.

“Because at the end of the day, you’re *mine*. Not his. He let you go. Disappointed you. Left you to fend for yourself. I won’t do that to you. He may be rich with a lot of connections, but I will always be a better man than your father is.”

Gaping, I stare at his serious expression.

“I meant my vows, Georgia.” He straightens, grabbing his glass and dragging it toward him. His foot moves away from my leg, my skin feeling its absence. “For better or worse, I’m in this. *We* are in this. No matter what your father tries to pull. Understand?”

I find myself nodding again, unable to put into words what his mean to me.

Because Lincoln Danforth is everything a woman could dream of marrying.

My husband.

And my...friend.

A fuzzy feeling fills my ribcage.

“So today matters,” he concludes. “*We* matter.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lincoln / Six Years Ago

CONKLIN LOOKS AT the computer screen and winces at the number staring back at us. “That’s a lot of zeroes,” he says, counting them with the tip of his pen that he was chewing. Leaning back in the chair, he turns toward me and blows out a long breath. “I knew the Del Rossis had money, but this seems...”

“Excessive,” I agree, scrubbing a hand through my fresh buzz cut. Grumbling, I exit out of the tab and shake my head. “You ever heard of a business making that much money?”

“In a lifetime,” he replies slowly, moving his head back and forth. “Sure. In the course of a year? No. Not unless he’s suddenly Bill Gates.”

I tap my hand against the edge of the desk and drag a palm down my jaw. “Lord knows, the world only needs one of those.”

Conklin grins. “You’re such a Mac user.”

I gesture toward the computer where Nikolas Del Rossi’s name is spread across the screen. The man must have sources at every local newspaper because he’s constantly being written about and praised in one of them. It’s nauseating. “What do you make of this? You think he’s legitimate?”

My friend is thoughtful for a second before choosing his words carefully. “I think he runs a concrete business that’s legitimate since the IRS hasn’t flagged any of his filings since he took over his partner’s shares. But the numbers aren’t adding up.”

That’s what I was worried he’d say. I asked Knight if he could look into Del Rossi and the Carbones, but he said his resources were limited at his security company. I knew he would do what he could for me, but I wasn’t optimistic he’d find much. It seems like Nikolas and whoever he’s working with have their shit on lockdown.

“But,” Conklin adds, raising my brows. “I was able to look into the charging documents from his partner’s arrest. The detectives on his case

dug into his business's bookkeeping, which led to his arrest for money laundering and fraud."

He must have seen something interesting. "Is there something that stuck out?"

Reaching for a notepad from his top drawer, he flips it open and turns it to me. "I did a little comparison of The Del Rossi Group's books to their former company's books that were reported in the files from the FBI. What do you see?"

I study the first page, trying to decode his horrible handwriting. "Are these supposed to be words?" I muse, shaking my head.

He snatches the notepad from me. "Shut it," he grumbles, pointing to two different names that he underlined. "Check this out. From 2005 to 2008, when William Murphy was arrested, he was getting large lump sums of money from a company called Scores Tech. When I searched that company, nothing came up."

"Strange," I agree.

"And look here." His finger trails down to the next line. "This is from The Del Rossi Group, starting in 2009 until last year."

Scores Tech. "Okay, so the investor decided to stick to the company when Del Rossi took over. That doesn't seem like it's that abnormal."

"Normally, no. But there was a stipulation when Nikolas took over MDR Inc. and made it into The Del Rossi Group. He wasn't allowed to use any of the previous investors. In order for the company to remain legitimate and separate from William Murphy and the scandal he created, they were supposed to start fresh. And that's not all."

Jesus, how much did he do? "I asked you to do a little light digging, Conklin. How long did you spend on this?"

He shrugs. "You know I don't sleep for shit when I'm adjusting from days to nights. I had some time on my hands." He waves me off and doesn't give me a chance to respond. "Anyway, I noticed that Scores Tech has two separate addresses by one common name."

"I thought you said you searched it and couldn't find anything?"

He eyes me. "You didn't ask me for help because you thought I would give up after two seconds."

"True," I relent, watching him flip the page and show me the information gathered. My eyes scan the Atlanta address and the New York City one below it. "Who is Carlo Salvatore?"

Conklin closes the notepad. “Your guess is as good as mine. There’s no evidence of a Carlo Salvatore in either New York or Georgia. I searched the name in other states and came up with a few hits, but nobody that has the kind of money he would need to write the checks that The Del Rossi Group is getting. My best guess is that it’s a fake name and company.”

A fake name. “What are you thinking Del Rossi is involved in to get that kind of money from a fake company?”

Conklin clicks his tongue. “Nothing good,” he surmises. “I know this might be out of left field, but there’s only one reason I can think of that would explain why a fake company would give Del Rossi that money. It’s the city, and he’s Italian. So...”

When I look at him, I already know what he’s thinking. “You honestly think this is a *Godfather* situation?”

He lifts his palms up. “Logically, it makes sense. We both know organized crime is alive and well in the city. I never thought I would witness it firsthand in Middle Point, but we know drugs have been moving upstate. It’s not like men in Italian suits are on the street corners dealing out, but there has been evidence in the past of the five families dabbling in drug trafficking.”

Those families were knocked out by the big boss, though. “Drugs caused a lot of those families to dissolve.”

“Which means new families formed.”

And he thinks Del Rossi is one of them or that he’s working for one? “What would you do if you were in my shoes and this was Marissa’s family?”

He smiles at his girlfriend’s name. “I’d want answers,” he admits. “If I’m married to someone, I’d want to know who’s on my side and who’s not.”

I’ve basically known Conklin as long as I’ve known my wife. And he knows that my relationship with her was fast-paced because we went from bonding over being single to me admitting I’d gotten married.

He called me crazy.

I told him he was probably right.

“Nikolas Del Rossi is up to something,” I murmur, eyeing the door of the office we stuffed ourselves into. It sounds like second shift is coming in to take over, so I start exiting out of the tabs and delete the history, just in case. “And I don’t know what, but this smells pretty fucking fishy to me.”

“You really think he’s out to get you just because you married his daughter?” he asks skeptically.

I haven’t been completely honest with the guy, but it’s for his own good. I’ve done my own research on Nikolas Del Rossi and the people he’s been seen with. Including Captain Chamberlin. There are pictures of them plastered online, all smiles and laughter. There’s even one of Chamberlin with his hand on the small of Georgia’s rigid back from two years ago. Her smile is forced. Her eyes screaming for help.

I’ve never met Captain Chamberlin, but if I do, it’ll take everything in me not to punch him in the throat for touching her at all.

I also learned that the Carbone family has the largest growing real estate business in New York State, using The Del Rossi Group to lay concrete on a few developments they put up on the New York-New Jersey line. The more I read about Antonio Carbone, the less I like. And when I saw the headshots of his son Luca, I’d almost put my fist through the screen.

The smug asshole in the headshots on the Carbone Realty website had been *this* close to getting Georgia.

And I hated that feeling.

“He wanted a very different future for his daughter,” I tell him, stretching my legs out in front of me. “One that I took away from him.”

Conklin gestures toward the computer with his pen again. “With that kind of money, it’s no wonder he wasn’t cool with her settling for a rookie. There’s no way in hell your starting pay comes close to an eighth of what this fucker is getting in two months.”

My nose twitches. “Thanks for that.”

“Did you get her a ring from the twenty-five-cent machine at the grocery store too, or make it out of paper on your salary?”

I’d flip him off if I had a reason to, but he’s not far off. “I didn’t get her one.”

“You...” He sits up, dropping his feet from where they’re perched on the corner of the desk. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I heard you right. You didn’t get your *wife* a *ring*? No engagement ring or wedding band?”

There’s a difference between the two? “You thinking about taking that step with Marissa? I wouldn’t have known the difference between an engagement ring or wedding band unless I googled it.”

Or if my mother hounded me about when I was going to buy one for Georgia. She’d brought that up a time or five over the last year.

He blanches. “You’re one to talk. One second, you’re single; the next, you’re marrying the chick I thought was your roommate.”

I’m almost tempted to correct him and say she was a *temporary apartment sitter* like she insisted but swallow the words.

“Plus, I’ve got sisters,” he points out. “And they know how all that shit works. If one of their boyfriends asked for their hand without a ring, I wouldn’t hear the goddamn end of it in the family group chat. Most women don’t settle without at least a carat and some gold. Your dick game must be top-notch for her to marry you without anything.”

I know our circumstances are a far cry from normal, but she’s still a woman. Was she disappointed when I didn’t try getting her one?

Choosing not to acknowledge his comment about my dick game, I say, “I didn’t have the money for one.”

I want Georgia to feel secure. Cared for. I’ve done what I can to make her comfortable under the budget I’m working with. Her job doesn’t offer her much, so it isn’t like our combined incomes are astronomical. But we’ve managed to save over the last year. Not a lot, but some.

“It’s got to be tough knowing what Del Rossi is pulling in,” Conklin sympathizes. “But look at it this way, man. Your girl chose *you*. Not your money. Not her family’s money. If I were you, I’d be on cloud nine knowing that.”

At the end of the day, Georgia didn’t have to tell me yes. She could have walked away—could have gone back to her father like he wanted. I know I didn’t force her into this. But her other options were lacking.

So, maybe a part of me does feel good that she chose me, regardless of what I can or can’t offer her. The other part of me doesn’t want to hold on to hope that she feels the same way I do in case this is all circumstantial to her.

I stare at the ground, unsure of how to feel.

Because as each day goes by, Georgia somehow claims another piece of me. Whenever I come home to a warm meal after a long day or get handed a lunchbox with food so I can save money on my shift, another chunk of my heart gets tucked away in her back pocket. She buys my favorite red apples because she knows I don’t like them too sweet or too sour. She keeps grapefruit juice in the fridge—the pink kind, not the yellow—because she found out it was the only juice I’ve preferred since I was a kid.

Georgia doesn’t know it, but I’ve been falling for her a little every day. Maybe it’s time I showed her.

Conklin smacks my shoulder to regain my attention. “You want me to look into this some more? I can do some research. Pull some strings and figure out who’s employing Del Rossi’s company.”

I should tell him no.

Tell him it doesn’t matter.

Because Georgia chose *me* not her father.

Not the Carbones.

Not the lifestyle she walked away from.

But that’s not what I say. “Yeah. Let me know what you find.”

Because at the end of the day, my gut tells me never to be too safe.



THE APARTMENT IS dark when I get home five and a half hours after my shift ends. I told Georgia not to wait up for me when a vehicle pursuit led to an arrest involving twenty-five grams of cocaine being taken from the car. If second shift hadn’t helped with paperwork, I’d probably still be there.

Georgia is tucked in bed with the lamp still on and a paperback draped over her chest that she must have fallen asleep reading. She’s propped up against two pillows, her head slumped slightly, and the softest snores indicating she’s probably been out for a while.

Slowly creeping in, I grab the book from her and put her favorite bookmark in it that I bought her from a local indie bookshop. It has a yellow labrador on it with its tongue hanging out that says “you pawsed here” in bold lettering.

She told me the Del Rossis never let her have pets because they were too dirty, but she’d always wanted a puppy. I couldn’t get her a dog, so I told her the bookmark would be a baby step toward the future.

A promise.

Even a small one.

Her eyelids flutter awake, her head groggily lifting when I set the book on the nightstand. “You’re home,” she whispers, a tired smile gracing me.

I smile, sitting on the edge of the mattress beside her. “Sorry I’m late.”

She sits up. “It’s okay. Did you catch the person who ran?”

“We did.” I smile and peck her lips. “We got a lot of drugs off the street. Me and Conklin were pretty happy about that. Our bosses said we’d get a letter of accommodation for it.”

I usually try not to bore her with the details from work, even when she asks. There are times I’ll come home frustrated, and the only thing that seems to help is ranting about it. Georgia listens, always attentive, always interrupting and asking questions.

I know she cares.

I just wonder how much.

“There are leftovers in the fridge. I wasn’t sure if you’d be hungry, but you can take it to work tomorrow if you want.”

I am hungry, but I don’t want food right now.

Leaning forward, I kiss her. It’s gentle. Coaxing. My palm comes up and cups her jaw, stroking it with my thumb until she relaxes into me and opens her mouth.

I swallow the faintest moan as I peel away the blanket from her lap and tug her down so she’s flat on her back. “Missed you,” I say against her lips, nipping her bottom one, then the top, and trailing my mouth down her jaw and neck.

Her hands find my waist, getting a fistful of my shirt and tugging until I help her take it off me. Then my mouth dips down and nips at the curve of her breast, peeking through the deep V-neck of her pajama shirt until I hear her suck in a sharp breath.

I work fast getting it off her, followed by the matching shorts, until she’s in nothing but a scrap of fabric that’s damp from my mouth, teasing her supple skin.

Latching down on one of her pebbled nipples, I suck until her hips arch off the bed and her covered pussy rubs against the leg of my jeans. Even through the denim, I can feel how hot she is. My dick hardens at the thought of sinking inside her and feeling her muscles clench around me.

“Lincoln,” she whispers in awe, her fingers gripping my head as I move from one breast to the other. My hands trail down her body until my knuckles graze along her wet panties.

“You’re already ready for my cock, baby,” I praise, tongue following the same path as my hands until it stops at the cotton covering her. “Have you been waiting for this all day? Thinking about my mouth on your pretty pussy? My cock getting you off?”

I press my mouth against her panties as her thighs fall apart to make room for me. “That’s it, pretty girl. Let me in.”

My name whispered on her lips makes me eager to get a taste of the woman under me. I can smell her desire and feel how badly she wants me. It’s as much as I want her.

I don’t make her wait.

Peeling her panties off, I dip down until my mouth finds her core. She jerks up as my fingers work with my tongue and lips until the choked noises she’s making put me at risk of embarrassing myself before I can even get naked.

Lifting my head from between her thighs, I grin up at her glazed eyes as they watch me.

There’s no point in asking what she wants, because her eyes tell me all I need to know. I waste no time getting the rest of my clothes off and positioning myself over her, my cock nudging her entrance eagerly as her legs wrap around me.

Inch by delicious inch, I sink into her and watch her mouth form an O as her body accepts me. It’s a sight I’ll never get sick of. “You’re beautiful when you’re taking my dick, baby girl. Do you know that?”

Her eyes roll into the back of her head as I withdraw and push back in.

My movements aren’t slow, but they’re not fast. She’s used to me fucking her—bending her into positions that get me the deepest inside her until we’re both crying out.

But this time is different.

I claim her.

I let her feel every inch.

Every grumbled groan.

Every whispered sigh.

I brand her with my scent, my body, and every ounce of my being to show her how much I appreciate coming home to her, the food she makes, and the sleepy smiles she greets me even when I’m late.

Reaching behind me, I grab the expensive piece of jewelry that I’d slipped out of work to buy shortly before getting into my pursuit.

“Got you something,” I tell her, biting down on her throat as I pull out so only the tip of my dick is inside her. I pick up her hand and slide the gold ring onto her finger as I settle fully inside her, grinding down until her pussy vice grips me.

She stares at the polished piece of gold before slowly looking up at me in stunned speechlessness.

I slide the engagement ring on with a small round diamond in the center. It's nothing extravagant. Nothing flashy. But her eyes water all the same.

I kiss her, keeping my lips on hers as I start pumping into her again. "I know I'm not the most romantic guy. I know I can do better. But that doesn't change the fact that you're *mine*," I rasp against her mouth, swallowing her moans as I pick up the pace with each thrust.

Our fingers interweave.

I feel the ring as I press her hand into the mattress and listen to the bed frame squeak with our quickening movements.

"Mine," I say as I bite her throat.

"Mine," I repeat as I bite her breast.

Each nip leaves marks in their wake. But nothing claims her like the ring on her finger.

And then she utters one word that makes me lose control, coming before I even have the chance to pull out.

"Yours," she whispers, her hand tightening around mine as she comes on my cock. "Yours," she says again, bowing her back as I fill her.

It's not an admission of love.

Yours.

But it's close enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lincoln / Present

A ROSE GETS shoved in my face as I walk down Main Street, and if it weren't a middle-aged woman, I'd probably hit the person who crowded my personal space. "Buy your sweetheart a rose."

"No thanks," I grumble, sidestepping her and ignoring the wafting scent of the flower left behind. The woman who used to run the flower shop passed away a few years ago. The person who bought her out kept the name, but as my relationship with Georgia started deteriorating, so did my trips to the flower shop.

Turns out, flowers didn't fix everything.

"It's Valentine's Day," she calls out after me. "I picked and trimmed them myself. Five dollars for two, ten dollars for five."

My eyes go to the flowers in the bucket by her front door that's still full. I'm sure she'll get a lot of last-minute shoppers who forget what day it is, like I used to. I tried being good about proactively doing things for Georgia, but my work schedule tended to crowd my memory. "I don't have anybody to give them to."

A dubious look twists the stranger's wrinkled face. "A man like you? I don't buy it. No, no. You have somebody. I have a sixth sense about these things."

Great. A flower-selling psychic.

"I've got carnations too," she notes, gesturing toward the basket of white flowers I'm all too familiar with.

My nose wrinkles as old memories resurface. "Pass."

She walks over to me and passes me five roses. "Eight dollars for the man with sad eyes."

Sad eyes? "I'm not sad," I tell her, looking down at the red roses in her hand. Sighing, I pull out my wallet and pass her a ten. She knows damn well what she's doing. "Keep the change."

Before I walk away, she says, “You have people in your life. Today is the day of love. It doesn’t have to be romantic.”

Chuckling dryly, I grip the flowers in my palm. “It’s a commercial holiday marketed to couples. It isn’t about love at all. It’s about money.”

The woman smiles at me. “I suppose that’s why you think you don’t have anybody then. You’re confused about what this day is about.”

I’m sure a lot of business owners are saying that to get a few more sales. “Have a good day, ma’am.”

I make my way toward the coffee shop, where an extra-large cup of caffeine is waiting for me before my session tonight with my favorite psychiatrist. But the last thing I expect when I walk in is the sudden scent of Valentino perfume and the back of a familiar head.

My shoulders tense when I scope out the hand pressed against the small of her back, following the arm over to the person it belongs to.

When the man beside her turns, there’s a slick grin on his face.

Luca-Motherfucking-Carbone.

He slides his palm up her back and onto her shoulder, squeezing it once before trailing it back down. This time, he rests it farther south than before, leaving it on the curve of her ass. “Hello, Detective Danforth. Long time, no see.”

Georgia’s body tenses, moving slightly away from the youngest Carbone’s touch before turning in slow motion to meet my gaze.

I see red, snapping the flower stems in my grip until the roses fall to the ground in broken disarray.

It seems appropriate.

Symbolic, even.

Georgia’s eyes follow the discarded flowers.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” I hiss, watching as Luca’s smile grows and Georgia’s frown deepens.

I hate Valentine’s Day.



IT’S TEN MINUTES past when my session starts, and I’m doing my best not to punch the smug nepo baby still smirking at me from the pickup counter.

“Er, sir?” the young cashier says, shifting on her feet. “Will that be cash or card?”

Snapping out of my stare down with the douchebag my ex-wife is standing silently beside, I turn back to the teenager waiting for me to pay for my drink. “Sorry. How much is it?”

When she repeats the number, a ten-dollar bill is handed to her by someone else. I stare at the gold Rolex and know exactly who it is before I even look at the custom suit that’s probably worth my mortgage payment.

“I’ve got it,” Luca says.

“I don’t need you to pay for my damn coffee.”

He puts the change he’s handed into the tip jar with a smile that feigns innocence. “I’d do anything for law enforcement.”

What a crock of shit. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’m not interested.”

He holds his hands up. “No games here. Just respect. Putting yourself on the line of duty isn’t for everybody. You have to have a certain mindset to take those risks.”

To anybody else, this might sound like a regular conversation—like he’s complimenting me. But I know better than that. It’s a veiled threat delivered with a politician’s smile.

Honestly, I can’t blame Nikolas Del Rossi for liking Luca Carbone. He’s a great manipulator.

“You know, I never got to reach out and tell you how sorry I am for your loss,” he says, his words boiling my blood. His hand finds my arm, his fingers gripping my biceps. “It’s a shame what happened to your colleague. Such a tragedy that should have been avoided.”

You’re in public, I remind myself, suddenly glad I left my gun at home instead of holstered to my side. “A lot of things *should have* happened that day,” I reply, dropping my voice so only he can hear me. “There’s still time.”

His smile remains calm, unthreatened. “Not for everybody.”

My fingers twitch at my sides; then my eyes go to the woman still standing by herself with her eyes downtrodden, evading everybody around her like she wants to remain invisible.

I put my hand on Luca’s shoulder and squeeze once. Instead of threatening him or throwing the first punch like he wants me to, I walk around him toward Georgia.

Her shoulders stiffen when she sees the tip of my dirty Wolverine work boots. She was the one who bought them for me. I wear them every day when I'm not on duty. I've been tempted to throw them out, but if I threw out everything Georgia gave me over the years, I'd have to buy a whole new wardrobe.

"You were right," I tell her, dropping my voice so only she can hear. "He's not me, and he never will be."

Through her lashes, she peeks up at me with those damn eyes. They're glassy, pleading like she wants to say something. But what could she possibly say to me to make this okay? There is nothing.

"I expected a lot from you, but not this." I have no doubt she can feel the fury radiating from me, despite my best efforts to keep it off my face.

Luca Carbone will not get the reaction he wants from me.

"I tried saving you once," I murmur, shaking my head in disappointment. "But I don't know if I have the energy to save you again. So now is your chance to tell me if you need it."

Her lashes flutter, and the softest exhale escapes her lips before a quiet, "Lincoln..."

It's a shame what happened to your colleague. Such a tragedy that should have been avoided.

"Tell me," I urge, knowing our time is limited. I take another step closer, wanting nothing more than for her to beg me to take her with me—to get her far away from the person who caused us so much pain. "Tell me you need me. Because if you don't..." I swallow, feeling the eyes of Luca Carbone burning holes into my back. But fuck him. Fuck him and fuck her family. "If you don't, this is it, Georgia. If you let me walk away today without you, our memories will be what's left of us. I can't keep doing this with you. Not when he's here in your life. Not after everything."

Tell me he's forcing you.

Tell me it's blackmail.

Tell me you have no choice.

A man like Luca Carbone will only allow what he deems his to have so much freedom before suffocating it like a fire. To him, Georgia is an item. An object. Not a person. He sees her the same way Nikolas does—as a pawn to be traded and used when they see fit.

So why the hell is she here with him?

“Lincoln,” she whispers. “I need you...” Her eyes flicker toward Luca. When they find my face again, she takes a deep breath. “I need you to let this go. Let this all go. It’s for your own good.”

For my own—

“Who the hell are you?” I ask, my head moving back and forth as I stare at the stranger I used to call mine.

When she just stands there, I realize I’m not going to get what I want from her. There is no silent plea in her eyes, no desperation to get out. As those amber eyes skate over me, there’s not even an ounce of lust or love like there used to be. They’re hollow. Distant.

Standing before me is an empty shell of a woman I don’t even recognize anymore.

Luca Carbone steps in. “I think you’ve said enough, Detective. Don’t be desperate. It isn’t a good look on you.”

He’s baiting me.

Seeing what I’ll do.

My eyes stay on Georgia when I say, “I’ve said all I need to.” Finally, I peel my gaze away from her and toward the asshole in a tailored suit. “It’s ironic,” I tell him. “You’re telling me not to be desperate when you’ve been chasing after Georgia for years, waiting for her to finally choose you. It must be hard to swallow knowing she never fully will.”

Luca steps toward me until the toes of his polished shoes are pressed against my muddy boots. “And why is that?”

I simply smile. “Don’t you know? You’ll never be me.”

His eyes darken as I shoot him a smug smile, going to step around him now that there’s nothing left to say.

He stops me, grabbing my bad shoulder and squeezing the exact spot blanketed by scars until I suck in a harsh breath. “Whether you like it or not, I’m not the enemy.”

Nostrils flaring open at the pain shooting down my arm that he applies pressure on, I grab his wrist and yank him away from me. “You could have fooled me.” I step away first. “Enjoy my sloppy seconds, Carbone. And be sure to tell your father I said hello.”

As I walk toward the door, I dump the coffee he bought into the trashcan.

It’s twenty-five minutes past my session.

But I don’t care.

I get in my truck and drive in the opposite direction of the therapist's office until I park next to a line of motorcycles lining the side of The Barrel.

Sliding onto the stool at the bar, I don't bother looking up at the bartender, who's always here on Wednesdays, and say, "Don't ever serve me Johnnie Walker again. Even if I ask for it."

I don't have to look to know she's studying me with an inquisitive brow. "On a break with Johnnie Walker?"

We both know it's not Johnnie Walker I'm breaking up with. "Something like that."

She hums, pouring an IPA from the tap and sliding it in front of me. "It's about time you pulled your head out of your ass." When I try passing her cash, she shakes her head. "That one is on me."

Tucking the money into the tip jar, I take a swig of my favorite beer. "Thanks, Shelly."

All she does is dip her chin and continue stacking cups on the back shelf.

"How come you never hit on me?" I ask, sipping the drink. "I've seen you hit on everybody else around here."

Shelly stops what she's doing and props her hip against the counter. "Baby, I can smell damaged from a mile away. There are some people I won't touch with a ten-foot pole, no matter how hot they are."

"You think I'm hot?"

She snorts. "Men like you are heartbreakers. I see it all the time. Even if I hit on you, we both know you wouldn't have done anything."

She's not wrong.

"Plus," she adds. "A girl needs good tips."

Her wink makes me chuckle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lincoln / Present

THERE ARE TWO missed calls and one voicemail from an unsaved number on my cell. But I know who it is before I listen to the smooth, professional voice and dial the number after getting home hours later.

“This is Theresa Castro,” is how she picks up.

“Hello, Theresa Casto,” I greet with a slur as I stumble up the stairs. “This is Lincoln Danforth.”

There’s a moment of hesitation. “Have you been drinking, Mr. Danforth?”

“So many formalities,” I muse, kicking one boot off at a time and tripping over one on my way to the couch. Dropping onto my back, I close my eyes and lay my phone down on my chest. “I may have indulged in a drink or two.”

Or twenty. Not sure.

I lost count after Shelly gave me glass number five. She also made me drink water and put a basket of chicken wings in front of me to absorb some of the alcohol. I’m not sure if the food came after drink number nine or ten.

“It sounds to me like you’ve had more than two,” she remarks, her tone almost sounding disappointed. Or was it judgmental?

I ignore the dull ping in my chest. “IPAs are heavy, doc. High alcohol content. You ever drink beer, or are you a fruity kind of woman?”

She doesn’t answer me. I already know the answer. She likes strawberry daiquiris. “You missed our session today. Is there a reason for it?”

Humming, I drape an arm over my eyes and settle into the couch. “Did you miss me?”

“I’m not in the mood to flirt, Mr. Danforth.”

Somebody is testy. Is it wrong that I like when she uses that firm voice on me? Maybe it’s the alcohol making my dick twitch to life, or maybe it’s the fact I haven’t gotten any in a while.

Seeing Georgia today sure as fuck didn't put me in the mood. If anything, it made me want to find someone at the bar and bring her home. I debated it. But I thought about what Shelly said, and I knew she was right.

"I saw my wife today. Her new boyfriend bought me a coffee. Wasn't that nice of him?"

The good doctor is quiet for a moment, her voice softer when she speaks again. "That must have been very hard for you."

"Oh, it was the best part of my day. I think we had a dick measuring contest in the middle of the coffee shop." I laugh at my pathetic joke, my eyebrow twitching when I think about his reference to Conklin. "Do you want to know whose is bigger?"

She clears her throat. "Not particularly."

"Suit yourself," I say with a grin.

Theresa Castro sighs. "You should have come to talk to me. Using alcohol to get through problems isn't a healthy coping mechanism."

"I'm not an alcoholic."

"I never said you were," she reasons when she hears the defensiveness in my tone. "But it's obvious that you decided alcohol was a better way to sort out your feelings than therapy. All I'm saying is that there's a reason I'm here. It's to talk. To listen. To offer help."

What could she do to help me? There are a few X-rated things I could think of that I doubt she'd be game for. "Have you ever drank to avoid your problems?"

There's no hesitation this time. "Yes, I have. I'm human too. Which is why I'm telling you that it's better to talk it out rather than to self-destruct at a bar."

I'd hardly say I'm self-destructing. "What did you do when you lost your husband?"

It's fifty-fifty on whether she'll answer me. I know it's a sensitive subject and none of my business. But curiosity killed the cat.

After a minute of silence, I almost change the subject when she gives me an answer. "I took time away from school. From work. From...life. I grieved. Mourned. Cried. Yelled. I'm far from perfect, Lincoln. In fact, I don't think there is such a thing. We are all flawed in some ways. To be flawed is to be human."

A small smile tilts the corners of my lips when I replay those words back. "You called me Lincoln," I murmur, the name on her lips warming me

more than the alcohol does.

“I think you should reschedule your appointment instead of waiting for next week’s,” she replies, not addressing the slip of the tongue.

The smile grows on my face. “Is that your way of saying you’d like to see me?”

“I would like to *help* you,” she states, that firm voice leaving little room to push boundaries. As much as I’d like to flirt with her, I have a feeling it won’t go anywhere.

“I’ll reschedule if you answer one question.”

I expect her to tell me no. To tell me I’m in no position to request anything. But she doesn’t say anything—doesn’t reject me or agree.

“Have you seen anybody since your husband passed away?”

It’s another prying question I’m not owed an answer to. I wouldn’t blame her if she told me to fuck off by asking it. I’m not surprised when she doesn’t.

“No,” she admits. “I have not.”

I nod to myself, not that she can see me.

“All right,” I agree without pressing her. It tells me all I need to. That she knows how I feel. That, to some degree, she understands. “I’ll reschedule.”

“Friday at six?”

I almost say, “It’s a date,” but stop myself at the last second. Instead, I say, “Happy Valentine’s Day, doc.”

When the call disconnects, I realize the anger I’d felt since my run-in with Georgia is nearly dissipated. And it has nothing to do with the buzz coursing through my body and everything to do with Doctor Theresa Castro.

And I don’t know what to think about that, so I choose not to think at all. At least not for the rest of the night.



MY BOOTS CRUNCH over what’s left of the melting snow as I walk through the graveyard. It’s a short walk from the path to where a brand new marble

gravestone sticks out in the back corner of the cemetery with CONKLIN carved in black lettering on the top.

“You always had a taste for the expensive shit,” I tell my late friend, stopping in front of the stone and wiping my runny nose. “I would have assumed you were a granite kind of guy if I didn’t know you better. Pretty sure your ritzy ass even requested a cherry coffin, which is a far cry from what you used to tell me to do with you when we were in the academy.”

Before Conklin met Marissa, he used to say he wanted to be cremated to get a head start to where he was going. It was funny because he was one of the nicest guys I know. There was no way he was going to hell, but it was his running joke that always got a few laughs. I guess marrying the love of his life made him think differently. He even went to church every Sunday with her and her family. Man was a sucker for that woman.

I smile to myself, but it wavers when my eyes scan over the dates listed on the piece of carved marble. “I saw Marissa and Coop the other day. I got him the new Grand Theft Auto game, much to your wife’s dismay. They’re doing good. As good as they can be, anyway.”

Kicking at the ground, I blow out a harsh breath and shake my head. “Man, this is bullshit. You shouldn’t be...*there*. Gone. You should be here, with us, kicking your son’s ass at video games and telling me what a fucking moron I am for sleeping with Georgia. You’d give it to me straight. Tough love. You’ve always been the best at that.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I look up to the sky and close my eyes. Taking a deep breath, I count to three to try to calm myself down. Fists clenching and unclenching, I relax my arms and stand to my full height.

“It was all for nothing,” I whisper, unable to stop replaying the image of Luca Carbone’s hand on Georgia’s back. “After *everything*...” I choke on my words, swallowing them as the anger boils my blood. “I did everything I could to protect her from him, and she still went back. You *died* for *nothing*.”

The truth cuts deep—so deep I’m not sure anything can repair it. Not stitches or glue or faith. No amount of time will undo what’s already been done.

And seeing Georgia with *him* again cemented the hatred that’s been brewing inside of me for a long-ass time.

Because I loved her once. I loved having someone to come home to. Somebody to vent to. To take care of. I loved each milestone we shared that

felt like the biggest victory to us, even if it was minuscule to others.

Georgia Del Rossi had once been *mine*.

A woman I was willing to sacrifice it all for.

I almost did.

Over.

And over.

And over.

And Conklin...

He *did* sacrifice himself for that love.

A love that I'm not sure ever existed outside of my head.

What the fuck was it all for?

"I'm sorry," I tell my friend in a broken whisper, sucking in a breath to fill my stinging lungs. "I'm sorry I didn't make it worth it."

Looking down at the ground, I clench my eyes closed and fight off the burning sensation behind my eyes.

I will not cry.

Not today.

Taking another deep breath, I open my eyes and rest my hand on the top of his stone. "I'll see you later, buddy."

When I pull back, I stare at the freshly polished coin resting where my palm was. He used to collect them wherever we would go. It used to piss me off. What did a guy who made six figures need with a few meaningless pennies?

He flicked one over to me once and told me that finding coins on specific dates meant loved ones were reaching out from the afterlife. That day, he picked up a penny from the side of the road and said it was the day his grandfather had passed. Another time, he picked up a quarter on the day of his aunt's death.

I stare at the penny that caught my eye earlier on my walk to grab lunch. I'm not sure why it stood out to me on the side of the street covered in dirt, slush, and grime. When I picked it up, it was spotless. Like it hadn't seen the dirty ground at all.

That's when I realized it was the anniversary of Conklin's death. Fifteen agonizing months.

Swallowing the emotion rising up my throat, I check the time on my watch. "I have to go," I murmur, looking at the penny, then at his name. "If

I miss another therapy session, I don't think the good doc will sign off on my paperwork."

My lips twitch. Would Conklin laugh at me being in therapy? Or would he tell me he thought it was a good idea? When he and Marissa were having trouble after Cooper was born, they went to couples counseling. I'd been surprised when he said it helped. I'd even considered trying it with Georgia. Anything to make it work.

She didn't want to.

The drive to the therapist's office is quiet.

I don't turn the radio on, but let my thoughts drown out the silence. I let myself feel the pain. The anger. The guilt. Holding it back has become exhausting.

Thirty minutes later, the good doctor opens the door to her office and gives me the same greeting as always.

But when I sit down on that green suede couch, it feels different. Her smile twitches downward like she can feel the shift.

She asks, "Are you all right?"

It's not the first time she's ever asked me that, but it's the first time I'm honest. "No. But let's not get ahead of ourselves."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Georgia / Six Years Ago

THE AUGUST SUN is baking my skin, turning the pasty color into a sun-kissed tone as I help set the table outside. “Do we have enough seats?”

Lincoln closes the grill, keeping his back turned on me. “I don’t know. I haven’t looked to see who all is coming.”

His tone is...off. Then again, it has been all week. He said it was because of work, but I’m not sure I believe him.

“Did you invite your friends from work? I know Marissa said she and Matt were planning on coming, but—”

“I said I don’t know, Georgia.” He cuts me off, pinching his nose when he sees me gawking at him.

My eyes go to the ring on my finger that the sun reflects off of. “I was only asking. I’m sorry.”

Scrubbing a hand down his face, his features soften. “Don’t apologize. I didn’t mean to be a dick. I sent out a group text saying we were barbecuing today and haven’t had a chance to see who responded because we’ve been prepping all day.”

“I’m sorry. I—” I cringe when he eyes me for apologizing again. “I know you wanted to sleep in more. I should have come here to set up myself.”

“It’s not about that.”

“Then what?”

It’s hard to keep the forced smile even when he walks over to me and rubs my arms. “Look, I’ve got a lot on my mind. Things that I don’t want to drag you into. Okay?”

“We can call it off if you’d prefer spending the day just us.”

When I asked what he wanted to do for his birthday, he said he didn’t expect anything special. Maybe drinks with friends or a night out at a nice restaurant together.

His parents and little sister went to Florida to see family, so I thought it would be a good idea to have a barbecue at their house with his friends that he hadn't seen in forever.

"It's too late for that."

Does that mean he wishes we could? "You could tell them something came up. Make me the bad guy. Today is supposed to be about you."

He looks away, a weird twitch in his eye that has my brows furrowing. "I'm sure Matt and Riss are already on their way, so let's not worry about it. We'll get more chairs if we need them."

My shoulders slump in defeat as he walks away toward the half-empty beer he'd been working on for the last twenty minutes. "Did I do something? Because you've been weird all week, and I thought this would be a nice change of pace for you. If you want to talk about what's on your mind, you know I'm here."

The bottle pauses halfway to his mouth. There's a pause before he takes a long swig and lowers it in his grasp. "It's been a long week, Georgia."

He always says that. "So let's talk about it."

"Not right now."

He's barely said anything about work all week, which isn't normal. I always hear about the traffic stops he makes or the search warrants he helps execute. If there's an arrest, I know the details. Same with any interactions with coworkers. I know Matt is planning on proposing to Marissa and that their other coworker Richie was caught sleeping with a dispatcher in a sergeant's office and is probably being suspended without pay for a few days. But over the last week, something changed.

"Are you sure? Because we have time."

Finishing off his beer, he tosses it into the trash bag hanging off the fence post and turns back to the grill. "I already said I don't want to talk right now. Okay?"

He doesn't want to talk to me or doesn't want to talk to anybody? In defeat, I murmur, "You never want to talk."

When he comes home, he'll evade my questions when I ask how his day is by asking about mine instead. Then he'll kiss me to distract me from asking again. And the kisses turn to touching. And touching turns to...way more.

I never complain. He makes us both feel good. *Mine*, he called me. My finger presses against the ring to remind me of that.

I'm his.

He's mine.

That means something.

Lincoln chuckles, but it's a dry sound. Normally, when he laughs, his eyes light up. They're dull now. Drained. Distant. He doesn't look like my Lincoln. The carefree one. "We talk all the time. You're being a little dramatic."

His condescending tone sinks its claws into me. Setting the dishes down, I turn to him. "It's obvious that something is wrong, so I don't know why you're trying to deny it. I'm only asking because I care."

Lincoln groans, and the sound is grating. "I know you care. I'm saying I don't want to talk about it right now because we have people coming over."

"People you clearly don't want here!"

"I just wanted a quiet birthday, Georgia," he finally admits. "I never asked for this. I didn't want to entertain the people I see all goddamn week. Happy now?"

His tone is uncharacteristically cold, making me stare at the ground when his slitted eyes on me become too much. "I..." The words get stuck in my throat, so I don't force them. Shaking my head, I walk away from him. What's the point of having a one-sided conversation.

Seconds after the door closes, it reopens, and Lincoln's footsteps follow the path I take to his parents' guest bathroom. "Georgia—"

I close and lock myself in the bathroom, sitting on the edge of the bathtub and fighting off the urge to cry. My eyes go down to the piece of gold on my finger that suddenly feels too heavy.

Knuckles knock against the door. "Georgia," Lincoln says quietly. "Can you open up?"

For a second, I think about not replying at all. Isn't that what he wants? Quiet? But I decide not to be petty. "I think it's better if I stay in here for a little while and cool off. Like you said, you don't want to talk right now. People are going to show up soon anyway."

Despite that, I see the doorknob wiggle before hearing the lock click open. I gape as he pulls the door open, unashamed at picking the lock and walking in. "I'm an asshole."

I don't disagree with him.

"You did this for me."

Another truth.

He walks in and squats down so we're eye level, tilting my chin up so I'm forced to meet his eyes. I want to look away, but he won't let me. "I have had a shitty week at work, and you don't deserve me taking it out on you. There was another complaint made against me that's being investigated. If I get another one, I'll have to face internal affairs. It's not a great position to be in. Especially since I've been working on my portfolio to apply for BCI. The investigators aren't going to want to take me on as a detective if they think I'm trouble."

Another complaint? "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's bullshit." His lips twitch as he lowers his hand from my face. "Someone claims they saw me hitting a car at a gas station and driving away. They gave a generic description of the trooper that matches me and gave my car's number. Thing was, I was at the gas station filling up before the end of my shift. But I was there thirty minutes before the woman said I was. And I sure as hell didn't hit a car."

"Why would anybody say that?"

He doesn't answer, but something flashes in his eyes. "The girl that called my sergeant is a user. We've picked her up before for possession and arrested her boyfriend on numerous accounts of assault and distribution. That's how she said she was sure it was me. And the gas station's security system just so happened to be down for maintenance at the time this happened."

"Wouldn't your car have damage if you hit something?"

"I'm not worried about getting into trouble. I did nothing wrong. It's not..." His fingers rake through his hair. "I just don't need the extra pressure right now when I'm trying to make connections with the investigative team."

"I'm—"

"Don't. Don't say you're sorry." He presses his thumb against my lower lip. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

My eyes go to my ring, silently communicating with him that we both know I'm at fault. Nickolas Del Rossi said he would make Lincoln's life hell if I disobeyed him. He's always been a man of his word.

"You should have told me," I say quietly. "If you keep bottling it up, you're going to explode. And I...I don't need another man in my life who could combust around me at any second. I need...stable. Safe."

The frustration on Lincoln's face melts. "You always have a safe place with me, Peaches. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to make you feel guilty. You're not responsible for what your father chooses to do. And this shit has his name written all over it. He's not a good person. He's petty and angry and a lot of other shit that makes me dislike him a little more every single day. But he doesn't matter. We're in this together, right?"

One of my brows rises. "I don't know. *Are* we? It's a two-way street, Linc."

He nods. "You're right, it is. I'll work on it. Okay?" We hear a car door close outside, marking the first guests. "It's going to be okay. I won't get into trouble for this. They'll know I didn't do it, especially when they see her record. She's an unreliable witness."

Even if that's true, it's obvious he's concerned this could happen again. And I don't want him to worry about what my father could do to his career. He's done too much for me to risk it all because of pettiness.

He stands, offering me his hand. "Come on. Today will be a good distraction from work. You were right to plan this. I'm happy we're doing it."

I'm not sure if he means it, but I smile and pretend like he does. We answer the door together like a happy couple, welcoming Matt Conklin and his girlfriend Marissa in.

I give Marissa a hug.

Matt clasps Lincoln's hand. "Happy birthday, you old fuck."

Lincoln chuckles. "You're older than me."

Matt hands him a bottle of liquor with a blue ribbon on it. "Don't remind me."

Marissa rolls her eyes at the men. "Men," she muses, nudging me with her elbow.

I feign a laugh. "I know."

But I don't know.

Not at all.

A few more people show up.

We eat.

We drink.

We joke.

Lincoln seems...happy.

Happier than he has been.

That makes the guilt seep in deeper.

Sometime later, I go inside to get another water from the fridge when I hear Lincoln and Matt talking quietly down the hall.

I stop around the corner, biting my lip, when I hear, "...are three different transactions that The Del Rossi group gets regularly from Scores Tech that I can't find anywhere online. It's always the same lump sum."

Why is Matt talking about my father's business?

"Forgery?" Lincoln asks.

"Could be money laundering," Matt says, voice lowering. "You mentioned that his former partner was put away for it. Maybe her father learned from the best. A lot of businesses that partner with the mafia get transactions like these for their underground services."

My stomach sinks. *The mafia?*

Lincoln and Matt are talking about my father like his life is the plot of a movie. And I...I don't think I like that.

"What kind of services could Del Rossi provide? He only works in one area, so it can't be transporting black market items," Lincoln asks.

Matt pauses before saying, "Maybe it's literally an underground partnership. He works in concrete, right?"

Lincoln cusses. "You think there's a chance he's burying bodies?"

My eyes widen. *What?*

There's a sigh. "I don't know, man. I think it's possible. Whatever is happening, I'm positive of one thing. Nikolas Del Rossi is in over his head. It's not good. He's clearly working with someone to get money for his company. Word on the street is he's not getting a lot of regular business these days. If that's the case, how is he getting millions transferred to him? And for what? Whoever is sending him that money can't be doing it out of the kindness of their hearts."

There's silence.

Then, "Hard to think Georgia could be related to somebody like that."

Somebody like that.

I step back, cringing when a floorboard creaks. The voices stop, so I make a hasty exit back outside and take my seat next to Marissa. Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I try to calm my racing heart.

"You forgot your water, silly," she says, patting my leg. She stands up. "I'll go get us both one. Want anything else?"

Silently, I shake my head.

“I’ll be right back.”

I murmur, “Okay,” absentmindedly.

Lincoln comes out with a new beer in his hand, laughing at something Matt says. When he sees me looking in his direction, he flashes a smile.

It goes to his eyes.

I smile back, but I’m sure it doesn’t go past the tightness lifting my lips.

He’s pretending like he wasn’t just talking about my family.

Lying.

How long has he been checking into them?

I’m lost in those thoughts when he starts opening presents. I barely register when he opens mine and pulls out the Wolverine steel-toe work boots to replace the old pair that are falling apart at the seams. He presses a kiss to my cheek, but I barely feel it. “I love them, Georgia. Thank you. It’s a great gift.”

Liar.

I say, “You’re welcome.” But it doesn’t feel like I’m saying those words at all.

Because I’m thinking about Nikolas Del Rossi and the shared blood that courses through my veins. If he’s inherently bad, like Lincoln and Matt think, what does that make me?



THE NEXT NIGHT, I stare at myself in the vanity mirror, frowning at the chocolate-brown hair against my sun-kissed skin. If Nikolas were here, he’d tell me I looked like my mother. They both had dark hair, but it’s her eyes I got. My nose is hers. My lips. My face a mixture of the two.

But maybe I don’t want to look like her anymore.

I don’t want to be a Del Rossi.

I simply want to be Georgia.

I open the counter drawer and pull out the box of hair dye I bought months ago. I’d bought it with Millie’s words in mind about changing my hair, but I’d been too chicken to do it. The woman behind the counter said I’d need to bleach it if I wanted to go lighter, so I googled everything I’d need for when I decided to make the move.

My eyes go from the box in my hand to the mirror one last time.

I touch my brown roots with my other hand and trail my fingers down my long locks that rest just over my shoulders.

My father liked my hair long. He liked when Mrs. Ricci or Leani curled it. He said it reminded him of my mother when she wore it that way.

But I am *not* my mother or my father.

Just as I crack open the box and begin pulling out the items, Lincoln knocks on the door. "Are you okay?"

When I don't answer right away, he cracks it open and pokes his head inside. Brows pinching when he sees what I'm holding, he walks in and leans against the edge of the sink. "What are you doing, Peaches?"

I fidget with the bottle of hair bleach before peeking up at him through my lashes. "I don't want to be the reason you're held back. I don't..." I stare at the packaging, fighting a deep frown. "I don't want to be like my father."

Lincoln's hand tilts my chin up to meet his warm eyes. "You will never be like Nikolas."

Swallowing, I nod, even if I don't believe it.

Mostly because I'm still trying to figure out who I am without my family. A daughter to a businessman. A wife to a cop. But who am *I*? I don't know because Nikolas has never allowed me to figure it out.

I enjoy my job, even when I find it boring. I like to read and talk about books with people who come in looking for recommendations. But there's nothing else I'm good at.

"Is this what you want?" Lincoln asks, picking up the instructions that came with the bleach and scanning them.

Is it? I glance at the reflection one last time before making up my mind.

Whoever Georgia Del Rossi was doesn't exist anymore. "Yes."

"Okay." He stands, flattening out the paper and reading over each step.

"What are you doing?"

His eyes meet mine in the mirror. "Helping."

One word wraps around my heart like a warm hug as I watch him mix the containers and shake it before fighting with the gloves that are too small for his large hands. He foregoes them without a second thought, standing behind me and putting a hand on my shoulder.

"Ready?"

I look at myself one last time.

This version of Georgia.

The old one.

Swallowing, I dip my head. "Yes."

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him about what he and Matt were talking about at his birthday party.

I'm about to when something holds me back.

Fear. The unknown.

I think about what Mrs. Ricci told me when I asked about my mother's car accident. *"That is a question you are better off not knowing the answer to."*

So, I watch his careful movement in the mirror as he covers the brown strands of hair with the bleach and remain quiet, saying a silent goodbye to the girl I no longer wanted to be.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lincoln / Five Years Ago

SERGEANT ANDERSON CLAPS my back as I head toward the exit in my civilian clothes. “Good work on that bust today, Hawk. I overheard the captain say he’s impressed with the work you’ve been putting in. No doubt he’ll give you a good recommendation if there’s anywhere you want to go from here.”

Anderson has been one of my favorite sergeants to work with because he doesn’t limit his patrol officers based on the latest policies. He lets us do our job, even if it means writing fewer tickets for mundane shit like seat belts and speeding and making more arrests for drug deals and violent crimes. Problem is, he’s retiring soon, and God only knows who will take his place.

If he says the captain knows who I am and likes what I’m doing, it means I have a better chance at moving up before he’s officially gone. I can only hope that’s the case. There are certainly people here who aren’t my biggest fans. I’ll take any ally I can get.

Anderson gestures toward his office, closing the door behind us when I step inside. “You’ve been doing a lot of interdiction work lately. Seems like you’ve got a point to prove. I’m curious who it is you’re proving it to.”

He sits on the edge of his desk with his arms crossed, curiosity clear on his face. I like the guy. He’s a hands-on boss and gives a shit about the men at his station, unlike some of the sergeants before him. Despite encouraging us to make a change in our communities, he’ll never understand my determination to clean up the streets.

“I grew up here,” I explain. “I don’t like seeing drugs overrun the streets I used to play on. Heroin has been on the rise for the past ten years, and now fentanyl is a growing problem that’s causing twice as many overdoses thanks to people lacing their product. I don’t like seeing it where my family lives or where my friends raise their kids.”

His understanding nod makes me wonder if he’ll press on the issue, and thankfully, he doesn’t. I don’t want to tell him that Conklin got a list of

people employed by The Del Rossi Group who have a lot of criminal history in drug use and distribution. They aren't your usual construction workers, and I doubt we'll see them on any Del Rossi job site helping lay out foundations.

I also don't find it a coincidence that two of the workers we just picked up tonight happen to be working the streets with a hell of a lot more narcotics than anybody should have. Nobody with a habit of using has eighty grams of cocaine stashed in a hidden compartment in their cars, and they sure as hell don't have stacks of one-hundred-dollar bills tucked away either. The drugs come from the same person the money goes to, and one of these people is going to tell us who.

Conklin doesn't think they'll talk.

I do.

Interrogation has always been my strong suit, which is another reason I want to become an investigator. It's all about how to speak to people—how to make them comfortable, or sometimes uncomfortable, enough to get them to open up. Conklin says I can charm the pants off a nun. That's a skill set I hope the BCI can appreciate when I formally put my application in.

"I'm surprised you don't want to work with narcotics," Anderson notes. "They'd love to have you with all the arrests you've got under your belt. You could train the rookies on what to look for when they're on the road."

I've considered that before, but I don't want to be a teacher. "I'm a hands-on kind of guy, sarge. Teaching isn't really for me."

He shrugs. "It's an option. Same with CSU."

Community stabilization? "CSU is just a fancy way of saying you're a cop. It doesn't come with the same pay raise as becoming a detective does, even though you're doing more work by being undercover."

"Saving up?"

"One day, I'd like to get out of my apartment."

"Well, I'm sure you'll make a hell of an investigator. You've been putting in the time helping BCI close their cases, so your portfolio should definitely gain their interest."

I ask him an honest question. "You think I got a shot?"

His hesitation makes me wonder what he knows that I don't. "I think you've got a better chance than most people who will apply for an investigative position. You're always here. Always working. Putting in the overtime. Making arrests. You're showing results."

One of my brows pops up. "But?"

He sighs. "But you've clearly made some enemies. There are people who want to make a mockery of you. I'm not the only one who's noticed. I don't know who you pissed off, Hawk, but it's clear they've got it out for you."

As soon as Conklin and I started partnering up to go after the people on his list, I started getting called into the sergeant's office more often. I was a threat to their polished platoon that they wanted me to mold and conform to. When they realized I wasn't going to do that, they started splitting me and Conklin up like it would stop me from going after the same people I was before.

It's not a mystery who's behind the sudden influx of calls to the station about me. When I asked one of the perps who told them to narc on me, they'd been desperate enough to make a deal. It wasn't a lot of information I got from them, but they told me it was a man in an expensive black Escalade. The same vehicle Georgia said was following her. The same one that ran her off the road. There is no doubt in my mind it was Nikolas or someone he hired.

Question is, why does he care about the people I've been picking off the streets?

The only thing I offer him is the bland version of the truth. "When you make the number of arrests I have, you're bound to make some enemies, sir."

He studies me with inquisitive eyes before relenting in agreement. "You're not wrong. My suggestion is to be careful, though. Some people get lost in this job. Obsessed with justice. You have a life to live. You're young. Got a wife to think about. Kids, I'm sure, one day. Don't throw your youth away to catch a few criminals."

It's my wife's life that I'm trying to protect. I promised her safety, and dammit, that's what I'm going to give her. Del Rossi is involved in a lot of shit that I'm determined to prove. I just need time and willing witnesses to back me up.

"Don't worry about me, sarge," I reassure, grabbing the door handle. "I've got it all figured out."

"It's not just you I'm worried about," he informs me with a strong look that has me pausing halfway out the door. "Conklin follows you blindly into

anything. All I'm saying is that you need to be cautious about what you get into. Some of these people are flagged as violent offenders for a reason."

My lips twitch at the warning. "It's a good thing we're trained for anything then."

His parting sigh is the last thing I hear before grabbing my keys and heading toward my patrol car.

But his warning rings in my ears, settling into my gut like a heavy weight I can't nudge.

I don't like it.

I don't like it at all.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lincoln / Present

SENIOR INVESTIGATOR BEAUGARD walks out of the back room and sighs the second he sees me leaning against the wall with two coffees in my hand. “One of those better be for me, Hawk,” he says, taking the one I extend out to him as I match his pace down the hall.

I pass him the one on the right. I know he likes his coffee with three shots of milk and a little bit of sugar. Since I have no idea what this is about, I figure buttering him up couldn’t hurt.

“McAdams said you wanted to speak to me.”

He stops at his office at the end of the corridor and opens it, gesturing me in with his hand. I step inside, standing by one of the chairs across from his desk and watching him pop open the button of his suit jacket before sitting down in front of his computer.

“Sit,” he tells me, setting the coffee down by his keyboard. “We need to chat about why I got a call from Estep from the DA’s office asking me about your visitation request at Rikers to see his client. What the *fuck* are you thinking?”

Christ. I thought I’d told Estep to call me, not Beaugard, about seeing Jakob Volley. I’ve worked enough with the attorney to have a decent relationship with him. I thought he would have afforded me one favor.

“I need to talk to Volley,” is all I say.

My unapologetic tone has him sighing as he takes a long sip of his coffee. Then he points to his thinning hair and says, “Do you see this? I blame you for all the goddamn grays. I used to be young when I started this job.”

I don’t point out that his hairline was receding when we first met because that won’t get me far at all. “Look, I know it’s not ideal—”

“You’re damn straight it’s not.” He leans forward. “You must be out of your mind to think speaking to Volley is a good idea. Do you have any clue what that could do to his case when he appeals?”

“When?” I repeat.

He doesn’t bullshit me. “You and I both know that they always appeal. He doesn’t want to stay at Rikers for a full sentence. Any chance he can go in front of a judge again, he’s going to take.”

“He shot and killed a police officer,” I deadpan. “There’s no way they’re going to consider resentencing.”

Beaugard scoffs out a dry laugh. “What do you think is going to happen when they find out one of the officers he shot went to see him? They’ll appeal and claim intimidation of their client to get him out.”

“That wouldn’t excuse his previous charges,” I point out. “He was charged with murder in the first degree with a life sentence. He *plead guilty*. Even if I went to see him, there’s no overturning that decision.”

Beaugard stares at me for a long time before shaking his head. “You really have lost it. They shouldn’t have let you come back until your head was in the right place.”

What the hell? “I’m not crazy.”

“Well, you’re not being logical either,” he shoots back. “What could you possibly want to talk to Volley about? You had your chance to address him at his sentencing.”

Is he forgetting where I was? “I was stuck at the hospital being monitored after my second emergency surgery when he was sentenced. If I could have been there, my happy ass would have.”

He nods, looking only slightly apologetic. “I feel for you, Hawk. I do. But there’s no reason for you to go see Volley. His team is going to use that against you, and I’ve seen people get off on far less.”

Closing my eyes, I lean back in the chair and take a deep breath. “He knows more than he’s letting on. I just want to ask him a couple of questions.”

“At what cost?” he questions. “If closure is what you’re seeking, you already got it. The person who pulled the trigger is behind bars exactly where he should be.”

But not the people who told him to.

That’s what he doesn’t understand.

“He said he wasn’t working alone, Beau.”

“He also said that a demon made him do it,” Beaugard points out with a dumbfounded expression on his face. “I don’t really put much weight into what he said in court, and you shouldn’t either.”

His team was going for an insanity plea, but the jury saw right through that. Volley wasn't insane, he was scared and willing to do what it took in order to avoid Rikers.

"I made a deal with the devil," he said into the mic, wild-eyed and sweaty as he frantically looked at the jury. "A demon made me do it."

Maybe he wasn't totally out of his mind.

He said that he'd been paid by the devil himself but wouldn't say the name. His claim was that his life would be in danger if he did. If I had to guess, I'd say the devil wore a designer suit and had the same last name as my ex-wife's maiden name.

"You know I'm good at my job," I tell Beaugard quietly. "I'm usually never wrong about these things. My intuition is saying we need to look into this. I've got a reason to believe that he's connected to more than we have him for. Maybe he can be given a deal if he gives us information—we get him out of Rikers and into a different prison for the same sentence."

Beaugard swipes at his face, looking as tired as I feel. I'm lucky if I get four hours of sleep a night these days, and I know his hours are crazier with all the cases that come into the station. Our hours are supposed to be nine-to-five with the BCI, but with rising crime rates, that almost never happens. "If we opened this can of worms, do you honestly believe it'll get us anywhere? There's a lot of time and money that get tied up into these kinds of cases, and I've got people on my ass about what's worth our energy and what isn't."

He means the state.

They like to hold our spending over our heads like putting money into getting dangerous people off the streets isn't important enough.

"Tell the troopers to write a few more tickets so the state has the funding they need then," I counter, ignoring the narrowed look I get. "I'm sure if they pull over enough soccer moms going ten over the speed limit because they're late dropping their kids off, then we'll have enough money to get *actual* criminals off the roads."

Beaugard doesn't bother scolding me for my opinion because he knows there's no use. I've never been the kind of guy who went after the blue-collar workers trying to get to their jobs on time by speeding, or the people whose license plates are dirty in the wintertime from all the grime and muck kicking up from the roads.

"So?" I press.

I don't tell him about Welsh or the file that Conklin put together. Not yet. Not until I have the information I need to move forward. And that depends on what Volley has to say.

Beaugard finishes the coffee I gave him and tosses the cup into the trash. "Apparently, your intuition is still strong. Estep said Volley wants to talk." His expression goes stiff as he leans back, tapping his hand against the edge of the desk. "And he only wants to talk to you."

My eyebrows go up.

"You realize," the senior investigator says slowly, "that I can't get this approved, right? There is no way anyone would let you go on your own."

I figured as much, which is why I was hoping to do this without having to ask. Conklin used to say it was better to ask for forgiveness, not permission. Those words were at the forefront of my mind when I made the call to Estep to get access onto Volley's exclusive visitor's list, which was made up only of his legal team.

"So what do we do?"

Beaugard stands, buttoning his suit jacket and checking his watch. "I am going to the deli to get my wife the sub she's been craving before she threatens divorce again," he says with a small smile curling his lips. "Her pregnancy hormones are brutal this time around. They say that means it's a girl, God help me. But *you* are going to go home and get some sleep because you look like shit. Think about what I said. You can't go see him *alone*."

He walks by and squeezes my shoulder once before sliding a piece of paper onto the desk in front of me.

It's Estep's personal cell number that he must have given Beaugard to pass along.

My boss pats my back and walks out, leaving me alone in his office.

His words sink in.

I can't go alone.

That doesn't mean I can't go *talk* to him alone.



THE FRONT DOOR opens as I lift my hand to knock, and a hand swings out before I have time to blink. I don't expect the sting behind the blow coming from a five-foot-nothing pregnant woman, but pregnancy hormones must give people an extra dose of strength.

I rub my arm. "Damn, Marissa. Are you hitting up the gym? If I'd known you called me to come over just to abuse me, I would have stayed home."

"Are you out of your mind?" she asks, fury narrowing her slitted eyes at me.

I hold up my palms in surrender. "It was just a question. I didn't know the gym was such a sensitive top—"

"I'm not talking about the damn gym!" She cuts me off in exasperation, pulling me inside and toward the kitchen, crossing her arms over her chest. Conklin used to say he loved what pregnancy did to his wife, and I knew what he meant whenever we'd all have dinner together. The guy could barely stop staring at her tits.

"Jakob Volley," Marissa says. I force my eyes to stay on her face and far, far away from her boobs.

Did Beaugard talk to her? "What about him?"

"I know what you're doing, and I'm not okay with it. Don't you think you've sacrificed enough thanks to guys like him? Come on, Lincoln. Think with your head for once."

So that's why she made it seem urgent when she left me a voice message to come over as soon as I could. "I am, Riss."

"No," she argues, lowering her voice so Cooper can't hear us from wherever he is in the house. "You're thinking with your dick and your male ego. You wouldn't even be on Volley's trail if it weren't for Michael Welsh. And the only reason you care about Volley is because of Georgia and her father. I already lost one person thanks to them. I *refuse*—" Her voice cracks. "—to stand around and watch as I lose another."

Her broken tone has my shoulders dropping a fraction as I step toward her shaking body. "I don't think that's fair. You know I can't just let it go. Matt deserves justice."

"At what expense?" she asks me, brushing my comforting hand away from her arm. Her eyes become glassy. "Where is the line, Lincoln? When are you going to realize that it's not worth constantly putting your life at

risk? Matt is dead. My husband, my soulmate, and best friend is gone forever. We can't do anything about that."

"We can make sure the person responsible gets locked up," I counter, watching as she shakes her head and swipes at a fallen tear rolling down her cheek.

"Volley is already locked up."

"Marissa, I can make a difference. I know I can. I'm close to the truth. I can feel it. You and I both know he didn't willingly pull that trigger without being told to. Somebody let him know we were coming."

She snuffles, anger growing on her face. "He knew you were coming because he missed his court hearing and had an arrest warrant. Lincoln, you said you were close before. When you went to that house, Matt told me he'd stop obsessing over the case when you two got Volley. But what if you get killed too?"

"I won't."

"You don't know that," she whispers, angrily wiping her damp face off with the back of her hand. "We both know that anything can happen out there. These people aren't just your everyday users. They're not out there smoking weed or snorting coke or shooting up heroin for the sake of their fix. The people you're going after are so much deeper than that. You know what they're capable of. You've *seen* what they can do."

Swallowing, I look down. I can practically hear the gun go off. Again. And again. And again. I hear it every goddamn night I lay down.

Smell the gunpowder and the blood.

Feel the piercing pain and hot lead as I try getting to Conklin.

"That's why I need to make sure they don't hurt anybody else," I tell her as softly as I can.

"They'll get caught with time," she pleads. "You don't have to be the vigilante. It's not only up to you to stop them."

She's wrong. "There's a reason I have a badge. If I can't be the one who ends this, then what's the point of having one?"

Her eyes dim. "Do you care that little about your life that you're willing to put it on the line?"

"Would it really matter if something happened as long as I got what I needed?"

She closes her eyes, clenching them to fight off the tears, and then lets out a long breath before opening them to look at me. "Stop doing that."

“Doing what?”

“Stop acting like you have no one!” she yells, wincing when she looks into the other room. She squeezes her temples and walks away from me, putting the kitchen island between us.

“You have Cooper to worry about,” I remind her. “It’s not the same for me. I go home to an empty house. I’ve got nobody who depends on me. Who’s waiting for me. Who—” *Loves me.*

She tosses her hands in the air. “You have people, Hawk! You have family and friends and coworkers who would miss you if something happened. Cooper loves you. I love you. Your mom and dad and sister all love you. Why do you always insist that your life matters less than Matt’s or anybody else’s? It matters just as much.”

I have to look away when her intense gaze becomes too much to bear. “Because it’s *my* mess. It’s my responsibility to fix it.”

“It’s too much responsibility,” she says, voice softening as she rounds the island. “And it shouldn’t be your problem to bear anymore. You walked away from the Del Rossis for a reason.”

But Georgia didn’t. “I told her I’d keep her safe,” I murmur, meeting her eyes for the briefest second until understanding crosses her tense features. “I promised, Marissa.”

The image of Luca Carbone’s hand on her back makes me nauseous. But not as much as the look on her face when I told her I was done.

I’ll never fully be done. Not until Nikolas goes down for everything he’s done, starting with her and ending with Conklin.

Sympathy washes over her. “The promises you made to her when you said your vows hold no weight now, Lincoln. You’re free. She made her choice, and you need to make yours. You’re on a suicide mission, and what will that earn you at the end of the day?”

It won’t be Georgia.

That’s what she’s saying.

Because Georgia made her choice.

And it’s not me.

You’re free.

I tried giving Georgia that freedom once, and look where it led us.

Marissa’s hand finds my biceps. “Matt wouldn’t want this for you. He’d want you to live and find love again. He’d want you to be *happy*.”

I stare at her hand—at the ring she still wears on her finger.

I wonder if she'll ever be happy again. I'd like to think she and I are cut from the same cloth. We both love Matt too much to let go. So, how could she expect me to move on without getting any closure?

"I'm in too deep, Riss."

"It's a suicide mission," she repeats.

I smile emptily. "I know."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Lincoln / Present

THERE'S SOMETHING DIFFERENT about the doctor today, but I can't pinpoint what it is. Her glasses are the same, and so is the color of her hair and how it's pinned back away from her face. She's routine. Precise. She's wearing the same black skirt I saw her in two months ago, with a brown silk shirt that brings out the color of her green eyes.

Cocking my head, I drape my ankle over my opposite leg. "Do your friends ever pester you about moving on with your life?" I ask, filling the silence so my blatant staring doesn't seem so obvious.

She gently bobs her foot, covered by a black stiletto with a thin heel. Maybe that's new. I've always seen her in loafers that make her look about ten years older than she is. "Some of them do. Most of them have learned to let me be until I'm ready."

My eyes watch her foot swing before trailing up her lean legs until they stop at the hem of her skirt. "And when do you think that will be?"

Her answer is to arch an eyebrow in silence.

Half of my lips kick up. "I'm asking because there's no timeline for these kinds of things. And you seem like the type who loves those."

"On the contrary. I find timelines to be misleading and damaging."

I settle into the couch, relaxing my arms over my chest. "You really trying to tell me you don't like timelines? You strike me as the type of person who makes meal plans, weekly workout routines, and picks out outfits days in advance."

If I look closely, I can see the faintest hint of pink in her cheeks. "There's a difference between routines and timelines."

"Indulge me then."

There's a brief pause where she contemplates entertaining me. "Routines are plans that can be scheduled in advance for organizational purposes. They're not necessarily set in stone, but they help guide people. I often recommend people have daily routines to help with anxiety and time

management. Timelines are trickier. People tend to think they have to follow them in the exact order as everybody else. It puts pressure on them. If they don't accomplish something in a timely manner, they feel like they've failed."

"Can't timelines guide people though?"

"Is there a reason you're asking, Mr. Danforth?"

Back to the formalities. "And here I thought we were getting somewhere," I muse lightly, watching as she remains unreadable. "Everybody seems to think that I should let go of everything that's happened over the past few years and move on with my life. But I've never done well with that. Letting things go, that is."

"Is there a reason for that?"

"There are a lot," I answer plainly. When her silent stare makes it obvious she's waiting for me to elaborate, I sigh. "I want closure. I want justice and satisfaction that I did something right—that I tried to keep my word. My word..." I lift a shoulder, glancing toward the window. "My word means everything to me."

"I can respect that sentiment," she begins, shifting in her seat to reposition. Her heels click against the floor, making my eyes go down to her exposed legs before they drift upward to meet hers. "Closure can be a very difficult thing to obtain. It's never guaranteed. Most people I counsel rarely get closure from relationships that end."

"This isn't just about Georgia, doc."

Both of her eyebrows go up. "No?"

I shake my head. "It's part of it," I admit begrudgingly. "She was a large piece of my life, and I took my vows very seriously. Even after it ended, I took them to heart."

"It's admirable."

"Most people find it ridiculous."

The good doctor shakes her head. "Not me."

She's been married, so she understands.

But her loss and mine are very different.

"I wanted to make a difference in her life by giving her another chance," I say, looking down at my lap. "She deserved to figure out who she was without her family's influence. Without mine. I wanted to be the person that helped her realize she had the world at her fingertips."

“That’s a lot of responsibility for one person,” the good doctor replies, reminding me of Marissa’s words to me the other day.

“I promised that I would keep her safe,” is all I say back, swallowing down the lump slowly rising up my throat. “I was supposed to keep Matt Conklin safe too.”

A thick silence passes between us before I hear the creaking of the chair she’s sitting on. It’s only then I look up to see she’s scooted forward, almost as if she’s tempted to get up and walk over to me. The temptation is there; I can see it in the way her fingers curl around the notepad on her lap as if it grounds her to her spot.

It isn’t pity on her face though.

She peels her glasses off and sets them down on the table between us. “Lincoln, I want you to understand something. I know that your job is to serve and protect and that you’ve been trained to take on a lot of heavy responsibility. But you cannot keep living with that guilt on your conscience. It’s impossible to save everybody. It will eat you alive.”

I don’t get the chance to appreciate my name on her lips the way I wish I could. “Then what the hell am I supposed to do? How are people like us meant to move on from things that we can’t get closure over?”

Her smile is warm. Gentle. “We find new things to look forward to in life.”

Is it really that simple?

She finally sits back, settling into the chair again and ignoring her discarded glasses. “Why is it that you associate one loss with the other when you speak about Georgia and Matt? What is it that you equate to this need for justice?”

My smile is forced. Weighted and numb all at once as I feel the crack in my heart expand another centimeter. “Georgia may not have pulled the trigger that day,” I tell her. “But she might as well have been the one who passed Jakob Volley the gun.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Georgia / Five Years Ago

AS I'M PUSHING the front door of the library open and turning on the lights, I'm startled by the baritone greeting from the broad-shouldered man in the custom Versace suit. "Hello, Georgia."

Goose bumps cover my arms as I stare dubiously at my father sitting in my favorite armchair by the fireplace.

There are only two keys to the library. One of them is in my hand and I highly doubt Mariam, the head librarian, let him borrow hers. She barely let *me* touch it until she had no choice but to give me the spare when I took on opening hours. "I doubt I want to know how you got in," I murmur, leaving the door half-open just in case.

My father may have never hit me before, but I know he's capable after watching Mrs. Ricci step between us the day he raised his hand.

He doesn't say anything right away, but he chuckles when he sees me walk away from the door and go behind the check-out counter. I know underneath the suit that makes him look both wealthy and professional is a powerful man not to be messed with. Lincoln and Conklin's words from my husband's birthday echo in my head.

No matter how well put-together my father looks or how approachable he appears, there's far more hiding beneath the surface if what I heard is true.

"I have my ways," he answers simply, his eyes roaming from the tips of my shoes to the messy bun I threw my hair into. "You looked better brunette," he notes, the statement a punch to the gut I take with as much dignity as I can.

My eyes go to his graying hair that was once as rich a brown as mine. "That's because I looked like a Del Rossi."

He makes a thoughtful noise. "Much to your dismay, you will always be a Del Rossi. No matter what horrible color you dye your hair."

The comment makes my teeth grind. “I’m surprised you haven’t stopped by sooner to congratulate me on my nuptials.”

I see the slightest flicker of a smile that’s gone when I blink, and I know it has nothing to do with amusement. I’ve seen it before whenever I snooped in on his meetings as a child. When he was challenged or second-guessed by the person he met with, that smile would appear. Usually, before that person went away. It was rare I ever saw them again. I’d heard rumors that they were fired, stripped of their roles, and moved away.

Disgraced.

Like me.

That smile, no matter how minuscule, is terrifying.

“Are they really nuptials if they’re fake?” he questions, gripping the arms of the chair.

“I assure you, the documents are all very legal.”

“I wasn’t referring to the documents.”

His eyes are bloodshot, not staying on me for too long. Is it because he doesn’t see my mother anymore?

“Then what were you referring to?”

“I preferred it when you barely spoke back,” is his only response.

I drape my coat over the back of the chair, giving him minimal attention. “I’m sure you do. It was easier for you when I didn’t ask questions. I want more out of life though.”

When I peek up at him, I see his jaw grind as he studies our surroundings. “Do you honestly think that the life you’ve chosen for yourself is any better than the one I could have provided for you?”

I slide my purse under the counter. “I got to *choose* this life for myself. That will always make it better than being forced to live under whatever cruel arrangements you set up.”

The laugh he lets out is short and cold. “Have you seen yourself? You’re a mess, Georgia. You are married to a man who makes you work. You look like you haven’t slept. From where I sit, you chose *wrong*.”

He has to say that, doesn’t he? A man like him would never admit otherwise. “It’s so nice to hear you’re concerned about me and my well-being. How very...fatherly of you. I almost forgot you were mine since you’ve made it a point to throw the world’s largest temper tantrum because your adult daughter made a few choices for herself.”

For a long, tense, minute he doesn't say a word. His sharp gaze is piercing, and I realize I'm poking a bear. A grizzly. Deadly. "You used to be a reasonable girl. That's how you were raised."

"I was raised to obey," I correct, standing taller. "Whether I saw reason in it or not. There's a big difference between the two."

He hums, standing as well. His presence takes over the large space, making it much smaller. Flattening a hand down his suit jacket, he says, "Loyalty is everything to the Del Rossi name, which is not lost on you no matter where you decide to play house. I'll admit, Georgia, that I thought you a lost cause when I learned that you whored yourself out to a cop and married him behind my back. But all is not lost after all. Not yet."

"If you think I'm going to come back—"

"I think you need to stop talking and let me finish." He cuts me off, voice leaving no room for argument.

As if my body recognizes the tone, it locks up, throat tightening and tongue heavy to trap the words wanting to escape it.

Once he realizes I'm not going to speak, he tucks a hand in his pocket. It's a casual gesture, one far too simple for a man of his stature. A power play, I realize. To get me comfortable—maybe even to make it seem like he isn't a threat when we both know he is. "Our family needs a united front. It always has. Your absence and your marriage have been very well-noted in our community. What's also noticed is how haggard you look at such a young age. Your officer is hardly taking care of you. The beauty you were known for, *praised* for, is wasted on whatever act of rebellion you saw fit."

It's quickly clear to me that it's not me he cares about, but his image. "So, what? You want me to let you back into my life after you shut me out? Threatened me? Threatened Lincoln? Made our lives more complicated than they already were? Those were all *your* choices. I made the one best for me. My husband is a good man. He works hard for us. We're both building a future we can be proud of. It doesn't matter what people think anymore."

"It does to me. To your mother."

"Leani is not my mother."

"I'm not speaking of my second wife," he spits, eyes narrowed as they land on me. If looks could kill, I'd be writhing on the ground.

Swallowing, I clench my fists. "How can anything matter to a woman who is dead?" I question, feeling my doubt wrap itself around my heart.

My father's expression tightens, his eyes draining of whatever anger that he felt before, and in its place...irrevocable sadness. The same kind I saw at her funeral when people were sharing their condolences one measly handshake at a time.

"Look at you," I whisper, shaking my head in disbelief. "You're so worried about what people think of me, but I don't even recognize you anymore. Do you sleep? Eat?"

He doesn't answer any of those questions.

"Your mother," he says, voice cracking, "was trying to do everything she could to make sure your life was secure. That you were *happy*. She cared more about you and your future than she did herself, which is why she's dead."

He says so much without saying anything at all. "You said before not to be naive about how she died, so why don't you tell me the truth for once? I can handle it."

His laugh is short, cold, and abrupt. "You do not have what it takes to handle the truth. That's why your husband doesn't tell it to you. Our world is built on a foundation of lies and deception. You're guilty of it as much as I am."

What have I ever lied about? "That's not a world I want to live in then."

"Do you know the effort the cop is putting into taking me down? How much energy he's spending behind your back on all of those late nights at work and away from you just to meddle in business that isn't his to know?"

When I heard Lincoln talk about his suspicions surrounding my father, I didn't want to believe it. But all of those late nights at work, of the phone calls he takes in different rooms when he's home, makes me wonder what it is he's found out that only he, Matt Conklin, and my father seem to know.

"You don't question me," my father says, the sadness masked by cool indifference, "because you know I'm right. What kind of marriage is shaped by lies and deceit? That's all yours ever was and ever will be. Your mother would be ashamed."

Bringing my mother into it cuts deep. "And would my marriage to Luca Carbone have been any different? Would it be shaped with honesty and transparency? You said that's not what our world is built on. We both know the Carbones don't have a clean reputation. Maybe my choice is less about choosing someone who would lie to me and picking the person with a good reason to lie in the first place."

It's the only justification I can let myself have to separate Lincoln's actions from my father's—from Luca's.

He's not the same as them. He's...good.

"And what do you think I've been doing this whole time? I have done nothing but protect you, Georgia. I have done everything in my power to ensure you don't get taken from me like *her*. She refused their wishes once and look where she is."

For the first time ever, I see genuine fear in his eyes. It's faint, half-hidden behind the hideous mask he wears to seem indifferent, but visible only if you look close enough.

"I do not want to bury you too."

"Who are you so afraid of?" I ask, my voice far gentler than it had been before.

He looks away, his jaw moving as his hands tighten and untighten by his sides. In a grave voice, he says, "That is a list far too long to share, Georgia."

Chills run down my spine.

Is there any truth to what Lincoln and Conklin said? "Daddy," I whisper.

His eyes slowly find mine.

"Are you..." The words get trapped in my throat, so I clear it and try again as nerves bubble under my skin. "Are you working with the—"

"Do not," my father cuts me off, "ask questions that you do not want the answers to."

It's a nonanswer that tells me enough.

"But why?"

"Because I'm being punished," he answers, his Adam's apple bobbing as he evades his eyes briefly to look at something on the wall. "That is what love gets you. Punished."

All I can do is shake my head.

His eyes turn back to me, skating over my tired expression that's grown guarded and cautious since this conversation started.

Then something on his face shifts, like he shut off whatever emotion he was showing me before in order to bury it deep, deep down. "I was glad to hear the head librarian found the money they said you'd stolen. I thought to myself, 'No daughter of mine would be caught doing such a scandalous

thing,’ and that’s what I told the director when I made a donation in the Del Rossi name.”

Gaping, I let out a tiny breath. “How did you even know about the money?”

“The money you stole?” he questions.

He knows damn well I didn’t steal it. “We both know there was no stolen money, especially now that I know you wrote a check to ‘fix’ it. You hate that I work here—that I work at all instead of staying home like some dutiful nineteen-fifties housewife to a man whose family you seem to fear.”

His lips press together.

I sigh, feeling defeat warm my stiff muscles into my shoulder slump. Whoever this person is, he is not my father. Not the one I remember. Will I ever get that version of him back? I don’t think so, and that’s heartbreaking.

“You have interjected yourself every way you can since I turned down your last proposal. All I want is to be *happy*. I never wanted to be at war with you.”

Those dark brown-black eyes that used to be full of so much love before my mother passed away lock with mine. A newfound darkness in them that leaves me leery. “It is not me you’re going to war with, Georgia. It’s people far more powerful.”

And I have a feeling I know who now. “The same people you’re leaving me defenseless against? That you’re keeping me in the dark about?”

He doesn’t answer.

“What deal did you make that you can’t get out of?” I question, my gut clenching with warning over asking these things. “Ever since Mom died, you’ve buried yourself in a world that has taken the man I used to know away from me. You used to love me. You used to love *us*. But now you only see me as some object to trade in for something better. Mom wouldn’t have wanted that for me.”

He walks over to me, closing in on the space I put between us until the air is thick. “You knew nothing about your mother, so don’t act like you know what she would want for you.”

Swallowing down my retort, I watch his crazed eyes grow darker until there’s barely any of the brown color left. He is a man possessed by power and something far darker.

“You’re afraid,” I whisper. “Of whoever is pulling the strings.”

His nostrils flare. “You should be too. He is everywhere, daughter. He’s always looming, with one foot in the door, ready to take it all away. That is the deal I made. I asked for a future, and his price was you.”

Me. “Who is he? Antonio? Luca?”

“His name doesn’t matter. You only think you’re happy because you assume the alternative is worse,” he informs me, glaring at the romance books stacked on the counter. “But you have no idea the things he can do to get what he wants.”

“If you’re in trouble, maybe I can help.” It’s a last-ditch effort to find the man who used to tuck me in at night with my mother. I may not remember a lot about her, but I remember his warm smile whenever she was around. She made him better. Without her, he succumbed to demons I’m afraid I can’t do anything about. “We don’t have to be enemies.”

For a split second, he stares at me as if he sees the genuine concern on my face and feels it in my voice. I think there’s a chance he could accept the help, the figurative hand I’m offering to get him out of whatever situation he’s in.

He straightens to his full height. “If there is one thing you need to remember, it’s that weak foundations can be the collapse of otherwise sturdy structures, Georgia. I am not your enemy. But I am not your friend.”

I begin to answer, but he turns and walks out before I can so much as utter a syllable.

But his words soak in all the same.



THE LIBRARY LETS me go two weeks later. They say they can’t keep me because of budget cuts, but I know better. Mariam can’t even look me in the eye when she asks for my key, so I don’t bother pleading my case or asking for her to reconsider.

It isn’t up to her. Not if my father’s visit has anything to do with the sudden change of funding.

She gives me a card signed by everybody and offers me an envelope with some cash they’ve saved up to “get me by” until I find something else.

One of the girls I work with on Saturdays says she can get me a job at the new bookstore in town because she knows the owner.

When I get home that night, I don't tell Lincoln that I've been fired when I see the weight slouching his shoulders. I decide to wait—to let him tell me about the lost little girl they had to search for who'd been taken by a relative, then the brutal suicide involving a revolver and lonely old veteran that they'd walked into in the afternoon, followed by two different unattended deaths caused by drug overdoses.

My admission is on the tip of my tongue by the time he goes silent, but I swallow my words when he eventually says, "Sometimes, I think this job is going to kill me. I should have gone into a different field. The only thing keeping me here is the money and the chance at making a difference."

Tell him, an inner voice urges. I part my lips, ready to add to his stressful day, and admit I can no longer contribute past the two hundred dollars that had been tucked away in the envelope from the library.

But I curl into his body, kiss his chest, and say the only thing I can. "It'll be okay."

I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince.

Him or me.

I don't think for long.

Next thing I know, he's stripping off my nightshirt, cupping my breast, and putting his mouth over me. When he tells me to get on my knees, I do.

Because I don't want to talk. To tell him the truth. To feel like I've failed again, all thanks to the man who gave me my last name.

Maiden name, I remind myself.

I am not Georgia Del Rossi.

And it *will* be okay.

One day.

I watch him undo his jeans and pull himself out, knowing he needs this control after a long day of not having any, of having to be on his best behavior after the last two complaints were made against him. He's on thin ice and feeling it with each passing day when he comes home with another problem, another reason why I can't add to the mess.

So, I wrap my hand around the base of him and take him in my mouth, hearing those four familiar purred words above me. "That's my good girl."

And long after we're both naked and sated, and he's passed out tangled in the sheets, I think about what I'm going to do next.

But I never have an answer.

Only more questions that eat away at me as I bury them deep, deep down, to try to pretend nothing is wrong.

My head turns to see the steady rise and fall of Lincoln's chest, and I wonder what he's dreaming about.

More than that, I wonder if the beautiful, naked liar beside me will ever tell me the truth or if I'm destined to love the kind of men who will always keep me bathed in the darkness.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Lincoln / Five Years Ago

AFTER ALMOST A twenty-eight-hour stint following a twelve-hour shift, two court subpoenas, a drug bust, and a meeting with the captain, bone-deep exhaustion settles in on my drive home. It takes driving over the rumble strip on the side of the road to snap me out of my wavering consciousness, reaching for the radio to turn up whatever station is playing to keep me awake.

“You’re listening to ninety-two point three, late-night rush hour. It’s now eight forty-five on Thursday, the twenty-second. If you’re just joining us, we’re doing a countdown to the top ten in today’s pop hits. Coming in at number three is—”

“Shit,” I hiss, slamming on my brakes and pulling over to reach for my phone from where it’s charging in the center console.

The twenty-second.

My wedding anniversary.

And the only thing I texted my wife about was that I was going to be late.

“Fuck me,” I murmur, swiping a palm down my face and googling florists near me. Most of them are closed, except for one twenty minutes away that’s supposed to close at nine.

The one piece of advice my father gave me when I told them I’d gotten married was to never forget an anniversary. Georgia didn’t want to make a big deal out of the first one because she didn’t think it counted. I made it a point to disagree. And now she probably thinks she was right the first time around because I’ve been so focused on building my portfolio for my BCI application that I didn’t think twice about what day it is.

I make it to the shop in twelve minutes as an elderly woman is sweeping the floor. It’s clear she wants to tell me to come back tomorrow, but my desperation must be obvious.

“Twelve of anything,” I tell her, pulling out a credit card. “It’s my anniversary.”

Her sigh is loud and disapproving, but she doesn’t turn me away. “What is your wife’s favorite flower?”

I go to answer but realize I don’t know. “I...”

The disapproval thickens in her eyes. “Men,” she chides with a tsk, filling a vase with water and getting to work.

Ten minutes later, I walk out with an assortment of carnations and some sort of greenery for filler that I’d never be able to identify unless she told me.

When I slip into the apartment forty minutes later, all the lights are off except the lone lamp in the bedroom. I poke my head in to see Georgia reading the same book she’s been working on for the past week. The bookmark has barely moved from the page it was on the last time I saw her with it. Am I the reason she’s distracted?

“I’m sorry,” is the first thing I say, catching her attention. Her eyes drift from the book to me, then to the flowers I hold out. “Happy anniversary, Peaches.”

Slowly, her book lowers as she stares at the various shades of pink and white petals I extend out to her.

“I know it’s late, and I should have been home sooner, but I’ll make it up to you.” Setting the vase down on her nightstand, I reach for her hand and interweave our fingers. “Anything you want to do tomorrow, we can. I’ll take you to the bookstore and buy whatever books you want.”

Her face flushes. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I do,” I insist, caressing her jaw. “I’ve been working nonstop, and you never complain. I owe it to you for how supportive you’ve been.”

She starts shaking her head. “Linc...”

I press a kiss against her cheek and lean my forehead against hers. “I know you don’t think our anniversary matters, but it does. Being with me isn’t easy, but I appreciate how much you put up with just so I can work toward building a better life with you.”

Her eyes stay locked on my hand on top of hers before briefly darting to the flowers. “I...”

“I love you, Georgia.”

My words recapture her focus, her eyes widening as they dart to my face.

I nod, kissing her temple, then her cheek, then her mouth. "I mean it."

She blinks slowly, absorbing the words that I've never said until now. Two years. I've shown her a million times and almost admitted it to her on more than one occasion. But she never looked ready.

And maybe part of me was nervous that she never would be. But the more I thought about what Conklin said about her choosing me, the more I remember that she didn't have to be here.

I never forced her into anything.

She could have walked away.

But she's here.

Her lips part, but only the smallest exhale escapes them.

The smile I offer her is warm. "You don't have to say it back. Not yet. I just wanted you to know. Take your time."

Her throat bobs. "I...I don't know what love is, Lincoln. I'm not sure I've ever really witnessed it. Not since my mother died."

Her eyes dart to the flowers, and she pales, as if remembering something.

Moving a piece of her newly blond hair away from her face, I tuck it behind her ear. "I don't think it's just one thing. Love is a compilation of a lot of little things that mean something to people. One day, I hope to show you exactly what it feels like because it's..." A warmth settles into my chest. "It's a damn good feeling."

She gapes at me, then her eyes go back to the flowers for a third time. "I've never gotten flowers before."

I ignore the fact I'm still in my regular clothes as I slide into bed beside her and tug her into my body. "I'll make sure you get used to it then."

We lie in silence as sleep calls to me. She curls into my arms, but her body is stiff. Eventually, I drift off.

But not before I hear the softest whisper in the night that sounds awfully like Georgia's voice. "One day, I hope to deserve your love."

When I wake up early the next morning, there's a note from Georgia saying she went to work to cover somebody's shift.

The sheets are cold.

The flowers are still on the nightstand.

And there's something in the air that makes it hard to fall back asleep.



GEORGIA ACTS OFF the next few weeks, but asking what's wrong gets me nowhere. So I stop asking and wait for the day the smile returns on her face, hoping it's not me who somehow knocked it down.

On my way out the door, Sergeant Anderson calls out to me from the breakroom, where he's pouring himself a cup of coffee. "You have a minute, Hawk?"

Glancing at my watch, I cringe at the time. "I need to get going, sarge. Trying to avoid being part of those divorce statistics they tell us about in the academy."

He lifts the mug to his lips before gesturing for me to follow him to his office. "It'll only be a minute. I wanted to talk to you about your interview."

Aw, *Christ*. If it's about the interview I did with the BCI, I don't know if it's going to be good. I'd been nervous leading up to it and was working with four hours of sleep the morning I went in. I was pretty sure I nailed the questions, but I knew it took more than that to be considered for a spot. My file was thick when they pulled it out, and I was fairly certain it was to gauge my reaction.

I'm a damn good cop, and that's what I told them. Any other reaction was held back while they started the questioning. I was honest, blunt, and to the point. As far as I could tell, they were intrigued. Maybe even a little impressed. But this is the first time anybody has brought it up in a month since it happened.

"I spoke to Rigley," he says of the senior investigator who has one foot out the door into early retirement. "He seemed impressed by you. Asked what I thought about your time as a trooper."

"I'm sure you sang my praises," I muse, unsure of what Anderson might have said. We've gotten along, but I know I get on his nerves sometimes with my stubbornness. I think it makes me good at my job. He thinks it makes me risky. I wonder what Rigley's opinion is.

Anderson chuckles. "Like Mary Poppins."

His mood loosens some of the coiled stress in my back. "Who doesn't love Mary Poppins?"

The zone sergeant, who's leaving in three weeks, leans his arms against the edge of the desk. "I told him that you were driven to do the right thing

for the people, and it makes you good at your job. Truthfully, I haven't seen somebody willing to stay so many days in overtime since I was on the road."

As much as staying late sucks, it's nice to be recognized for it. "I appreciate that, sir."

"I was being honest," he says with a shrug, grabbing his coffee. "But what impressed him the most was your connections."

My connections? "What connections was he referring to?"

He sips his coffee. "You never told me you knew Captain Chamberlin. The man basically endorsed you to Rigley. Having those kinds of friends in high places will get you far."

Captain Chamberlin spoke to Rigley about *me*? I haven't even met the man before.

My teeth grind, knowing there's only one person who could be behind that. But why the hell would Nikolas Del Rossi do me any favors? "He encouraged the promotion?"

Anderson's eyebrow pops up. "Of course he did. He seemed to know you well. Said you were dedicated to cleaning up the streets and making this patrol area safe again. You've been leading the station with DUI arrests for the past two years, and your record shows that. It's about time someone noticed outside of your peers here in the troop. You're a shoo-in for the position now. Rigley would be an idiot not to accept your application with someone like Chamberlin endorsing you."

It takes everything in me not to let my eye twitch. I've wanted to become an investigator since my first year on the job, and the desire has only grown as I've worked with detectives on interdiction cases tied to organized crime in the city. The CSU guys working undercover to get high-priority dealers have gathered a list of names that have been affiliated with the big bosses. Del Rossi's name hasn't been dropped, but I wonder if they're close to finding him out.

Why else would he ask Chamberlin to move me off the road where I can't make the same number of arrests as before? And what is the captain getting out of putting a good word in for me? Because I highly doubt a man I've never met before would help me get promoted without some sort of benefit in his favor.

"Most people would look happier right now," he notes skeptically.

I have to look away and collect myself, not willing to show my cards so easily. “I prefer getting jobs on my own. Influences like Chamberlin don’t make it feel as rewarding.”

Especially because it seems like there’s a price tag attached to this little gesture.

Maybe Del Rossi realized I was determined to come after everything he had, regardless of the setups he tried organizing. If they didn’t work, he needed to try something else. Using the captain is a genius move on his part. If Del Rossi can’t change the playing field, the captain can. And with me off the road, it keeps the dealers suspected of work for him in business. Does he get a cut of that? Is that where the money is coming from?

Millions seems like a lot for the limited amount of drugs we’re pulling from cars. There’s got to be another source. Another reason.

Chamberlin made everything I’ve worked my ass off for a fuckton less rewarding—like he’s taken away any gratification I could earn by getting this job on my own.

“Take it from me. Life is all about knowing the right people. There’s nothing wrong with that.” He sips his coffee and slides it back onto his desk, the hot liquid sloshing over the side. “If I were in your shoes, I’d be glad to know my future is secure.”

Secure. I scoff mentally. If he only fucking knew how untrue that was. “Right,” I murmur, wondering what game Del Rossi is playing.

“Well, you best get home,” Anderson says, dismissing me and waving toward the door. “I’d hate to be the reason you join the club for divorced law enforcement officers.”

I’d forgotten he’d been married before. Twice, if memory serves. He used to bitch about paying alimony that wiped out any retirement he earned for himself, which is a reason he stayed past the typical twenty years most of us work.

“Don’t let this promotion be another reason,” he says as I walk toward the door. “You’ve worked our ass off more than anybody else I know to get where you are. Eventually, you’re going to need to slow down. Maybe now is the perfect time to start building a foundation for yourself and the missus.”

I think of the woman waiting for me at the apartment, wondering what she’ll say about the news. She told me she knew I’d get the job. Now, I’m starting to wonder why she was so sure.

“Yeah,” I force myself to answer, gripping the doorjamb. “Maybe you’re right.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lincoln / Present

MY FATHER PASSES me the wrench and adjusts the light so I get a better view of the pipe I'm working on under the sink. "I'd do this if it weren't for my damn back," he grumbles for the third time.

I tighten the loose connection and hope I don't get sprayed again when I test it. "Don't worry about it. It's not like my schedule is jam-packed these days anyway."

I work in silence for a few minutes before carefully sitting up. "Okay, try it out." He turns the faucet on, letting the water run as I examine the pipes to make sure there's no more leaking from any of the old hardware. "Looks like we're good."

We clean up in comfortable silence, putting the tools I brought back into my bag and setting them on the counter before he passes me a cup of fresh coffee.

"Thanks." I take a seat at the table and watch as he slowly sinks into the one across from me.

The sixty-five-year-old man used to be spry once upon a time, but I've seen him slow down over the past couple of years. I know it irritates him, so I don't bring it up. When he needs help, I let him ask for it. Offering only sets him off.

"How's the arm?" he asks, stretching his legs out and tipping his head toward my left side.

I move it. "Functional."

"When do you have your physical?"

My lips twitch. "They rescheduled me. The doc had some sort of family emergency when I was supposed to have it in January. Now they can't see me until the end of next month."

Three months *after* the fact. I'm still angry about it, but there's nothing I can do. They put me on a cancellation list, but God only knows how many people are ahead of me on it.

My father watches as I sip my black coffee. He's never been a prying person without the influence of my mother, who thankfully took Hannah out for a girl's day. But he has moments when curiosity sparks an interest in him that he entertains when it's just the two of us. "You ready for it?"

Staring at the steaming dark liquid in the mug, I shrug my good shoulder. "As ready as I can be. If he signs off on my physical, all I need is my therapist to sign off on my sessions."

Glancing up at him, I arch a brow when I see the way he offshoots his focus. It's the same reason why Hannah can't look me in the eye whenever she's holding something back. She gets it from him.

"What?" I question, gripping my mug.

"Nothing."

I sigh at his bullshit. "Dad, come on."

He sets his coffee on the table. "I think it's good you're going to therapy. Seeing somebody has made you...lighter."

Lighter? "How?"

There's a beat where he contemplates being honest but must decide it's worth it. "When things started going downhill with Georgia, I could tell you were fighting an uphill battle. You started spending a lot more time here than you did at home. Your mother would comment on it every time you left, but I told her she needed to butt out and let you two figure things out for yourselves. I hoped you two could work past it, but in the end, I wanted you to be happy. It was starting to seem like you had a better opportunity to get that if you started fresh."

It's the most he's ever said about my relationship with Georgia. Mom and Hannah have actively spoken their opinions, especially when I least wanted them. But Dad has kept it to himself, not adding to the chaos.

"I'm not going to lie, son. Watching you hold on to something that hasn't been good for you for a long time has been hard, but I've bitten my tongue. You joke around with everybody, but it never seemed like your smile reached your eyes." I frown at the words he speaks so casually. "Since you started going to therapy, I can see the faintest version of the old you coming back. It's in the way you smile. How often you're coming around. Not just to help your useless old man or be distracted from your issues, but because you *want* to be here. So whatever you're unloading during those sessions must be working."

My eyes go back down to my drink. I always thought I hid my emotions well. It's how you're trained in the military. If people know your weaknesses, they can go after them. So you bury whatever you're feeling to stay safe.

You can't save everybody.

Those parting words that the good doctor gave me still echo in my mind.

"She's...helped," I admit, not willing to offer the details of how much I've actually talked. I never thought I'd tell anybody the story of Georgia and me. I figured I'd keep it locked away in the vaults of my mind and take it with me to the grave.

But that became heavier and heavier to hold as our relationship started falling apart. I don't know if it's Theresa Castro that's lifted some of that weight or my conscience finally willing to let some of it go.

"Good," my father says. "I'm glad."

That's all he says.

He doesn't press for more or ask what we've spoken about. He won't. And I won't offer him the tale of my life's woes and the first girl I truly loved.

Taking a sip of his coffee, he hides a wavering smile before saying, "Your mother told me to mention that Opal is single."

I groan. "Don't get her started."

He chuckles. "I'm just the messenger."

We don't bring up Georgia, work, or his neighbor's daughter the rest of the time we sit together.

I should tell him that I'm going to see Jakob Volley in a few days—that I may be ending a huge chapter in my life. Maybe then he'll see that I'm trying to move on. Or maybe he'll worry like Marissa is, and I don't want to do that to him.

So, I don't tell him about Volley.

The less he knows, the better.



DICKERS STARES AT the twenty-dollar bill I'm extending to him as we wait for the bus that takes people to and from Rikers Island. "You should go get yourself some breakfast."

He nervously scratches the column of his throat, looking between me and the money. "I'm supposed to come with you," he reminds me, looking around at the others waiting to go see loved ones.

I pull out another twenty dollars from my wallet, take his hand, and set the two bills down in his palm. Wrapping his fingers around them, I say, "You don't want to be here. I can see it in your eyes. And I don't blame you. The people at Rikers are no joke. Don't subject yourself to it. Take the money, go to that diner we saw on the way here, and I'll call you when I'm done. Nobody has to know."

It's obvious he's contemplating the offer, telling himself all the reasons why he should come. He's a rule follower, and I respect that. Because he's new, he doesn't want to go behind anybody's back. But he also doesn't want to be here with me. It makes him uncomfortable. Ever since I picked him up at his place, he's fidgeted with his hands and struggled to make small talk.

"Why me?" he finally asks.

"Because you could have told somebody about what Welsh said, but you didn't," I answer.

He reminds me of Conklin. Matt would have liked him. Maybe even made a dumb joke about him being his long-lost brother or something because of how much they act alike.

I've learned to be skeptical of whom to trust in life, but I never second-guessed the trust I had in Conklin, and my gut is telling me I can trust Dickens too.

"I told you I wouldn't," is all he says.

"I know." I pull back my hand and tuck my wallet back into my pocket. "Look, I won't stop you if you want to come with me. If that's what you think is right, get on the bus. But I can handle Volley. I'd rather not involve you any more than I already have anyway."

He's on overtime right now since he took time off to be here. When I asked him to tag along, he didn't question it. He might have wanted to, but he agreed, nonetheless. I appreciate his willingness, but I don't want him in that room with me hearing more than he needs to.

This is my battle to face.

Dickers's gaze drops down to the money I put in his hand before he sighs. "You sure you're going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine. There will be guards with us."

He nods, tucking the money into his pocket.

"If anybody asks, you came with me," I say, turning when I hear the bus driving toward us. Pulling out my truck keys, I toss them to him. "I don't know how long I'll be, so take the truck and get some food. I'll call you when I'm on my way back."

It looks like he wants to say something, but the bus pulls up and opens its doors before he can. "I'll see you in a little bit," I say, waving him off and climbing the stairs that separate me and the wary trooper.

Forty minutes later, I'm seated in an uncomfortable chair with a slew of other waiting family members eager to see the inmates. From what Estep said, it'll take some time to get a private room cleared for me to have personal time with Volley rather than speaking to him in the community room where everybody else is. He told me only media and legal teams are allowed access to the rooms in the back, and it takes a lot of strings in order to secure one.

Which means I owe him.

He knows it.

I know it.

I just hope he doesn't expect to cash in something big when the time comes.

It's another twenty minutes by the time the guard by the door calls my name. "Danforth," the middle-aged woman says from a separate door from where I've seen other people filter in and out of. "This way please."

I walk over to her.

"You're here to see Volley," she says, looking at her chart. "Can I see your identification?"

Pulling out my wallet, I flash her my badge and ID card that shows a slightly younger version of me—the version that had thicker hair from the lack of stress and broader shoulders from all the workouts I did before I was shot.

"This way," she says, scanning a card at the door and pulling it open. "I assume they told you the rules. The biggest one is no touching. The private rooms can be recorded, but you can tell the guard stationed at the door that you'd like a private conversation with the inmate. There will be a guard

outside the door at all times. If you need something, there's a button you can press. The inmate will be shackled to the table with limited mobility. You have thirty minutes, not a minute more. When the time is up, the guard will come in and take the inmate away, and another will escort you out. Do you understand?"

I can tell by her robotic tone that she's done this quite a few times. "Understood."

We stop at the door.

She dips her head at the man standing beside it who unlocks it for us. "Good luck, Mr. Danforth."

The name has me thinking of the good doctor as I enter the empty room. It's exactly as I expect it to be—a metal table with a bar that they'll handcuff him to with two chairs. There's a camera in the corner with a red light flashing on it. I'm sure Estep would prefer this meeting be recorded, and it'd probably be better if it were so I can back up anything he says.

But I know this conversation is more than likely going to turn. He'll try saying anything he can to make this about me and Conklin. I'm not taking any risks.

"I'll need this conversation to be private," I tell the guard before he shuts the door. "No cameras or recordings."

He dips his head once before closing the door.

I look at the camera as the red light turns off before I take my spot and wait to face the person who put a bullet through my chest.

It'll be the first time I've seen him in person. I didn't even get the chance to see his ass carted away by the SWAT team because me and Conklin had been hauled off in two separate ambulances.

I remember every detail about him though.

Every distinct facial feature.

Every tattoo.

Every scar.

I memorized the little things from his file and newspaper articles when the news started broadcasting his mugshot and trial updates.

But none of that compares to this moment.

And when the door opens, and I see Jakob Volley step inside in his prison-issued jumpsuit, it takes everything in me not to smile.

To seem unfazed.

Like my arm doesn't kill me every day.

Like, I'm not a miserable bastard whose life was altered drastically because of the asshole being cuffed to the table.

Jakob Volley takes one look at me with two bruised eyes and a split lip and shakes his head like he's disappointed in what he sees. "Thought you'd be...bigger. Doc didn't clear you for exercise yet?"

My fist tightens under the table. "We're not here to talk about me, Volley."

His head cocks. "No? Because I have a feeling this little visit has everything to do with you."

The smile I offer him is casual. "Last I checked, it was you who told your attorney you wanted to speak with me."

His eyes drop to the table. "Maybe I changed my mind."

"Do those black eyes have something to do with your sudden change of heart?" I ask, leaning back in my chair. I rest my crossed arms on my chest to show him I'm relaxed. My shoulders aren't tense. My palms aren't clenched.

He needs to see that he didn't break me.

Not completely.

"It's a rough place," he dismisses. "Not exactly a place you make many friends."

I'd imagine not. "If you didn't want to talk to me, you would have told the guards to send me away," I point out. "So, why don't we get right to business then and cut the shit."

He lifts his gaze.

His right eye looks fresh. The swelling has the lid half-closed, and the coloring doesn't match the darkened purple and yellow of his left cheek.

I ask him the main question that brought me three hours to the city. "How badly do you want to live?"

He sits straighter. "That a threat?"

Scoffing, I roll my eyes. "I don't need to threaten you. It's clear you've got plenty of people here who are willing to put you in your place. I'm asking if you want a chance to live out the rest of your sentence without the beatings and blackmail. Somewhere safe."

Interest sparks in his eyes.

"Thing is," I continue. "I can't do that without answers. And it seems like you're the person who has what I'm looking for."

"According to who?"

“Michael Welsh.”

His nostrils flare open at the name.

“You’re familiar,” I state. “I already knew that though, Little J.”

His eyes narrow, nearly closing the right one completely. It tells me that Conklin was right. Jakob Volley is Little J.

“Why don’t we start with how you know Welsh?”

“You think I’m just going to talk?”

I shrug. “That’s up to you and how badly you want to get out of here. You told Estep you wanted to speak with me, which means there’s a reason. I’m sure somebody found out, somebody you’re afraid of, and tried to scare you into skipping the meeting. Unless you get into brawls every day here.”

His jaw grinds.

“That’s what I thought.”

We sit in silence.

His eyes go to the camera, then to me.

“So,” I press. “Michael Welsh.”

Volley’s eyes close for a second. “I’ve sold him shit before,” he murmurs. “Heroin mostly. Coke sometimes. He was a repeat customer.”

None of that is surprising information. “And where do you get your supply?”

“Here and there.”

Vague. “That’s not getting you out of Rikers.”

He snorts, meeting my eyes. “We both know I’m not getting out of here.”

One of my eyebrows arches. “Why are you so sure? Your attorney has gotten a lot of people out of shit that, frankly, they don’t deserve to get out of. Used to piss me off. But that’s what makes him damn good at his job.”

Volley stares at the wall. “I have a feeling he’s not going to be successful this time around.”

“He got you out of the death sentence.”

“And he put me *here*.”

That wasn’t up to Estep, but his tone backs up what I already suspected. “And if you help me connect some dots, there’s a solid chance I can work with him to get you put somewhere else.”

Anger flashes on his face. “You don’t get it.” He leans forward, a vein popping in his forehead as he grinds his teeth. “The people that put me here don’t want me out. And what they want, they get.”

I have a feeling he's not talking about the judge and jury. "You said you were told to open fire that day." It's hard to keep a straight face, but I do. "Who told you we were coming?"

He's quiet.

"You said it was the devil, but we both know you didn't mean that literally. Now is your chance to tell the truth. You wanted to talk, so talk. I'm listening."

His arms move, causing the short chain links of his cuffs to jerk him back. "You have no clue what you're getting yourself into. You know that?"

I've been told that a time or two before. "I think I have a pretty good idea. Does this have to do with Del Rossi?"

Color drains from his face.

Bull's-eye.

I sit up, leaning my arms on the edge of the table and softening my voice. "I'm not going to lie to you, Volley. I don't like you, and it's safe to say you don't like me. But that doesn't mean I'm not willing to help. There are bigger fish to fry, am I right? *They* are the people we should be locking in here. You know it. I know it. Trouble is, I don't have anybody willing to give me a name."

"That's because we're dead if we do."

I'm getting closer. "Is Michael Welsh working for Del Rossi? Or someone else?"

The question gives him the chance to pass the blame fully onto somebody else. If he throws Welsh under the bus, he stays safe. There's no indication that he's on Del Rossi's payroll.

"No," he says, his throat bobbing as he swallows. "Welsh just knows the wrong people who like to talk. But that isn't the question you really want to ask me, is it?"

I don't answer.

"Michael Welsh is a druggie with a big mouth," he adds. "If we're talking hypotheticals, a guy like Del Rossi and the person *he* works for would never trust him with any kind of intel. Not firsthand. He'd go through the channels. Make Welsh report to somebody else. Have a fall guy if something happens that he doesn't plan for."

Something like an officer surviving a shooting that was supposed to kill him. "And who exactly would he make the fall guy?"

Volley's eyes stay on the table. "Everybody."

“Including you?”

A noise rises from him. “Especially me.”

Yet, he’s still willing to talk. “Who gave you the orders that day, Volley? Welsh is pointing fingers at you, but I don’t buy it. I saw the video of you in court. There is somebody pulling the strings. Somebody who made it worth your while to pull that trigger. I want to know who. And I want to know *why*.”

“You already know the why,” he replies dryly. “Why do any of us make the choices we do? People like me have very little to live for. All we want is the next fix. If we can’t pay for it, we can’t get it. Me and Welsh are disposable because of our addiction. The people who send us the cash know that. They offer us drugs, knowing we’re too weak to decline. So we make them deals. We do their dirty work for a few ounces of the good stuff. We’re a dime a dozen to them. Nobodies. If one of us drops dead, nobody would feel bad about it. Nobody would mourn us. Tell me I’m wrong.”

I can’t, so I don’t bother speaking up.

“Nah,” he murmurs, shaking his head again and laughing. It’s distant. Short. Dry. “Welsh and I signed our death warrants the second we said yes to the devil. They get us when we’re weak. When we’d do anything for a quick hit. That’s what happened to me. That’s what Welsh didn’t tell you. Because if he did, you wouldn’t be here asking for answers.”

Whoever gave him the orders kept close enough tabs on him to know when he was desperate for his drug of choice. I’ve dealt with a lot of users in withdrawal who admitted they would have killed for a drag of anything.

“Who’s the devil, Volley?”

Before he can answer, the guard opens the door and says, “Time is up.”

“Wait,” I say, knowing I’m about to get the answer I’ve been searching for years. “I just need two more minutes.”

“Those aren’t the rules,” the guard tells me unapologetically.

Volley looks at me, smiles, and stands up as the guard undoes his cuffs from the table. Before his hands get restrained, he grabs ahold of my hand and squeezes it. “Glad you were able to pull through, Detective.”

“No touching,” the guard orders, grabbing his hands and forcing them behind his back.

When I realize there’s a piece of paper in my hand, I quickly tuck it into my front pocket. “Estep can give us more time. Tell him you need more time with me. Get me on the list to come back.”

As Volley gets escorted out of the room, he calls out, “My time is up, Detective. I don’t have anything left to give.”

When another guard walks in after Volley disappears down the corridor, I follow him out until we’re at the exit. All he says is, “Next bus will be here in ten minutes to take you back to your vehicle.”

As I wait outside at the stop, I pull the piece of paper out and read what it says.

*The devil works at 99th Street in Kirklin where he buries his secrets
eight feet under*

I stare at the words and flip the paper over to see more ink written on the scrap paper torn from a notepad corner.

*Once they know I’ve met you, I won’t be able to offer you
more information.*

-Jakob Volley

My eyes go back to the front, where they rake over the address that I know by heart. Almost as well as where Conklin’s last breath was taken.

I pull out my phone to triple-check what I already know, making sure I’m right.

The business that pops up when I type in the address makes my heart tighten.

99th Street in Kirklin.

The Del Rossi Group.

He buries his secrets eight feet under.

I think back to Conklin’s working theory about who Nikolas Del Rossi really is. More importantly, *who* he’s working with.

Going through my contacts, I hover over one as I look out the window at the fading prison as we drive down the road.

She picks up on the second ring.

I lean my head against the cool glass window and ask, “Can we talk?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Lincoln / Present

THE VASE in the center of the table is full of white carnations, filling the room with a strong floral scent that assaults my nose with old memories.

"I hope you don't mind," she says when she sees what I'm staring at. "Carnations are my favorite flower. If they bother you, I can put them in the hall."

My eyes lift from the assortment carefully put together. "They are?"

She nods with an easy smile on her face as she leans forward and readjusts a few of the flowers in the vase. "They're my birth flower. I've enjoyed them since I was a little girl."

Swallowing when I remember the bouquet I brought home to my wife years ago, I shake my head. What are the chances? "Georgia hated carnations," I murmur.

Not that I knew that when I'd bought her them. She didn't tell me. It was the first of many things she held back.

Then again, I was no different.

All she says is, "They're not for everybody."

I sit back and try ignoring the flowers in front of me. "Thank you for meeting me."

"Of course." She repositions in her chair. "I was surprised to hear from you. Is everything all right?"

Ever since getting back from Rikers with Dickers, I've been thinking about my conversation with Volley. When I showed the note to Beaugard, he told me it was going to be a challenge to move forward with the information because it was off the record. Even though Volley signed the paper, he didn't think it would be enough to try getting Nikolas Del Rossi in to talk.

"I've never been closer to getting the answers I've wanted," I tell her. "And it got me thinking about what comes...after."

"After," she repeats.

“You said that people like us need to find new things to look forward to in life.”

She nods. “I did.”

“What is it that *you* look forward to?”

Her shoulders lift. “I find little things to look forward to every day. Seeing friends and family. Coming to work and helping people. Going out and ordering my favorite meal. Buying myself my favorite flowers. It doesn’t always have to be so deep.”

My eyes go back to the flowers. “You don’t look forward to more?”

“More as in...?”

“Companionship?”

Her lips press together. “I find companionship in those I’m close to.”

But not romantically.

I ask, “Who got you the flowers, doc?”

She smiles. “I bought them for myself.”

Nobody gave them to her. I store that information in the back of my mind.

She breaks the momentary silence. “Are you ready to move on with your life, Lincoln?”

Lincoln. Not Mr. Danforth.

I note that too.

“Once I finish what I started.”

“That sounds like a tall order.”

I dip my chin. “I suppose it is.”

“Tell me more about the carnations you bought for your wife,” she says.

My eye twitches. “You want the truth?”

She picks up her pen.

I smile, but it’s heavy on my face. “I think that’s when I noticed it was the start of the end. Because she never told me she hated carnations. She just...pretended she didn’t.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lincoln / Five Years Ago

I GO TO the library with a bouquet of assorted flowers that the florist put together—the white and pink carnations with something called snapdragons and aster fill the scent of my truck as I park in front of the large public building.

Conklin told me I should surprise Georgia with flowers. Apparently, whenever he notices Marissa is upset about his schedule, he tries getting her things she likes. Her favorite coffee. Flowers. Dinner from her favorite restaurant.

On the few days I am home and have time to spend with her, Georgia is quiet. She barely talks when I ask about her day or what's been going on in her coworker's lives. She used to share the gossip going around the librarians, which was always far more amusing than I thought it'd be for a group of middle-aged women.

Except when I walk in, the head librarian looks surprised to see me.

"Is Georgia here?" I ask, studying the space.

Mariam exchanges a look with the girl stacking books on the shelves before turning to me. "I'm sorry, dear. Georgia hasn't worked here in months."

Months.

"I thought she would have told you," the older woman says, not realizing how hard that statement actually hits.

Then she glances at the bouquet I'm holding onto tightly with a frown. "Oh, dear," she says with a tsk, studying the mixed stems in my hand and frowning. "Georgia doesn't like carnations."

Georgia doesn't... "Can you repeat that?"

"The scent. It makes her sad," she tells me, touching the petals. "You wouldn't have known it, but these were the flowers at her mother's funeral way back when. I remember seeing pictures of the service in the paper. It

was the most attended service in ages, they said. I thought it was such a pretty choice, very serene for such a sad day. Beautiful, even.”

It’s not the flowers I’m asking about.

Georgia doesn’t work here anymore.

“It’s a lovely thought though,” she goes on, misinterpreting my silence. “Not many men are willing to buy women flowers these days. Chivalry isn’t dead after all.”

“You said Georgia no longer works here?”

She shakes her head, sympathy coating her face as the realization sinks in. “I’m afraid not. We had to let her go a while ago.” Her eyes dart between me and the door before her voice lowers a notch. “She’s a sweet thing, but sometimes it doesn’t work out.”

Those words hit me like a ton of bricks.

I pass her the flowers and excuse myself before she can see my crumpled pride.

What had she meant when she said things don’t always work out? Was it about the job or something deeper?

Climbing into the truck, I slam the door shut and call Georgia, listening to the phone ring until her voicemail picks up.

She’s supposed to be at work.

I hang up before I can say anything.

Rolling the windows down to get rid of the scent lingering in my truck, I drive to the apartment and try to think of where she could be.

When I see her car absent from the driveway, I call her again. It goes straight to voicemail. Where the hell could she be during the days when she was supposed to be at work?

That night, I sit at the end of the couch with a glass of scotch. I call her twice more, and she picks up the last time to tell me she’s on her way home from work.

From work.

When she walks in, she glances at where I sit stiffly and stops with the door half open.

“Where were you?” I ask quietly.

She stands taller. “At work.”

The lie grates on my nerves. “Georgia,” I say slowly, clenching the fabric arms of the cushion until my fingertips hurt. “Where were you *really*?”

All she does is stare at me, the color in her face paling when she realizes I know something.

“I went to the library,” I add, before she can lie to me again.

Her shoulders tense as she drops her things onto the table we keep by the door. “It’s not what you think.”

The truth is, I don’t know what to think.

“Then tell me what it is. Because I have no idea why you wouldn’t have told me that they fired you when it happened.”

She shifts on her feet, toying with the buttons of her coat. “I lost my job at the library,” she admits, not looking at me.

I already know that. “When?”

She pauses, settling by the wall as if she’s afraid to come near me. “Four months ago,” she whispers.

My eye twitches.

Four months...

Four. Months.

I take a deep breath. “You’ve been lying for four months?”

“I...” She stops herself, her lips parting and closing twice before she sighs. “You were going through so much at work and coming home stressed all the time. And you kept talking about the future house we were going to buy and the dog we would get, and it made me feel...” Shaking her head, she lets her words fade. “I didn’t want to tell you that I couldn’t contribute to that dream. You would have told me it was fine and then worked three times as hard to make it work on your own.”

I make enough to get us by. She knows that. I’ve told her that before. It was she who wanted to work, and I encouraged that because it was her choice. But it wasn’t detrimental. Not like lying about it is. “Where do you go when you’re supposed to be at work? Who are you with?”

Her lips curl into a frown at the accusation spoken between words. “I *do* go to work. At the bookstore on Main Street. It doesn’t pay nearly as much as the library did, but it’s something.”

I watch her carefully, wondering if she’s being honest this time. I hate that I can’t tell—hate that she thinks she has to keep secrets from me. When did she start doing that?

“I promise,” she whispers. “I just didn’t want to put pressure on you to figure things out on your own.”

Looking away from her pleading eyes, I collect my thoughts. A nagging feeling in my stomach tells me to question her, but my brain convinces me to let it go. For now.

“I don’t want you to lie to me,” I say after taking a deep breath that eases the tightness that was squeezing my lungs. “I don’t want us to lie to one another.”

Her frown only deepens. “I don’t want you to lie to me either.” She stares at me. “So, is there anything *you* want to share since we’re being open right now?”

I don’t think about her question. Instead, I pose my own. “Why didn’t you tell me you hated carnations?”

Georgia gapes. “That’s not important right now, Lincoln.”

Maybe she’s right.

She peels her coat off and drapes it over the side of the couch. When she walks over to me, she cups my face and tilts my head to meet her eyes. “You told me you loved me. Did you mean that?”

I let her hold my gaze. “You know I do.”

The pad of her thumb brushes over my bottom lip. “I may not know much, but I know that people don’t lie to those they love.”

My eyes skate over her features as she releases my lip and steps back. “You never told me you loved me, Georgia.”

Her tongue lazily drags across her bottom lip before she dips her head. “That’s because I need to trust you first.”

I watch her walk out of the room, staring at her back as she disappears into the bathroom.

I hear her phone go off in the pocket of her jacket, and I debate on letting it stay there. But fate tests me when I hear another *ding* come from the fabric, and temptation has me reaching inside the coat to get it.

Unknown: If that’s what you want, I’ll help

Unknown: For a price

She must have deleted the thread leading up to the replies because there’s none above the two new messages.

I memorize the number and tuck her phone away where I found it.

That night when we go to bed, she’s still awake when I crawl into the spot beside her. It’s only then she says, “Carnations were my mother’s

funeral flowers. They're beautiful, but they remind me of death."

With that, she turns onto her side, turns the light off, and gives me her back.

When I ask someone at work to track the phone number the next day, it comes back to an untraceable burner.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Georgia / Four Years Ago

IT'S BEEN A long time since I've seen the boy who looks like a younger version of his father. Luca Carbone has grown into his features since the last time I saw him, gotten taller and more put-together. Gone is the baby fat he used to have, and in its place is a sculpted jawline. His dark hair is short, but the ends curl just enough to tease his forehead, and his green eyes are guilty from roaming over me just like he did with other girls whenever we'd be forced together at those boring events our families went to.

I'm almost done sweeping the floor at Turning Pages bookstore when he saunters through the pile of dust and pine needles with his polished Tom Ford shoes. "Fancy seeing you here," is how he greets me, looking completely out of place in business slacks and a button-down that probably cost more than my car payment.

I glare at the mess he made. "Funny. I was going to say the same to you. I didn't know you could read."

One of Luca's eyebrows pops up when I bat him with the broom to get away from the pile he's spreading everywhere. "Nobody told me how feisty you are. We could have had a lot of fun together, you and I. Imagine all those dry events we were dragged to that could have been different if you didn't avoid me."

Avoid him? "I wasn't avoiding you."

"You never spoke to me."

Is he forgetting that he was always surrounded by other people? "I never had a reason to. And you had plenty of other women to make the time fly faster."

"Were you jealous, Little Del Rossi?"

I scowl. "You wish."

He hums. "Do you honestly like this place? It seems so...boring. And there's an odor."

“Yes, I do,” I say crisply, my grip on the broom tightening. “And there is no odor. What are you doing here, Luca?”

I ignore the eyes I feel following me as I try to finish closing. The last person I want to be stuck alone with is the person I was supposed to marry in a different life.

“Did one of our fathers send you?” I question when he doesn’t answer right away. Last I heard, my father was proposing some sort of deal with his dad that didn’t include marriage since I closed that chapter of my life. Who knew how much money I cost him by staying with Lincoln.

At least fifty million.

I’m tired and slightly dreading going home because of the wedge shoved between Lincoln and me lately.

He hated me not being honest with him, but he didn’t seem inclined to tell me what he was trying to dig up on my father when he had the opportunity to. His hypocrisy has weighed heavily on my shoulders since.

“Believe it or not, no,” he finally answers, drawing my attention up. He speaks so casually it confuses me. “Leani did.”

My brows pinch together. “Leani?”

Since when does Leani talk to the Carbones?

He dips his chin and picks up a trinket from the shelf, studying it before putting it back. “I’m sure you’ve heard a lot about me, Georgia. But I’m not the bad guy.”

Wouldn’t a bad person say that? “And Leani told you to come here and tell me that?”

His lips lift. “No. She told me to check in on you to make sure you were okay. And to convince you to come to dinner with all of us on Sunday.”

Dinner? “Why would I want to come to dinner after everything my father has done?”

“Because you want to help him despite his actions,” he answers simply, picking up a book and opening the first page. His eyes scan it before closing the cover and sliding it back into place. “Do people actually read this?”

I don’t entertain him with an answer.

He shrugs it off. “And because Leani wants that too. My mother is friends with her, and she’s concerned about Leani’s well-being.”

“Her well-being?”

“I didn’t see them for myself, but my mother said she noticed bruises on your stepmother’s arms. She thought they looked like fingerprints. Leani

tried to brush it off, but my mother wasn't keen on forgetting that."

Bruises? "Do you think my father is hurting her?"

"I don't know what to think. I'm just relaying what I've heard. Do *you* think it's possible your father is capable of that?"

The memory of him raising his hand to me when he found out what I'd done comes to mind. If he was willing to strike his own daughter, what could he do to others?

Luca must take my silence as an admission. "I've seen firsthand the stress your father is under. Everybody who knows him thinks he's cracking under the pressure of people you'll be glad not to know. But that puts him, and the rest of you, in a vulnerable position."

He flicks a tasseled bookmark that's hanging on the shelf. "Cute," he remarks, nodding at the cartoon kitten on it wearing glasses. "Very... innocent. Unlike the page of that book I just read."

Ignoring him, I say, "Get to the point."

Luca tucks his hands into his pockets, turning to me. "Leani has taken the brunt of your father's anger, and frankly, I don't know how bad it truly is. My mother usually doesn't tell me these things, but she felt it relevant enough to bring to my attention. Especially when Leani was sent away to a rehabilitation clinic out of state to...heal."

Heal. "Heal, from what exactly?"

He doesn't answer that. "You know what."

My father.

"It's only a matter of time before Nikolas goes off the deep end again. His business is going under because of the choices he's made. The choices that *you*'ve made."

"And what am I supposed to do about it now? I can't go back and change what's already happened. I don't want to."

"I didn't ask you to. I'm here because Leani seems to think that you coming to dinner will relieve some previous tensions. She thinks your appearance will make him less testy."

It doesn't make sense why he cares. "I have a feeling that my presence will do the exact opposite. And there's no way that Lincoln—" I wince at his name in front of the person I married him over. "—will agree."

Luca's eyes spark. "Trouble in paradise with the cop?" he guesses, watching my face heat. "You seem a little tense over the subject matter."

I force myself to smile. "Your presence does that to people, I'm sure."

His eyes flash with amusement. “How *is* your husband doing? It must be hard not having him around with his work schedule as crazy as it is.”

How would he know anything about that? “I don’t get why you’re here delivering the message. Why couldn’t Leani? And what do you have to benefit from this? I already told my father that I’m not going to marry you.”

“Good,” he replies with a shrug. “If it makes you feel any better, I don’t want to marry you either.”

His statement makes me pause, blinking at the easy smile he gives. “You...don’t?”

“Nope.”

I don’t know what to say.

“So, why are you here?”

“Because my father has been on edge since you ran off and disobeyed your family. He thinks I’m going to rebel since their original matchup didn’t pan out. I don’t particularly enjoy dealing with my father’s mood swings, and I can’t imagine Leani likes dealing with Nikolas’s. So I’m asking you on behalf of your stepmother and me to come to dinner. Maybe then our fathers will get off our asses.”

This can’t be real. “Luca, I offered to help my father before and he refused. How much can I let him get away with by coming to his rescue despite everything that’s happened. He’s not himself, and I don’t think there’s anything I can do to fix that.”

Luca steps forward, dropping his voice. “You have to understand that it wasn’t your father making those calls. Trust me, I’m well-versed in the type of people who cross his path. They want results that he’s not getting, and they’re withholding funds until they get what they want. It’s put him in a very tricky situation.”

“That has nothing to do with me.”

“That,” he says quietly, his eyes uncharacteristically soft, “has everything to do with you.”

We fall into silence, his presence suddenly less evasive as I realize the genuine concern on his face. “He wants a marriage contract signed. I can’t give him that.”

His hand gently wraps around my arm, his warm, breath brushing against my face when he says, “He wants freedom far more. We all do. But some of us aren’t as lucky.”

Swallowing, I look him in the eye and wonder what that even means. Before I can ask, a throat clears from the entrance, and Luca lets go of me. I stumble back, putting a safe distance between us, when I see Lincoln standing at the door in his uniform.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asks, looking between us.

Luca stands taller, smirking at the man who put a ring on my finger. “We were just talking about you, actually.” He walks over, holding out his hand. “It’s good to officially meet you, Officer. I’ve heard...things.”

Not good things.

Just things.

Internally, I sigh at his baiting tone.

I can tell from here that Lincoln’s grip on Luca’s hand is tight—tighter than it should be. Not that I can blame him.

Lincoln closes the distance between him and Luca, towering over the devil’s spawn by a few inches. But neither of them says a word to the other as they standoff.

When they stay like that for a solid sixty seconds, it’s me who’s clearing my throat. “I need to finish closing,” I tell them both. “Goodbye, Luca.”

It takes a moment for them to finally break their contact, Luca backing down first. I know for a fact Lincoln never would have, and we’d be stuck here all night.

Luca turns, smiling at me in a way that makes nausea coil in my stomach. “It was lovely seeing you, Georgia. Consider what I said.”

He walks out after another head dip in Lincoln’s direction before slipping out the front door.

Finally, I take a deep breath. “Thank you.”

Lincoln turns the sign over to say CLOSED.

“Does he come here often?”

I stop sweeping to look at him. “What?”

“Luca,” he replies as if I’m too dumb to know who he’s referring to. “Does he come in here often?”

I shake my head. “No.” He watches me with skepticism clear on his face. “No. I would have said something if he did. This is the first time.”

Lincoln’s lips press into a thin line as he studies the place. For what, I don’t know. Maybe it’s just me he doesn’t want to look at.

I lean the broom against my side and put my weight onto the handle. “Is that why you’re here? Because you wanted to make sure I wasn’t doing

something I shouldn't?"

When he doesn't answer, anger boils under my skin. How could he think I'd want to spend time with *Luca Carbone*? After everything we've done to avoid the family, and he somehow thinks I'd want to be around him now?

"Wow," I breathe in disbelief, going back to work. Is this who we are now? "Well, now that you know I'm not screwing anybody on the counter between customers, you can go back to work. I'm sure you've got better things to do than check on the welfare of your slutty wife."

His radio goes off, the static murmurings of a domestic almost ironic for the moment.

After a few minutes, I hear him sigh. "I came here to see if you wanted me to follow you home."

"Why?" I snap, holding the broomstick so tightly it may just break. "Because you don't trust me?"

Lincoln blinks slowly, his expression too distant to read. "Because," he says quietly, "it's supposed to storm, and I know you hate driving in the rain."

I stare at him, embarrassment flooding my veins and making my cheeks heat. "Oh."

The quiet is thick, suffocating the room.

Then he asks, "What happened to us, Peaches?"

I peek up at him through my lashes, feeling that crushing weight get heavier and heavier on my chest. "I don't know."

But I do.

It started with the lies.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lincoln / Four Years Ago

MY MOTHER HOSTS Georgia's twenty-fifth birthday party, baking her a double chocolate cake with the help of Hannah. Dad grills burgers and chicken breasts on the back deck, where I hang out with a beer and a cigar. Georgia stays indoors, and talks to the girls about God knows what.

I woke her up with a soft kiss on the cheek, breakfast in bed, and a wrapped jewelry box with a pink ribbon tied around the top containing a silver customized necklace.

I helped her put it on, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck after doing the clasp, then watched her touch it the entire way here like it grounded her.

We went our separate ways when we got inside, and I didn't fight it. Didn't have the energy to, if I'm being honest.

There's a dark cloud looming over us that won't go away. We don't talk about it, but we both know it's there. Always hovering, darkening our days like a storm brewing.

I don't know the last time she let me touch her, and I don't cross that line until we're on better terms.

It wouldn't feel real then.

I needed real.

Dad offers me another beer, cracking the top off with the end of his spatula. "Something going on with you two?" he asks, addressing the elephant in the room.

"I don't know."

Every time I think we've talked it through, when I believe I've reeled her back in, she pulls away. Fights me. Fights *us*.

I don't show back up to the bookstore to prove to her I trust her. I ask how her day is, but her answers are short, held together by caution tape and a fake smile. She'll ask me how my day is, and I don't want to bore her with the details of another traffic stop or DUI arrest.

It's made things...quiet.

It gives me a reason to stay at work longer.

To keep building my arrest record to prove that it wasn't the captain's words of encouragement that's getting me the job at BCI, but because I work my ass off too.

I don't ask Conklin for any more information he may have dug up on Nikolas Del Rossi because I know it won't help us.

Dad hums. "Women get weird about their birthdays."

I stare at the steam billowing from the grill when he opens the top. "She's twenty-five, not forty-five, Dad."

A reflective expression crosses the old man's face as he flips the burgers. "Your mother bawled her eyes out when she turned thirty. Her coworkers told her it was all downhill from there."

I snort, remembering that story being told at every birthday we had for Mom. She would always reevaluate life, saying getting older wasn't so bad. Like how she didn't have to pay a lot of money for highlights because mother nature was doing that for her. And I've definitely noticed how her once dark hair was now speckled with silver in ways it never was before, and the laugh lines around her lips and eyes that never existed ten years ago. It's no different than Dad's graying beard and how his hairline is receding in ways I pray mine never will.

Time is a bitch.

"Yeah," I relent, glancing into the window at the girls sitting around the kitchen table talking.

Georgia is holding her necklace as she talks to my mother and sister.

A silver heart pendant with her initials in the middle—GD for Georgia Danforth.

It was a way to remind her we were in this together, even when it felt like we were at odds.

She must sense the attention because she turns in my direction and sees me staring. It's hard to tell from this distance, but I think she smiles. From here, I see the tiniest lift of her lips, and it gives me a semblance of peace.

Something I haven't felt in a long time.

It tells me we have a chance.

Dad says, "You'll get through it. Every relationship has its rough patches. Do something nice for her. Women love that shit."

For our sake, I hope he's right.

"Maybe I will," I murmur, thinking on it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Lincoln / Four Years Ago

AFTER YEARS OF intimidating “yes sirs” and “yes ma’ams” while putting endless time in at the station, I officially get promoted as an investigator with the Bureau of Criminal Investigation.

Adjusting to the new position means a lot of time spent away from the two-thousand-square-foot split-level ranch that I managed to buy for Georgia and me with a large loan and a prayer that it could fix whatever is slipping away day by day.

A new space means a fresh start, and we need that.

But between starting the new job and settling into the house with only the furniture we took with us from the apartment within six months, it’s hard to find a routine. The stress is heightened, which has led to a lot of heated disagreements about paint color, what to have for dinner, and other mundane shit I’d normally never think twice about.

Who the fuck cared what color a guest bedroom was? I sure as hell didn’t, and I doubted we’d have many guests who would. Frankly, I couldn’t think of one person who would need to stay with us.

But it mattered to her, and it took one swift smack upside the head by my mother to realize it had nothing to do with the color at all. “It’s about making it a home,” she says when I stop by to help her fix her tire on one of my few days off.

A home. “It’s just paint,” I murmur, grabbing my wrench and tightening the lug nuts on the new tire.

“Oh, honey,” she chides. “It’s never just paint. Not to her.”

Then what the hell is it? “I’ll never understand women.”

Her laugh is light. “That’s how women feel about men,” she reassures, helping me up once I’m finished with the job. “Do me a favor, though. Go easy on her. We both know you’re not an easy person to be with. Oh, don’t give me that look. I love you unconditionally, but that doesn’t mean I don’t see facts.” She eyes me when I go to argue, clamping me up. “Your job is

demanding, and that puts a strain on any of your relationships. Georgia is trying to deal with that by making your house into a home for the two of you, which I can only imagine is difficult since you're gone so often. Put yourself in her shoes. She's in a new place, all alone, attempting to make it into something you look forward to coming home to."

Flexing my fingers around my wrench, I stifle a sigh. I never thought about it that way, but she has a point.

"To her, it's not about the paint color," my mother concludes, patting my shoulder. "It's about making decisions together that you can both be happy with."

Shoulders tightening, I realize I've been an ass. I told Georgia she could do whatever she wanted with the house because I wanted her to feel at home—to make it hers. It wasn't that I didn't care; it was that I'd done this whole thing for her. To give her room. A place for the books she loves reading. A space to cook and bake using the recipes she's collected from my mother over the years. Room to grow.

Together.

No matter what is happening between us.

My mother squeezes my shoulder. "You should go," she encourages.

Go home to her, is what she doesn't say.

But I listen to the unspoken advice.

And when I walk up the stairs that lead into the living room, I see her sprawled across the couch with a book in her hand and say, "I liked the beige color."

She blinks, closing her book. "The...what?"

I walk over and sit on the edge of the couch, grabbing her feet and draping them over me as I scoot back into the cushion. Massaging her feet, I say, "For the guest bedroom. I liked the beige you picked out. It's... homey."

Her eyes go from where I work her feet up to my face, hers pinched in confusion. "Oh." She sets her book on the table. "I didn't think you cared that much."

"My mind has been preoccupied," I admit apologetically. "But I want this house to feel like ours. If that means going over paint samples for each room, that's what we'll do."

A small smile tugs at the corners of her lips as she settles into the cushions. "Does that mean we'll paint them together too?"

I've always hated painting, but for her, I'd do it. "Yes, Peaches. It means painting them too."

Her smile grows, and damn, is it a sight I've missed. "The house..." She looks around at the large living room that was a selling point to me thanks to the high wooden ceiling. "It's beautiful, Lincoln. It's the last thing I expected."

My hand works its way up her calf. "I know things haven't been easy for us lately, and I want to fix it. Hopefully, this is the first step."

As quickly as her smile stretches, it wavers as her eyes dip to where my fingers squeeze and rub the muscles in her legs.

"I want that too. But..." Her tone is full of hesitation as she pulls back one of her feet. I keep hold of the other, seeing her withdraw into herself and not wanting her to put that distance there.

I've let her do it too often lately.

"What is it?" I ask softly, using the pad of my thumb to caress the sole of her foot.

Her top teeth dig into her bottom lip. "We said no more lying or holding anything back." Her chest rises with a slow inhale. "So, you should know that I'm going to dinner with my family this weekend. When Luca came to the bookstore, he said Leani had bruises on her that he suspects my father is responsible for. She wants me to come to dinner to see if I can ease some of his stress."

The word "no" is out of my mouth before I can stop and process it.

"Lincoln—"

"You don't owe him anything, Georgia." Does she hear herself?

"He's my dad."

"He's not a very good one," I counter coolly, her foot tensing in my hold. Easing my tone, I go back to working out the tension just above her heel. "He hasn't done anything to prove he's worth your effort or energy. I'm sorry if that's true about Leani, but she needs to file a police report, not ask you to come handle it."

"Leani would never go to the police."

"Why not?"

Georgia is quiet for a minute. "Because he's all she has. I think if she wanted to go to the police, she would have. But something is holding her back."

I've dealt with plenty of people in situations like hers who were afraid of losing everything they had by leaving their abusers. "I understand that. What I don't get is how you're supposed to change what's happening behind closed doors."

"He used to be a different person," she tells me, her frown curling her lips. "I know you don't understand, but I can't help but wonder if I can get the old version of him back. Luca said—"

"Luca." I cut her off, my hand pausing on her foot. "Since when do you care about what Luca Carbone says anyway? If you only spoke to him that once at the store, I don't see why his input matters over mine."

"I never said it did."

"Well, it sure feels like it. All Luca Carbone cares about is what benefits *him*," I argue firmly. "If he said anything different, I wouldn't be so quick to believe him."

All she does is stare down at her closed book.

"You've offered to help your father before, and all he's done is make you pay for it. He's the reason there's a wedge between us, and listening to Luca is only going to drive it deeper."

She peeks up at me through her lashes. "Is it the only reason, though?"

"What does that mean?"

Shaking her head, she fidgets with the bookmark tucked in between the pages. "Neither one of us knows how far gone my father is. *Do we?*"

She spares me with a look, those amber eyes waiting for me to say something. But I don't want to get into what her father may or may not be into. It's better if she doesn't know the incriminating evidence that could lead to her father's ruin. The less she knows, the less guilt she'll feel for not trying to stop me. But if he's this unpredictable, then clearly, something needs to be done about it.

"I'm not trying to be a dick," I tell her, letting her take back her foot. She bends her legs up to her chest and wraps her arms around them. "But I want you to realize that this is another part of the game he's playing to get what he wants. Where is the line?"

"It's just dinner."

It's just paint, I'd told my mother.

But it wasn't.

"It's never just dinner, Georgia. This dinner is going to turn into another one. And that will turn into a third. Eventually, you'll be going every week."

And for what?”

It doesn't matter to her. She's already made up her mind, and it doesn't matter what my opinion on the matter seems to be. Whatever Luca told her got to her head exactly how he wanted it to.

The only reason she's telling me is because she already agreed to go.

“When are we going to dinner?”

Surprise coats her face, her lips parting. “You want to come?”

Want is a strong word. “I don't trust them.”

Her frown reappears.

“But I don't want you to face them alone. And maybe your stepmother won't go to the police, but maybe she wants you to bring the police to her in any form you can.”

She's contemplative. “And you would help her?”

“It's not her I dislike.” Though, she's never going to be getting a Christmas card from me anytime soon. “I'm not a complete asshole, Peaches. I can find it in me to help someone who needs it.”

“That's how I feel about my father.”

The difference is, Nikolas may be too far gone to be saved. And I'm afraid she'll realize that too soon and give up everything to try anyway.



WHEN A YOUNG woman opens the door to the Del Rossi mansion, I step inside with a hand on Georgia's lower back. We're guided to a formal dining room the size of my old apartment, where Luca and Antonio Carbone are sitting and making conversation with Nikolas, seated at the end of the table.

The eldest Del Rossi's face drops the second he sees me enter the room. It takes everything in me to behave like I promised Georgia I would on the drive here.

“Sorry we're late,” I apologize, making eye contact with each person. “We wanted to stop and buy you something.”

Georgia clears her throat, setting the bottle of Shivers on the table. The whiskey cost me sixty dollars at the liquor store, but I wasn't coming empty-handed into the lion's den.

It's Leani who's quick to respond. "How thoughtful. Would you like me to put it in the other room, dear?"

Her question is directed toward Nikolas, who's still staring at me. "We're more of a Macallan household," he informs me, ignoring his wife.

Georgia puts her hand on my arm, as if telling me to play nice. I capture her hand, threading our fingers together. "Unfortunately, not all of us have an unlimited budget like you do."

Leani gestures toward the table. "Please sit. I'll ask the caterers to pour you a glass."

The smug face on Luca Carbone only lasts long enough for me to take the empty seat next to Leani that I'm expected to sit at and drag it loudly over to Georgia. The chair legs scrape across the hardwood, stopping when I wedge the seat between where Georgia and Luca had been put beside each other.

Nikolas glares as I settle in, draping an arm across the back of my wife's chair. I simply look at the floor and say, "I can buff that out for you."

Georgia puts a hand on my knee and squeezes once. A warning. But I ignore the irritated glares in my direction from the men and turn my attention to Leani. "Thank you for the invitation. I've been wanting to speak to you and your husband for a while."

The hand on my leg tightens. "Lincoln," she whispers, eyeing me warily.

She's worried about what I'll say, but I have no intention of telling the man at the other end of the table what a horrible father he is. He doesn't need me to tell him that. Deep down, he already knows he's failed his family.

I put a hand on top of hers and turn my body toward the man of the household. "I wanted to thank you for helping me get my promotion. It's always nice to know there are people who can see the importance of cleaning up the streets. It's a shame drug use is on the rise, but your endorsement is going to help end that."

It's not a threat but a promise.

And I deliver it with a smile.

Antonio's body straightens, his shoulders squaring and eyes narrowing at Nikolas. "What is he talking about?"

"I don't know what he's referring to," Nikolas states, gripping the arm of his chair and keeping his eyes forward.

He won't look at his companion.

Interesting.

"Oh, come on," I say halfheartedly. "Now's not the time to be humble, Nikolas. Without you getting Captain Chamberlin to talk on my behalf, I wouldn't be able to take care of these dealers roaming our towns. We've got families to protect, after all."

Georgia's hand slips out from under mine, leaving my leg cold from the absence of her touch. She looks between me and her father, her brows furrowed together. "He..." Her eyes meet her father's. "You helped him get the promotion?"

"You didn't know?" I question casually.

Her gaze darts back to me. "Of course, I didn't," she says softly. "I had no clue."

Whether I believe her or not doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. Not when there are at least three pairs of eyes burning holes into the profile of my face.

Luca speaks up for the first time since we sat down. "A promotion like that must be strenuous on your personal life. Especially with all of your adjustments lately. How is that charming house of yours?"

Nostrils flaring at his nonchalant tone, I grab the water glass somebody set in front of me and grip it tightly. "It's slowly becoming a home," I inform him. "Isn't that right, Peaches?"

The nickname grabs ahold of Leani's attention, and her eyes, which had been downtrodden the entire time, lift to Georgia. She remains silent, an order laid out by Nikolas, I'm sure.

I notice something off about her.

Her eyes are glassy.

Her face thick with the kind of makeup Georgia used to wear. A mask to hide behind. And when she turns her head, I notice the faintest red marks around her neck.

Something tells me her makeup is covering a lot more than her misery. As much as I hate to admit it, Luca may be right.

Georgia clears her throat. "Right."

It's Antonio who speaks up next. "And how is the job you love so much, Georgia? I must admit, I never quite saw you as the working type when Luca said you seemed happy at the bookstore."

Georgia stiffens at the condescending tone thrown at her, her eyes staying on the empty placemat in front of her.

I speak for her when it's clear she won't speak up for herself. "Maybe if she was given the opportunity to make something of herself of her own free will, you would have seen it sooner. It's a good thing she has me."

A small breath escapes one of the women to my left—I'm not sure if it's Leani or Georgia.

"Yes," Leani forces to say. "A very good thing."

Antonio shoots Nikolas a look.

Nikolas leans forward, and despite the long table putting distance between us, his cold glare closes in on me all the same. "Keep telling yourself that, Officer. Perhaps one day, you'll believe it."

Luca chuckles, picking up the glass of scotch that he's been nursing.

The only thing I say is, "It's detective now."

The table grows silent.

Leani stands, nervously saying, "I'll go check to see if dinner is ready to be served."

Her eyes go to Georgia, then to me, never scanning over the three men looming at the other side of the table as if she's too afraid to.

"Georgia," she says softly. "Why don't you come with me?"

I highly doubt it takes two people to check on dinner, but I don't say anything.

Georgia glances at me, then at her father and the two other men across the table. "All right."

I skirt my hand over her leg as she stands, flashing her a smile that she tightly returns. It's as if the second she stepped into this house, all the progress she made went out the door and she reverted to the silent child she was raised to be.

As soon as the women are out of the room, I turn to the three men and lean my arms against the edge of the table. "Let's not bullshit one another. What was the real reason for this dinner?"

Antonio scoffs, and Luca's lips waver but remain neutral.

Nikolas answers. "Perhaps my daughter realized this is where she was meant to be."

Snorting, I look at Luca. "We both know that's not true, is it, Carbone?"

Luca's eyebrow pops up. "Nobody forced Georgia here tonight."

Instead of reacting, I lean back in my chair. "I would hardly say that's true. How many years of emotional manipulation did it take to wear her down enough to agree? I'll never understand why she chooses to care for somebody who's done nothing but tear her down. But she does." My eyes go to Nikolas. "We all have motives that brought us here tonight. I want my wife to be happy. You want her to be controlled. One day, she'll see all of you for who you are."

"And what about you?" Nikolas asks. "What do you think will happen when she opens her eyes and sees you for who you are?"

I'm not going to pretend I'm a saint. I know I'm not. But I also know I'm better than the men across from me. "And who is that?" I question him.

Nikolas's calculated grin makes my eyes narrow when he says, "A liar."

"I suppose it takes one to know one then," I return casually, not letting the words soak in as much as they want to.

He wants me to fold.

I won't.

When the women come back in, there are two servers that follow behind with trays of food. It's the first time I've ever been to somebody's house that has hired help catering a basic meal, but I expect no less from the Del Rossi family.

Dinner is silent, save for the silverware clinking against the expensive plates. I wouldn't be shocked if the design on the dishes were actually gold-encrusted knowing the company I'm in.

All the chatter that we'd walked into faded the second Georgia and I arrived, but the tension grew tenfold as each course was served.

Georgia only eats a few bites from each course, only poking at the fancy tart topped with all of her favorite fruit placed in front of her by dessert. The girl with the biggest sweet tooth I know barely touches anything that she would happily eat if it were just us.

And it's killing me.

"I think it's best we go," I say, scooting my chair back and standing. "Georgia?"

It's an out.

I've let her see how little her father truly needs her and taken the thick silence for as long as I can. I'm used to uncomfortable situations, but tonight goes beyond that. It's a challenge, one I don't want to take.

Not in front of Georgia.

I extend my hand, waiting for her to take it.

Her eyes go to my palm, then up my arm to meet my gaze. Throat bobbing, she blots her mouth with her napkin and moves the chair back.

She doesn't take my hand when she stands.

She doesn't look at Nikolas or the Carbones.

Her eyes go to Leani. "Thank you for having us," she says, her voice no more than a whisper.

"You'll have to come back next week," Nikolas says instead of his wife. "Perhaps we can have traditional family time."

Without me, he's saying.

No chance in hell I'm letting that happen.

Leani stands as well. "I'll walk you out."

She walks alongside Georgia, hesitating at the door.

I pull a card out of my back pocket and pass it to her. "If you need somebody to help you, you should call this number."

Leani stares at the business card a moment before taking it. "Shawn Hart?" she reads.

"He works in the special victim's unit. He deals with a lot of domestics. His experience ranges farther than your stepdaughter's."

"Lincoln," Georgia murmurs.

I turn to her. "I'm just being honest. Hart can help her because he has the resources to." When I focus back on Leani Del Rossi, she's not making eye contact with me. "I've dealt with abuse before. I know what it looks like. It's not worth staying. Hart can get you out of here."

When the older woman lifts her gaze, I find a hardness in the hue of her eyes. "I don't need your friend's help."

"But you need Georgia's?"

She stands her ground. "I think it's best if you both left."

When we walk out, I see her slip the card into the sleeve of her shirt before the door closes behind us.

Georgia takes a deep breath. "That was..."

"I know."

When the following Sunday rolls around, Georgia is invited back by Leani, just like I knew she'd be. I'm conveniently called in for a last-minute mandatory overtime detail at the same time I'm supposed to be at the Del Rossi's house for dinner.

I ask Georgia not to go.

She asks me to trust her.
Neither one of us winds up happy.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lincoln / Present

FOLLOWING BEAUGARD OUT of his office, I'm met with my third, "No, Hawk. I've got paperwork up to my dick that I need to finish by end of business today. I can't deal with any of your shit on top of that."

I extend the file that Dickers gave to me after taking pictures of each page and saving them to my laptop at home. "You're going to want to look at this. It's going to make you want to take on this case. I'm telling you."

He stops, dropping his head back and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Did you call the prosecutor's office about Heller's trial coming up on Friday?"

"Yes."

"And made sure the arresting officer sent the court all the documents they need?" he asks.

"All done. I even checked with the ADA to make sure there was nothing else she needed. She thinks it's going to be a slam dunk."

"Will he plea?"

Heller is a nineteen-year-old kid who got drunk and decided to run over a peer that he'd been feuding with since high school. Since it happened in the middle of the night in a relatively isolated neighborhood, there weren't any witnesses. But the idiot recorded the whole thing and posted it to Snapchat.

"He'd be dumb not to," I remark. There's no way he can deny he did it. There's video proof that we were able to apply a warrant to obtain from the social media corporation that was more than willing to help us get what we needed.

Beaugard grabs the file and opens it, his brows furrowing when he sees the compilation of information dated from years back up until Conklin's death. "What is this?"

"You said that the paper Volley gave me wasn't going to be enough to move forward with on its own," I say, tapping the stack of papers. "I found

this folder that Conklin was working on putting together. There is more than enough reasonable suspicion here to apply for a warrant.”

The senior investigator shakes his head as he flips through the pages. “And you just so happened to find this after your talk with Volley?”

He knows damn well I didn’t, but I’m not going to throw Dickers under the bus for passing it along to me. “It was buried under other files in the cabinet that he used to store copies of his arrest reports. Must have gotten missed when they went through it.”

A doubtful noise rises from his throat. “This is a lot we would need to process,” he tells me, closing the file. “And there’s no way in hell you’d be able to take lead on it. Even if you are cleared to come back full-time.”

If. “I *will* be cleared,” I correct him. “In a few weeks when I go through my physical. And I already know I won’t be appointed to the case, but I deserve to be a liaison.”

His laugh is startled. “You’re kidding, right?”

When he looks at me, he realizes I’m not.

Tucking the file under his arm, he pulls me to the side to let somebody pass us in the narrow hall. “Look, it’s obvious Conklin invested a lot of time in this. You have too, whether you admit it or not. But if you get any more involved in this, whatever justice you’re seeking won’t matter. They’ll throw it all out because of conflict of interest. Do you want that?”

I shake off his hold. “Does that mean you’ll look into it?”

“That depends.”

I wait for him to finish talking.

“Are you going to get in the way? Because I don’t want to waste my time chasing something that you get in the middle of. I mean it, Danforth. I’ve got a lot riding on me.”

And I don’t? “I won’t get in your way.”

He eyes me down like he’s trying to detect the lie. Whatever he sees must be enough. His chin gestures toward my arm. “How are you anyway? Really?”

My lips twitch as I roll the bad shoulder and feel the tight muscles tug on the marred tissue underneath. “I’m going stir-crazy trying to get back here.”

He doesn’t offer me any sympathy or condolences. “I’m not asking you this to be a dick, but what are you going to do if you don’t get cleared to come back?”

My nostrils flare with irritation at the question. “I don’t know, Beau. I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

Although he seems understanding, he still puts a hand on my good shoulder and says, “It wouldn’t hurt to think about it.”



THE PHONE BUZZING by my ear wakes me up from a dead sleep. My arm groggily reaches over to pick it up without looking at the caller ID. “This is Danforth.”

“Can you meet me?” Georgia whispers, cracking one of my eyes open to a pitch-dark room.

The blackout curtains sometimes make the morning seem like night, so I pull the phone away from my ear to check the time. “It’s two in the morning,” I tell the woman who used to sleep in the spot beside me.

I’ve never let myself wander to the right side of the bed since she left. Shortly after she moved out, I could still smell the lingering scent of her shampoo on the sheets. I washed them, but her presence clung to every facet of the room, making it hard to forget the body that used to keep me warm on cold nights like these.

“I wouldn’t call if it wasn’t important.”

Closing my eyes, I use the pad of my thumb and index fingers to rub my tired eyelids. “What is so important that you need me and not Luca Carbone?”

He’s not you, she’d once said.

She’s right.

But I wonder if she got her manipulation tactic from her father when she said those words to me because I don’t know what to believe anymore.

“Sandy’s Diner,” she replies. “In an hour.”

She’s not asking.

“And if I don’t show up?” I ask, suddenly more awake than I was a few minutes ago.

There’s a brief pause when I hear the tiniest exhale of her breath. “Did you mean what you said that day at the coffee shop? That you were done?”

If you let me walk away today without you, our memories will be what's left of us.

If I tell her yes, would she feel victorious knowing it was just another lie between us? That if I meant it, I wouldn't show up at the diner? I don't know what she wants—what she expects.

Because the truth is, I'm not done.

Not until Nikolas is behind bars.

Not until Conklin's murder is avenged.

Not until I can go to sleep at night without having nightmares or thinking about her.

So, I don't answer her question.

I'm sick of the lies.

Sick of the back and forth.

The push and pull.

I *want* to be done.

I can taste it—the end.

"Make it two hours," is my only reply, ending the call before she gets the chance to argue.

Staring up at the ceiling, I realize how pathetic it is that she still has any hold over me. It's been months since we fucked, and I haven't felt the withdrawals of cutting her cold turkey.

But she always finds a way to slip back into my life when I least expect it.

I throw the blankets off my body and stretch my stiff limbs, wincing when my shoulder pops and a searing pain shoots down my left side. Hissing, I drop my head between my legs and suck in a deep breath to ground myself.

Counting to ten, I lift my head and force myself to get dressed. The pain holds on, and I decide it's a good thing. It's a reminder of what I'm walking into.

Don't go.

My nostrils flare.

I can't go back and change anything.

But I can make sure the people responsible for that day pay for the repercussions.

And I won't let whatever Georgia has to say get in the way of that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Lincoln / Present

A COFFEE POT appears out of my peripheral and refills my mug, snapping me away from the dissociative thoughts drowning out the mindless chatter of the diner. “You look like you could use a second cup along with a good night’s sleep,” the owner says, propping her hip against the edge of the table.

Humming, I bring the cup to my lips and sip the bitter liquid. “I could say the same about you, Sandy. I’m surprised you’re working the night shift.”

She sets the coffee pot on the table. “Didn’t have a choice. Two of my girls called out, leaving me short-staffed. But it’s no matter. It gets me out of the house and a break from the hubby.”

Chuckling, I sip my coffee. “As long as you have a plan.”

“Are you getting your usual?”

I dip my chin, checking my watch. “And a chicken parm panini and steak fries with a side of marinara sauce.”

The familiar order has Sandy’s brows rising with interest. “Ah. It’s been a while since I’ve seen the two of you in the same place together. Should I hide the knives?”

My lips twitch at the implication. “Don’t call the police on us yet, or I’ll never live it down at the station,” I muse.

She hums, interest coating her expression, but chooses not to say a word. Patting my shoulder, she takes her coffee pot back to the machine and puts our order in.

Ears perking up when I hear the *click-clack* of heels on tile, I straighten my shoulders when my senses are filled with floral perfume. I only lift my gaze from my coffee when a body slides into the cushioned bench seat across from me.

One of my eyebrows quirks up when I see the oversized jacket wrapped around her, then to the silk scarf wrapped around her neck that hides half

her face, before lifting my eyes to the brown hair tied back into an updo and out of her face.

“I wasn’t aware you were interested in undercover work,” I say, watching as she unbuttons her jacket and unwraps the scarf, hiding the bottom half of her face.

It’s the same scarf I used to bind her with months ago, making my lips twitch. An intentional choice?

She sets the scarf beside her. “What are you talking about?”

I gesture toward the getup she’s in. “You’re clearly wearing a disguise.”

She slowly undoes the buttons of her jacket to reveal the low-cut shirt underneath. I’m surprised Luca let her walk out looking like that.

“Are you done ogling my boobs?” she asks, taking my coffee and wrapping her unpainted lips around the edge for a sip.

She hates coffee, especially the way I drink it. Not that you’d know it by the smirk she offers as she sets it down and uses her manicured nail to push it toward me.

“I was hoping to see that you popped your wonder bra,” I remark casually, finally meeting her eyes. They’re not painted with makeup, her lashes aren’t pristine and curled, and there’s no liner that makes her amber eyes brighter like I’m used to.

The girl sitting across from me reminds me of the version who I fell in love with.

“Are you saying I’m prickly?”

“Like hugging a cactus these days,” I deadpan.

Humming, she drapes her coat in the spot beside her. “I seem to recall a time when you liked my prickly personality.”

Her eyes pan over to me, scanning my face. God only knows what she sees. I haven’t slept more than three hours in weeks and have had approximately two coffee pots worth of coffee with very little food with any nutritional value to soak it up with.

My eyes go back to her hair. “Back to your roots?”

Her hands go to the tips of the hair framing her face. “Sometimes you have to make sacrifices. The blond was a lot to keep up with.”

And I’m sure her father disapproved of the color. “I’m the last person you should be preaching to about sacrifices, Georgia.”

Her eyes lower to the table.

Scrubbing a hand down my tired face, I take a long sip of coffee and set it down. “You wanted to talk.”

“I guess the time for pleasantries is behind us,” she mumbles, staring at the glass of water I had Sandy pour for her. She reaches for it and wraps those long, lean fingers around the condensation-covered cup. “I overheard a conversation my father was having with somebody over the phone. Don’t ask me who because I don’t know. But he told the person that he knew they needed to take care of Michael Welsh before he talked more.”

My shoulders square.

She trails her finger up and down the glass, making insignificant pictures in the condensation and not paying me any mind. “You used to talk about Michael Welsh a lot, so I know you know him.”

When she picks her head up, she sees me staring at her. “Why are you telling me this?”

The eyes lacking makeup soften. “Whoever was on the other end of the phone wasn’t giving him any other options. He’s been paranoid. Angry. He fired three of his seasoned employees that were with him for decades at The Del Rossi Group. Leani is...” Her throat bobs. “I haven’t seen her so scared before. I go there to make sure she’s okay, but she’s not.”

“And what do you expect me to do about it? I’ve told you plenty of times before that it was only a matter of time before he dug himself into a hole he couldn’t get out of. I gave Leani the numbers she needed to call. I can’t force somebody to file a complaint.”

“I...” She stops herself, takes a deep breath, and releases the glass. “I wasn’t asking you to do that. I’m not asking you to help him or even her. I’m asking you to help *me*.”

All I can do is stare at her. She acts like there’s a difference between the two, but I know there isn’t. Helping her would be helping Nikolas Del Rossi, and I have no intention of doing that.

“I can’t do that, Peaches.”

The nickname has her eyes darting upward in surprise. “Can’t or won’t?”

Sighing, I say, “Georgia—” I close my eyes and count to three, remembering we’re in a public place. “I need you to be reasonable. You’re asking a lot of me about something you knew I wouldn’t be on board about. I have no reason to help either of you after what you’ve done.”

Her eyes remain locked on the water, not giving me an ounce of attention. It's better that way. Those eyes make me do stupid things, and I can't afford to make any more dumb decisions in my life.

The next time she speaks, her tone is nearly inaudible. "I thought I could help him." Her tongue drags across her lips to wet them before her shoulders slouch. "I wanted to help him before it was too late. He may not be a good man, but he'll always be my father."

Her admission is one I've been waiting to hear for a long time. I knew she loved him, even when he gave her every reason not to. She was still there. Still trying. Still reaching out a helping hand for somebody who deserved every bad thing that came his way.

Ever so quietly, she says, "Luca could help me get the father I knew back. That's why..."

That's why she left me.

It's the reason I always knew but never heard her admit. She'll always choose Nikolas Del Rossi, no matter the circumstances.

Shaking my head, I lean back in the booth and grip the ceramic mug until my knuckles turn white. "I told you I'd help you."

"Don't lie to me, Lincoln." She sounds so tired. So defeated. And, for once, I'm not sure I feel bad for her. Because she did this to herself. "We both know you never wanted to help him. You wanted to *destroy* him. All those years of you going behind my back to take him down in a way you could—"

"I did that for *you*." I cut her off, gripping the edge of the table. "I did that for your freedom. For your happiness. You didn't want to live the life he chose for you."

"But that didn't mean I wanted his life ruined, Lincoln! He's family, no matter how convoluted that might seem to you."

There will never be a day when we agree on this. She'll always stand up for him, while I want nothing more than to stand back and watch him burn.

"So you let him ruin everybody else's life instead," I state, nodding empty. "I guess you are a Del Rossi, after all."

Hurt shadows her expression. It's the last thing she wants to hear, but as I sit there and watch her gape at me, I realize one thing.

I don't care.

I.

Don't.

Care.

And goddamn, is that a freeing feeling.

"I'm trying to make a difference," she whispers, her voice shaky. "You have no idea what I've had to do to make sure things change. For Leani. For you. For me."

Her eyes grow distant as they glance to the window into the dark night.

But what about what *I've* done?

"I came here to tell you what I heard. Not just for me or him. But so more people aren't pulled into the mess he's made," she murmurs. "I'm doing what I can to make sure my father doesn't destroy more people's lives."

I watch her, loosening my hold on the table and leaning up. "The problem is," I murmur with a sigh. "I don't think I believe you."

Her lips part at the words I've never spoken before. Thought, sure. But I never said them aloud. It would have put the final nail in the coffin a long time ago if I did.

"You don't want him to cross lines that he can't go back from," I say. "But he already has. There's no changing what he's done. To us. To other people. You want the truth? The only way to help him is to stop him."

She closes her eyes.

"I get it, Georgia." My throat bobs. "Family is important, and we can't help who we love regardless of what they do."

When she finally looks at me, there's an emptiness in her eyes that feels permanent. She's doing this because she loves him, and it's the same reason I tried helping her. Because I *thought* it was love. But what if it wasn't? "I guess we know that well by now, don't we?" she murmurs.

Two plates appear in front of us by Sandy, who studies the tense expression on our faces before shaking her head and walking away. But not before I hear the older woman murmur "a damn shame" under her breath as she goes.

Georgia lowers her eyes to study the panini in front of her.

Her usual.

"I guess we would," I finally answer, picking up my burger and taking a bite.

She watches me in silence.

Swallows her words.

And then dips a fry into the side of marinara sauce because she prefers that over ketchup.

We eat in silence, just like most of the meals we shared at the end of our relationship. We held everything back then. Let it build and build and build until the feelings combusted.

It ruined us.

We walk out to the parking lot together and stop at my truck parked in the back lot, blanketed by the trees. "I'll look into the Welsh thing," I tell her.

It's the only thing I offer. The only thing I can. I may not like Welsh, but that doesn't mean I want to see him with a target on his back.

Georgia kicks a pebble, watching it tumble underneath the undercarriage of my truck. "For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry."

Leaning my back against the door, I ask, "For what?"

Her eyes lift. "For everything. I thought we would be enough to drown out the noise. I never thought we'd wind up here."

Didn't she though? "You could have tried harder, Peaches."

Her eyes sadden. "You could have too. I asked you to stop. I asked you to choose me."

I had tried. Time and time again, I tried to glue the pieces back together, only to realize they were for the wrong puzzle. "What you refuse to accept was that I did choose you."

"No." Her throat bobs. "You chose my father."

Closing my eyes, I drop my head back and let the cool air caress my face.

Georgia's hand cups my cheek, bringing my head down until I'm facing her. She steps into me until her chest brushes mine. The pad of her thumb rubs against my bottom lip before her hand settles on my jawline.

"You and I were good at a lot of things that made us work back then," she says, her other hand reaching between us and grazing the growing bulge trapped behind the zipper of my jeans. "We were good at this."

She lets go of my face and reaches around me to open the back door.

"What are you doing?" I ask, the question no more than a whisper that gets lost in the wind.

"I don't know," she says while walking around me and climbing into the back.

Her hands go to the coat she didn't button before we left, peeling it open and draping it over the back seat.

"Georgia," I all but groan.

She slides in and pats the spot beside her.

I find myself walking over, hovering at the open door, and watching as her hands go to the hem of her shirt before peeling that off next.

My throat thickens with a swallow.

"We were good at making each other feel good," she says, her striptease continuing as her hands go down to the button of her jeans and popping open the button before slowly sliding down the zipper until a pair of black panties peeks through.

Lifting her hips, she pushes them down her hips until she's in nothing but a bra and panties. The cold air pebbles her nipples, making the hard peaks poke through the material of her bra.

She gets onto her hands and knees and crawls over to me. I stay frozen where I'm standing outside the truck cab, my cock thickening as I stare at her cleavage inches from my face and the familiar necklace hanging between her breasts.

"But the thing we were best at," she finishes, getting onto her knees and curling her fingers around my shoulders, "was pretending like this was *more*."

Her words are a knife to the heart, shoving the dull blade into the beating organ and twisting the handle.

Was that what we were doing? Pretending? Lying to ourselves and not just to each other?

"What are you doing?" I ask again, the pain thick in my tone. I keep my hands to myself even though hers trail down the sides of my arms and squeeze my biceps in exploration.

Her mouth closes the distance between us, her lips lightly carving a hot path over my jawline up to my ear and stopping at the lobe. "Saying goodbye," she answers, her warm breath letting a sharp one escape me.

The words go straight to my chest, but I don't have time to let them sink in before her mouth is on mine and her hands are pulling me on top of her onto the back seat.

I'm not sure how I manage to close the door behind me, but the next thing I know, I'm wrapped around the warmth and scent of Georgia Del

Rossi. And when I press my nose into the top of her head, I smell something familiar.

My shampoo.

I move my mouth over hers, our lips battling for dominance.

There's barely any room, but we make do with what we have.

Because we are good at this.

Always have been.

Probably always will be.

But that doesn't matter.

One second, my jeans are on, the next, they're halfway down my hips, and my boxer briefs are with them. My erection springs free, and I groan when Georgia's cold palm wraps around it and strokes.

There's a lot I want to do to the girl underneath me, but there's no room or time.

Georgia must know that too, because she wiggles out of her panties, wraps her arms around my arms and her legs around my waist, and brings my mouth down to her.

She says, "Fuck me," against my lips, arching her back up until my cock is nudging her entrance.

I know the moment I inch my tip inside of her that it'll be for the last time, so I savor every second.

Every thrust of my hips.

Every drawn-out moan.

Every whispered sigh.

I take it all.

Put it to memory.

Because she's rewriting our ending.

After tonight, this moment is what's left of us.

Two imperfect people.

Two skilled liars.

Her nails scrape down my clothed back, but the pressure brings me closer to the edge. She meets my hips every single time, her legs clenching around me as her mouth forms an O that I stare at as my pumps shake the truck cab.

I lift myself up using my hands as I find my release, watching as she breaks apart with me, but the weight is too much for my arm.

The pain I felt before becomes tenfold, and I nearly crush her when it gives out under me.

“Lincoln?” she asks in concern as I pull out of her.

I hiss when her fingers go to the injury covered by the plaid shirt. She’s never seen it because I’ve never allowed her to.

“No,” I say, yanking my jeans back into place and opening the door. “Don’t.”

She watches me with wide eyes as I scrape a hand through my hair and try pushing past the sharp ache radiating from the bullet wound.

My eyes go to that damn necklace. “Why do you still wear it?”

Her hand goes to the silver chain. “For the same reason you hold on to your ring.”

Did she feel it in the pocket of my jeans?

“Go back to him,” I tell her, voice thick.

Luca.

Once she’s dressed, she wraps her jacket around herself and stands in front of me. “I guess I was wrong. We’re also good at lying to each other.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

She doesn’t say another word.

Doesn’t try to spoil the moment.

Instead, her hand brushes my forearm as she walks to her car, climbs in, and drives away.

I watch until her taillights fade into the distance, with a weight lifting from my chest.

With every goodbye comes a new beginning.

That’s what I’ll take with me.

As I climb in, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Then I slam my hands against the steering wheel.

Tonight wasn’t just about Michael Welsh.

It was a farewell to a chapter everybody we knew was desperate for us to close.

CHAPTER FORTY

Lincoln / Present

THERE'S INK SPRAWLED across every section on the piece of paper except for the solid line at the bottom waiting for a signature. It's pristine still, the pen having passed over it three different times as Dr. Lucero fills out the other information above it.

Then he sits back in his chair, his bushy brows furrowing as he moves his gaze from the paper to the computer screen where last week's scan results are pulled up.

He sighs.

It's a heavy sound—the kind that people release when they're about to tell you something you don't want to hear. And I know what that's going to be even before his drawn-out sigh, “Lincoln...”

The permanent ache in my arm is a constant reminder that I survived that day when Conklin didn't. I woke up with it this morning and let it ground me on the short drive to the doctor's office for my physical.

I know the moment his body turns to me, and those eyes fill with sympathy that the scans seal my fate. He doesn't need to say it, and I don't want to hear it.

Not the apology or the glass-half-full bullshit to make me feel better. What I want to hear isn't going to be said, which is a theme that I've been getting a little too much of lately.

But maybe that's a good thing. It's a healthy dose of reality about what comes next. What comes...after.

An hour later, I'm walking into the back entrance of the station when I see Beaugard coming out of his office with the lieutenant and another investigator following behind him. The paper in my hand feels heavier because of the weight of the words printed on it, but I almost forget about it completely when my boss gives me a sudden chin dip.

I stand taller, waiting until the two people he was meeting with walk in the opposite direction.

As soon as I approach him, he says, “They’re doing it for Conklin.”

I don’t give a fuck who they’re doing it for as long as it’s getting done. “They’re going to move forward with the investigation?”

“We’re not taking lead,” he tells me quietly. “The feds have apparently had their eye on Del Rossi since his partner was put away. They know a hell of a lot more than we do. But the information Conklin put together is going to help fill in the pieces.”

“If they’ve been sitting on it for this long, what makes us believe they’re going to make a move? Because a cop died? Because they want to look good to the public?”

He pulls me into his office. “They’ve been trying to infiltrate Del Rossi for a while, Hawk. But you know this shit doesn’t unravel overnight. It takes time to build a case. I spoke to the lead detective assigned to it at the FBI, and they want us to tag along to execute the search warrant. Double the manpower means the quicker we get results. They’re not going to sit on this. Whatever the reason may be, you should be grateful it’s happening.”

I’ve been around long enough to know when people are telling you what you want to hear. I’m not keen on sitting around twiddling my thumbs until I get the phone call that it’s time.

My fingers slide over the paper in my hand, reminding me of what’s at stake.

I hold out the paper I spent twenty minutes filling out after getting home from the doctor. It’s the same form that Beaugard gave to me at the hospital.

Hesitantly, he takes it. “What is this?”

That day, it felt like he was giving up on me. I took it personally, feeling what little hope I had at a full recovery draining. I’d been in so much pain back then that I didn’t know how I was going to get through it. I refused the pills. Refused to open up. I’d wanted one thing.

To go back to work.

Not half-time.

Not as a goddamn paper pusher.

I wanted to be out there with everybody else, making sure the crime scenes were secure and the interviews were being done the right way. I wanted to be part of the action, not behind the scenes, watching everybody else get praised.

I needed that in my life.

It was all I had.

But now...

What comes after?

"You told me over a year ago that I could submit for medical retirement if I needed to. That there was no shame in that after what happened." Even though I can taste the shame on my tongue, I know this is the only way.

To leave on my choice.

Not anybody else's.

Beaugard's eyebrows shoot up as his gaze darts from me to the paper. "You told me that it would be a cold day in hell before you even considered this."

What does he expect? "The devil works at 99th Street, Beau. And I hear it's pretty fucking cold there."

He lowers the form. "This doesn't change your involvement in the case, Hawk. You know that, right?"

Doesn't it? "If the feds are taking over, they can call me as a witness. They'd be stupid not to when they find something."

"If," he corrects. "If they find something."

"They will."

His eyes narrow. "Do I want to know why you're so sure?"

"Because Conklin died for the cause. If he didn't think Volley was worth getting ahold of, then he wouldn't have gone that day. He wouldn't have compiled all of those papers and connected all the dots. But he did. And it always led back to Del Rossi."

Beaugard's lips press into a thin line.

I turn and head down the hall when he says, "I think there's something you should know."

"What?"

"The guys were called out to an unattended yesterday morning," he begins, tucking a hand into the front pocket of his slacks. "Alleged overdose."

What's new? "Someone I know?"

"Michael Welsh."

The name straightens my spine. "Why do you say 'alleged'?"

"Because they didn't find any new track marks on him, for one. We know he's a repeat heroin user. There hasn't been one time we've arrested him where we didn't find needles. For two, they found him dumped on the

side of an exit ramp. He suffered severe road rash and multiple broken bones.”

Somebody dumped his body from a moving vehicle. The question is, did they do it before or after he was dead? “How is it being treated?”

“We’re waiting on toxicology reports, but they’re expecting to find a cocktail of drugs. If I had to guess, someone needed to quiet him before he talked to us again. The day was coming, and they knew it.”

I don’t tell him about Georgia’s warning.

There’s no point now.

“Thanks for telling me.”

“If the feds do interview you and you tell them the truth, you do realize this could end in you getting a rip, right? They could decide that you intervening in this case damaged the investigation. They could take away your pension.”

Yeah, I kind of figured already.

“It’s for Conklin,” is all I tell him.

What do I have left to lose anyway?



MY FISTS RAP on the office door three times before tucking my hand into the front pocket of my jeans in wait. There isn’t any stirring behind the thick wood, or voices drowned out by the insulation of the old building.

Knocking again, I check my watch and glance out the entry window to see some late spring flurries in the sky.

It’s as I’m walking to the side exit that I hear a surprised, “Lincoln?”

Lincoln.

Not Mr. Danforth.

When I turn, I see Theresa Castro walking toward me with a bag draped over her shoulder and a coffee in her hands.

“Is everything all right?” she asks, stopping in front of me with concern pinching her expression.

It’s been twenty-four hours since Michael Welsh was found dead, and I put my notice in for work. After I left the station, I didn’t go to The Barrel or Marissa’s house or even my parents’ place to heed a distraction.

I went to see Conklin.

Because he was the one person I always confided in without feeling judged. We thought alike, which made our superiors nervous. They considered us loose cannons.

And they were right.

“If I needed you to sign the paperwork saying I was cleared to go back to work today, would you?”

The question arches her brows.

“It’s a simple yes or no answer, doc.”

She reaches into her bag and pulls out her keys, sidestepping me to undo the door leading directly from the hall to her office. “It’s never that easy, and you know it.”

Using her hip to push the door open, she stops at the threshold and studies me. “There are always other factors to take into account. You’ve made exceptional progress.”

There’s more she wants to say. “But?”

“But,” she adds with a soft smile, “there are things we still haven’t discussed. The root of the reason you’re here.”

I lean against the wall. “*You* were the one who wanted me to start from the beginning. That’s eight years of history to unravel.”

She lowers her bag to the table beside the door. “Do you know who Robert Penn Warner is?”

I shake my head.

Her responding chuckle is light. “He might have been one of the authors you made one of your friends write about in high school to avoid those dusty books you loathed so much.”

The quirky comment cocks my head. “Touché, doc. So he’s a writer.”

“A Pulitzer Prize winner too,” she adds, taking her glasses off and folding them to hold in her hand. “He once said that history can give us a full understanding of ourselves so that we can better face the future. I’m paraphrasing a little, of course, but you get the context.”

“So, the answer is no,” I say, not that it matters anymore.

“The answer,” she replies easily, “is that you haven’t finished telling me your story yet. Only then will you be ready to move forward in life.”

“For a better future?”

She nods. “For a better future.”

Wetting my lips, I look out the window as the snowflakes fill the air. “I put in my notice at work, doc.”

For once, Theresa Castro seems speechless.

“Conklin used to say that I should focus on the present because it was the only way to make sure I built a good future for me and Georgia,” I say, shaking my head. “But I thought I was doing that all along. I wanted to make sure she was free from her father’s control, and instead, I pushed her right back into his arms.”

“Everybody has the ability to choose,” she says after a moment of silence. “Each one of you—Conklin, Georgia, and yourself—made choices that led us to where we are today.”

“But what if we were lying to ourselves the entire time we made those choices to make ourselves feel better about them? What if I wasn’t really doing it for her but for me?”

Her words that night at the diner struck a chord that I’ve held on to a little too tightly.

“History isn’t history without the truth.”

“Which author said that?”

Her lips twitch. “Abraham Lincoln.” She looks up at the clock on her wall. “My next client isn’t supposed to be here for another hour and a half. I came in early to do some work. But if you’d like to talk...”

There are a lot of places I could be today.

But there’s a weight on my chest I need off.

I walk inside and let her close the door behind us. “I don’t know if I lied to myself about being in love with Georgia or if it was real. But you know what I realized the other day?”

“What?”

“In eight years, she never said she loved me.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Georgia / Three Years Ago

SHUFFLING THROUGH THE new box of inventory that Turning Pages got early this morning, I hum to the pop song playing softly in the background and organize the titles that I'm supposed to put on display by the lunch rush.

As I fold up the empty cardboard box and tuck it by the garbage I have to take out at closing, the front door opens and chimes the bell.

"Good morning," I greet, expecting to see one of our usual customers walk in. We get a lot of college students or bookworms like me who drag their boyfriends inside to browse for an hour even if they don't buy anything.

But the man standing at the door does *not* fit any of those roles. I know what expensive suits look like, and the person who's probably my father's age is wearing one tailored to fit him perfectly.

I'm not sure why, but a strange feeling fills my stomach as the gray-haired stranger steps in.

"This is a quaint little space, isn't it?" he says, turning to study the white shelves lining each wall that are full of books and themed trinkets.

My default smile stretches my lips up at the corners, but they waver as he takes another step toward me.

"I've been looking into investing in other businesses and have had my eye on this one for some time," he tells me, studying the space with distant interest. "It would be interesting to get into something so...niche."

Niche is a nice way to put it. "I don't know if Claire is planning to sell. She hasn't said anything to me about it."

A low chuckle comes from him. "For the right price, everybody is willing to give up what they love."

Something nudges my gut in warning. Clearing my throat, I casually walk behind the counter to put space between us. "What kind of business investments do you have already, if you don't mind me asking? Maybe I can pass along your interest to the owner."

I won't, but anything to play nice with the person who triggers alarm bells in my head.

"I dabble in everything. Strip clubs, restaurants, construction," he lists, his eyes finding mine again. "Speaking of which, I could use your help."

I blink. "*My help?*"

"It seems that your father has been struggling to deliver on certain terms of our agreement. And I'm having trouble getting ahold of him. If I didn't know better, I'd say he's dodging me."

"You know my father?"

The stranger walks over to the counter. "I know your whole family, Georgia. We've met a time or two, but you were young. I believe the last time was at your mother's funeral."

Eyes raking over him, I try putting a name to the face but come up blank. There's a familiarity about him that makes me uneasy, but I chalk it up to the similarities I see in my father.

Which makes sense.

"You knew my mother too?" I find myself asking, unsure of what to say.

The stranger smiles. It's not as calculated as I'm used to seeing, but easy. Non-forced. "I knew Isabella well. Her death was truly a tragedy that could have been avoided."

My ears perk up as something nudges my conscience. "Avoided?"

He doesn't enlighten me. "Perhaps you could help me by sending a message to your father. I'm sure all it will take for him to remember our deal is a little...encouragement."

The way he says "encouragement" makes me nervous. "I don't think you told me your name. Hard to pass along a message without one."

The smile on his face grows. "So much like your mother," he says with a soft sigh. "You know, it was unfortunate that she chose your father. Her life could have been so different if she'd decided otherwise like her family wanted."

If there was any other choice, I wasn't made aware of it. My parents were in love, and the loss of that is what destroyed my father. "I suppose that's what happens when you're in love," I answer, more to myself than to him.

He extends his hand out to me. "That's where I hope you differ from Isabella," he says, taking my hesitant hand and gripping it in a firm shake

that sends chills down my spine. “Tell your father that Stefan Mangino was serious about his promise. And make sure to ask him if he was serious too.”

He releases my limp palm with a smile that doesn’t seem as threatening as his words.

Grabbing a candy bar from the stack by the register, he sets it down in front of me. “I’ve got a bit of a sweet tooth,” he tells me, pulling out a one-hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and sliding it over to me. “Keep the change.”

Swallowing, I stare down at the money that feels dirty somehow. I force out a, “Thank you” with a smile that wavers unconvincingly.

Stefan Mangino gives me a once-over, but unlike when most men do it, it doesn’t feel slimy. He’s looking at me with nostalgia in his eyes.

“So much like your mother,” he says, the words uncharacteristically soft compared to his otherwise hardened features. Grabbing the candy bar, he tucks it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and pats it once. “It was lovely seeing you again, Georgia. I do hope we avoid repeating history again.”

As he turns and pushes the door open, he pauses after the bell chimes again. “And while you’re delivering messages, perhaps tell your husband that it’s best he stop burying his nose where it doesn’t belong, or it will end badly. I rather like working with law enforcement, so I’d hate to impact that relationship by doing something drastic.”

My eyes widen. I’ve never heard of this man in my life, but he knows plenty about me. Too much.

He doesn’t need me to say anything before dipping his chin once and leaving Turning Pages. The black car he gets into the back of has tinted windows that are too dark to see who’s driving. It drives away within seconds, disappearing when I walk over to the storefront window to try catching a license plate.

When I look down at the money left on the counter, I swallow at the crisp paper resting there like a silent taunt.

Then I glance at my car keys and make a rash decision that will probably get me into trouble.

But I hope Claire will understand.

Flipping over the OPEN sign and locking up behind me, I climb into my car parked in the alley between Turning Pages and the Indian restaurant and

make the familiar trek to the place I grew up with white knuckles gripping the steering wheel the entire time.



THE WOMAN WHO answers the door can't be much older than I am. Her flushed face and wide eyes are the exact opposite of Mrs. Ricci's calm demeanor, no matter what happens within these walls. Her replacement has clearly regretted accepting the position.

"Now is not the best time, miss," she says, her voice shaky as a loud voice booms from inside.

I flatten my hand against the door and push it open despite the warning. "They're expecting me," I lie, knowing she won't fight me on it.

She must not have been here long because it's obvious she has no idea who I am. Does she eavesdrop at my father's study door like the woman before her did? Or does she play by the rules?

If she were smart, it'd be the latter.

"Miss—"

"It's Georgia," I tell her, shutting the door behind me and watching her eyes widen more.

So, she has heard of me.

The yelling coming from my father's study gets louder, making the new help flinch. "I think it's best if you go make yourself busy somewhere else. Perhaps my old room. I'm sure it's collecting dust these days."

She's quick to nod, scurrying off as something crashes in the near distance.

Taking a deep breath, I start walking toward the office that swings open before I can stop in front of it.

It's Leani who stares wide-eyed at me with a red mark across her face that looks too familiar to the one Mrs. Ricci had endured for me.

"He hit you," I whisper.

Her hand snatches mine, her frail fingers tightening around my wrist with a grip I was unaware she had. "You should not be here."

She flinches when my father appears behind her, looking wild-eyed and red-faced. "It was only a matter of time before you came crawling back."

Is that what he thinks this is? “What did you do to Leani?”

His hand comes down on her shoulder. “That is no business of yours.”

“It is when you make it mine.” I take his hand and move it, pulling Leani toward me. “Did you raise your hand to Mom too?”

Leani sucks in a breath from behind me.

“No. She knew how to listen.”

“Funny,” I muse dryly. “That’s not what Stefan Mangino told me today.”

Color drains from his face.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I say, “So, maybe you and I should have a little chat since he came into *my* job for a message to *you*.”

Leani says something in Italian that sounds like a murmured prayer as she backs away from me and my father.

“If he came to see you,” my father says, his throat bobbing with a swallow, “then it’s the beginning of the end for us.”

“There is no ‘us,’” I correct him. “There is ‘you’ and whatever deal you apparently haven’t fulfilled with him. I want nothing to do with this. I never did.”

The laugh that bubbles out of him is cold. “I hate to break this to you, daughter, but you have everything to do with this.”

“How?” I doubt. “He said he knew Mom, which means he was in the picture long before I was born.”

His shoulders drop as he turns and walks into the room, giving me the first look at the destruction from his rampage. There are papers thrown everywhere. Some of them are torn, others are crumpled and covering almost every inch of the floor.

I follow him in, keeping the door open as he sits down behind his desk. The drawers are all open and disorganized, as if he was trying to find something important and left the remnants scattered when he gave up.

“Stefan Mangino has been punishing me from the moment your mother chose me over him,” he tells me in a somber tone as he leans back in his chair and stares absently at the mess surrounding us.

I blink slowly. “They were...together?”

He shakes his head. “It was arranged by their fathers. The Mangino family is very powerful in the city. Their influence was supposed to put the Gardino’s back on the map. But Isabella met me long before she ever met Stefan, and she made up her mind then and there. She chose me rather than

securing her father's spot on the Mangio business, and nobody has forgotten that."

Why hadn't I known that my mother was supposed to be in an arranged marriage?

Stefan's words echo in my head. *Do not let history repeat itself*. But wasn't that already too late? I'd chosen Lincoln. Not Luca.

"Why would you put me in the same position that she was in then?"

"There was no choice," he answers plainly, his palm running down his face. "I did what had to be done because Mangino inserted himself into every facet of my life to show me he could. Isabella rejected his family, and he was going to do everything he could to make sure I remembered who the real boss was. Your mother..." His voice thickens. "Your mother died because she refused to marry you off to his son. He showed up at your funeral to remind me what turning away the Mangino family means."

"So Luca is his son?"

"His son was killed years ago." He grabs a bottle of scotch and pours it into a tumbler before drinking half of it. "There are five families that run the city. Mangino's is the one in charge. His son was caught taking money from another family's business and was gunned down on the street for the millions of dollars he stole. Mangino needed a new male heir to take over the business."

"And that's Luca," I realize.

He finishes the glass and pours himself another one, holding on to it like a lifeline. "Antonio Carbone is one of his made men. His secondhand. If you and Luca Carbone marry, the alliance that your mother broke would be reinforced, and he would stay out of my business unless necessary. He *said* he would stay out of my business."

"But if I didn't?"

"If you didn't," he concludes, his empty eyes meeting mine, "then he would make sure I lost everything that is important to me."

He gestures around us, making me do another scope of the room. My eyes land on his desk, where white powder is smeared across the expensive wood. Is that what I think it is?

"He is running The Del Rossi Group into the ground one deal at a time," he says, scowling at the paperwork on the floor. "He's making a mockery of it. No local realtors want to take our bids for jobs because he's making the

sites into his own personal—” He stops himself, his jaw grinding as he holds back whatever he was going to say.

When his eyes find mine, they’re hollow.

Ghostly.

“He took away the only family I had left.”

My lips part. “I’m right here. It was you who pushed me away. *You* are the one who’s made my life hell since you told me to leave. When I obey, I get punished. When I don’t, I get punished. There is no winning in this world that you’ve created for us. It’s not the world I want to live in.”

The smallest smile curls his lips. “Your mother said the same thing.” The smile drops. “I had to remind her that we do not control the world. They do.”

I sit in the leather chair across from him. “So, how do we take it back?”

He leans forward, resting his arms on the edge of his desk. “I have done everything I can to ‘take it back,’ Georgia. I’ve learned that there are only three ways to do that. One of you must die, get arrested, or find a better item to trade.”

Everything in me says to walk away from this and let my father lie in the bed he made for himself. But my gut tells me it wouldn’t matter.

“Then we find a better item.”

“You are a Del Rossi,” he murmurs. “To him, there will never be a better item that would hurt me.”

Swallowing, I reach up and feel the necklace that hangs from my neck twenty-four hours a day. “I’m not a Del Rossi anymore.”

His head picks up, watching me fiddle with the custom piece of jewelry, then to the ring on my finger. “Much to your dismay, you will always be my daughter.”

There’s a nervous knock at the door, then a squeaky, “S-sir? Your lunch is ready.”

My father’s gaze drifts to the new help before waving her off rudely. When she disappears, he stands and flattens his wrinkled polo. “I should have never fired Ricci. The new help is useless in comparison. If I knew where she was, I would give her more money to clean up what little I have left.”

Find her? “What do you mean? I’m sure you have a number on file for her.”

He walks around his desk, stepping on discarded paper as he goes. “Your stepmother has reached out with no luck. Nobody has seen or heard from her.”

My stomach drops. “Did...something happen to her?”

He spares me a look. “If you’re wondering if *I* did something, the answer is no. But I would not put it past others. It is not *my* job to make people disappear, Georgia. Remember that.”

Swallowing, I watch as he disappears from the room before gathering myself to get up too.

When I pull my phone out of my pocket, I stare down at the audio recording on the screen.

Wetting my lips, I turn to see Leani standing there. Her eyes go to my phone. “It’s best you leave before he realizes what you’ve done.”

I meet her eyes. “Did you ever reach out to Shawn Hart?”

“Shawn Hart cannot help me.”

“You can leave.”

Her face is void of emotion. “I can never leave. Not like you. Not anymore.”

I may have never been close with the woman standing in front of me, but my heart squeezes when I see the defeat on her face.

Quietly, I say, “I will do everything in my power to help you.”

Doubt shadows her eyes.

“He may have connections,” I whisper, my eyes darting to the hallway. “But so do I. You reminded me of that the day you dropped off that wedding dress.”

Her throat bobs as she straightens her shoulders. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Georgia.”

I take her hand. “So is he.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Lincoln / Three Years Ago

A SANDWICH WRAPPED in plastic drops onto the desk where I'm finishing up discovery before my lieutenant loses his shit on all the backed-up paperwork I have to do.

"Marissa put extra Italian meat on for you," Conklin says, dragging a chair over to the end of the desk I'm working at and sitting down with his lunch. "She didn't do that for me."

"She loves me more."

He harrumphs. "Clearly."

Grinning, I save the report and print it out. "How did the relay go?"

With a mouthful of food, Conklin says, "It was painful, dude. I think I'd rather stick my dick in hot glue than have to deal with a hysterical woman crying the entire time in my back seat."

"There's nobody better fit for it, buddy."

He lowers his sandwich. "How the hell do you figure that?"

I clasp his shoulder. "You've got Cooper. Marissa said he spent the first week screaming his little head off when you brought him home from the hospital."

Groaning, he stretches his legs out. "It isn't the same when it's your own kid, Hawk. I can handle my son crying. I can comfort him. But a woman in handcuffs sobbing about how her life is over? Not so easy to deal with. There was snot coming out of her nose."

I cringe. "Nasty."

"What was I supposed to say to her? 'Hey, maybe if you hadn't robbed two different family members while you were high on meth, then you wouldn't be here'? I'm not a total dick."

Snorting, I shake my head as I unwrap my lunch. "Nah. That's my job."

He watches me take a bite before switching subjects. "Noticed you haven't been bringing in food like you used to."

Conklin has never been good at subtlety. “I get caught up with projects around the house and lose track of time. Forget to pack one.”

Unfortunately for me, he won’t let me get off that easy. “Georgia used to make them for you.”

“She’s busy too.”

One of his eyebrows pops up as if to ask me how strenuous her job at the bookstore really is.

I don’t let him press me on it. Or why I’ve been spending more time at their house when I’m not a big fan of screaming babies. Then I’d have to tell him that Georgia has been going to her father’s house every week despite me telling her not to, which usually leads to a fight that ends in her going anyway.

“Is this what you said you wanted to talk to me about last night?” I ask him. “Because if it is, I think I’d also rather stick my dick into hot glue.”

His lips waver into an amused smile. “No, asshole. That’s not it.” He sets down his sandwich and wipes his hands off on a napkin he pulled out of thin air. “It’s about Georgia, though. Well, her dad.”

My shoulders stiffen.

He stands up and goes over to his drawer in the filing cabinet, unlocking it with a key from his pocket and pulling out a notepad. When he drops down in the chair again, he opens to a page and turns it toward me. “Scores Tech.”

The mystery investor. “What about it?”

“I’ve been tracking their investments,” he says, eyeing me. “It’s better not to ask me how. Anyway, they recently put in two new bank transfers to local businesses.”

I grab the notebook and scan the page of notes before my eyes find the businesses at the bottom. “What the fuck?”

Carbone Realty.

Turning Pages.

Conklin lowers his voice. “Scores Tech also hasn’t sent any recent transfers to The Del Rossi Group. It’s the first time in years that not one transaction has gone to the company.”

“So they split ways?”

“Maybe.” He lifts a shoulder. “Or maybe there was a falling out. I don’t know, Hawk. What I do know is that whoever is behind Scores Tech is moving in on the Del Rossis.”

Does Georgia know who Scores Tech is? “We still don’t know who’s actually running it?”

“The addresses listed on their accounts are legitimate ones in both Atlanta and New York City, but Scores Tech isn’t headquartered at either location. There are other businesses at the locations that probably haven’t heard of the investor in their lives.”

Clicking my tongue, I lean back and scrub my jaw as I stare at the notes he’s been taking. “What is all this?” I ask, gesturing toward the arrows that connect to a few different names.

He points toward a name. “This is the bank that most of the transfers are originating from. It’s in the city.”

“Not Atlanta?”

“No.”

Blowing out a breath, I toss the notepad onto the desk. “Every time I think I’ve learned enough, I get more goddamn questions I want answered. How is somebody with that much money still under the radar while still investing in new businesses? And why a fucking bookstore? At least concrete and real estate all have a purpose. Turning Pages makes no sense.”

“You want my honest answer?”

“Is it going to piss me off?”

“Probably.”

Grumbling, I nod. “Hit me with it.”

“Turning Pages is a personal investment to this person,” he says, reaching across me to snatch his notepad back. He flips to the next page but doesn’t show it to me right away. “I don’t think it has to do with the business itself but who it’s attached to.”

When he passes me the paper again, I’m left staring at the same bank information that was on the last page. “What is this?”

“That’s the same bank that The Del Rossi Group uses to store their funds.”

Is he saying Scores Tech is run by Nikolas Del Rossi? “Why would he invest in his own company? Where would that money even come from if it’s from a different account with a fraudulent address?”

He grabs his water and uncaps it. “I don’t know if this is Del Rossi, man. But I think it’s someone who wants people to believe it is.”

“Why?”

“Because everybody needs a person to blame to save their own asses.”

I blink, stare down at the information, and realize he's probably right. What I don't know is how much of this Georgia might know now that she's rubbing elbows at the Del Rossi household like this entire marriage wasn't formed to get away from them.

"You okay?" Conklin asks.

"Yeah," I lie. "I'm fucking fantastic."

I stand up and brush crumbs from my button-down. "With skills like these, you should really consider applying for BCI. I don't know why you insist on staying on the road."

He grins up at me. "Because that's where the real action is. Plus, I think this uniform makes my ass look phenomenal."

If he's trying to lighten the mood, it's working. "Tell Riss I said thanks for lunch," I tell him, patting his back.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to talk to someone."



THE YOUNGER WOMAN at the desk is wearing her shirt like a second skin, and I wonder if that's part of the appeal here. "May I help you?" she asks, her lips painted an unnatural shade of pink as she smiles up at me.

"I was hoping to meet with someone about the house for sale on Striker Ave," I tell the bleach blond, who looks like a modern-day version of Barbie.

Her smile grows. "Of course! I have a few realtors in the office today. Let me go ahead and call—"

"Actually, I specifically want to work with Luca Carbone." I cut her off, flashing my best smile. "He and I go way back. I'm sure if you tell him that Lincoln Danforth is here to see him, he'll find the time in his busy schedule to fit me in."

Her hesitation is momentary before she picks up the phone. "If you know him..."

She clears her throat as the phone rings. "Mr. Carbone? It's Lyla at the front desk. I have a Lincoln Danforth here to speak with you about the

property on Striker.” Her top two teeth dig into her bottom lip as she listens to his reply before her eyes flick up to mine. “Yes, sir. Okay. Absolutely.”

When she puts the phone back onto the receiver, she paints a brighter smile on her face and stands to reveal an even tighter skirt than the shirt hugging her large breasts.

I have a feeling I know why Luca likes to keep her as the welcoming committee.

“This way,” she directs, gesturing toward the hallway. The swivel to her hips makes me wonder if her boss told her to put on a show. Everything about the woman in front of me seems fake. Forced.

When she turns in front of the door at the end of the hall, she reaches for the handle. “Mr. Carbone has a meeting in twenty minutes that’s very important, but he says he’ll see you.”

“Thank you, Lyla.”

Her eyes do a brief scan down the front of me before she clears her throat. “You’re welcome, Mr. Danforth.”

Opening the door, I step into a small conference room where Luca Carbone is seated at the end of a polished oak table with papers scattered around him. He doesn’t look up right away when I step in, but says, “Close the door, Detective. I’m sure this conversation doesn’t require an audience.”

I wink at Lyla, who flushes and steps away, and I wonder if she’s made it a habit to stand near the doors during meetings. “This is quite the establishment.”

He finishes writing down whatever he’s working on and finally lifts his gaze. “It was surprising to hear you, of all people, asking for me. Especially over such a...historical house.”

By historical, he means expensive. “What can I say. I’m full of surprises.”

His eyes glimmer. “I’m sure that’s true.”

I pull out the chair furthest from him and drop into it. “I figured your office would be a little nicer. Not on your father’s good side these days?”

He doesn’t take the bait like I hope he would. “I prefer working in here. There’s more space. The office I have in my father’s building is a little too stuffy for my taste and far too removed if he expects this place to run smoothly.”

I’ll give him this: he’s more hands-on than I expect him to be. The blueprints with notes in front of him back that up. “I figured you’d be like

most nepo babies and complain about a long day's work."

A thoughtful noise rises from him. "Would you like coffee?" he asks, unfazed by my taunts.

He walks over to the table in the corner with two coffee makers and the fixings to go in them. He grabs two cups and fills them each. "How do you like it?"

I watch him doctor one. "Black."

"Bitter. Seems oddly fitting."

I don't comment as he passes me the other cup and takes his seat again. "Your presence at the Del Rossi dinners has been...noticed," he says, grinning behind the cup he lifts to his lips.

Noticed. Not missed.

"I'm sure you cry yourself to sleep every time you don't get a chance to see my pretty face there, Carbone," I answer plainly.

His grin only spreads. "I like you, Detective."

"That's unfortunate."

"Indeed." He hums, setting his mug down and picking up the pen he'd discarded. "But let's talk about what you really came here for. We both know you can't afford another house, and I highly doubt you're looking to sell the one you just bought. You'd never get the same interest rate now that the market has neutralized, and you sure as hell wouldn't get your money back."

I'm not surprised he knows that information, but it still grates on my nerves, nonetheless. "It's sweet that you keep up on me. It makes me feel so special."

"Anything for somebody I go way back with," he muses dryly. "In fact —"

Before he can finish his thought, the cell beside him rings, and his nostrils flare at whatever name pops up on the screen.

"Father," he greets, evading my eyes. He listens, the gruff tone inaudible from where I sit and watch Luca. "Yes, I'm well aware of that. What do you think I've been working on for the past two weeks?"

His jaw tics at his father's reply.

"Nobody said that was coming up, or I would have shifted my focus. Maybe—" He's cut off, his eyes narrowing as he clenches the pen so tight that his fingers turn white.

Interesting.

“Yes, sir,” he grumbles. “I’ll get on that right away.”

When he ends the call, his teeth grind as he tosses the phone down on the polished table harder than necessary.

“My father says hello,” he tells me.

A lie.

“You don’t like being controlled,” I state, sipping the shitty coffee he poured me. It’s burnt with a strange aftertaste. Do they not know how to make a decent pot of coffee around here?

“There is not one human on this planet who does,” he counters, his grip loosening on the writing utensil. “What does your father do for a living?”

It’s a random question, but one I’m not opposed to answering. “He works in automotive. He’s planning to retire soon.”

Luca looks thoughtful. “And I’m assuming there was no pressure for you to follow in his footsteps.”

I shake my head.

“There’s where we differ.” He uses the pen to point between us. “I’m sure your father has always been supportive of whatever you chose to do, while mine has spent decades fine-tuning the mold he expects me to fill when he’s gone. I’m supposed to take over a multi-million-dollar company that he has barely stepped a foot in more than ten times over the past five years, yet he calls me to bark orders like he knows more than I do about the happenings. It’s insulting, really.”

He doesn’t want to take over the business. “If you had a choice, you would walk away?”

As calmly as he can, he leans forward with a smile that can only be described as haunted. “I would burn everything my father has touched to the ground, including this place.”

It’s not what I expect from him. Most people in his position would feed into the wealth and prestige that comes from being from a family like his. What makes him different?

“The reason why Georgia and I will always understand each other is because we are one of the same,” he says, dropping the pen. “Whether you like it or not, we were born into the same world and cut from the same cloth with the very same expectations. The difference is, she was brave enough to try getting out.”

“She *did*.”

Luca chuckles, the disbelieving sound flaring my nostrils. “If she truly escaped, then why are you here, Detective?”

I’m silent.

“You’re here,” he answers himself, “because she will never be free. Just as I never will. You can try to change that with your position in life, but it will never be enough because you are against players far bigger than the law you abide by.”

Even if that’s true, it doesn’t mean I’m willing to give up. “I suppose that’s another thing that makes us different. You’re willing to lie down and take it rather than make a stand. That’ll never be me, no matter the sacrifices.”

“But how much are you truly willing to sacrifice for your vigilante cause?” he questions curiously.

“Some sacrifices are worth it.”

“And some,” he argues, “aren’t. Guess you’ll have to figure out what you’re willing to risk.”

He’s not referring to a “what” at all.

Straightening in his seat, he smiles. “For the record, some jobs don’t need the law. They need an inside source willing to light the torch.”

Is that what he’s doing? “The problem with that is that you won’t be able to douse the fire from inside the house once it’s lit.”

“I never said I wanted to.”

We stare at one another silently.

There’s no way he’s willing to take himself down too. I don’t buy it.

“If there’s nothing else...” he says, standing.

“There is, actually.”

His eyebrows go up in wait.

“Scores Tech.”

He keeps a neutral face, but I see the smallest twitch in the corner of his mouth. “What about it?”

“It invested in this company recently.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

We both know that’s bullshit. “If you give me a name, I can have the fire station on standby when you light the torch,” I propose, staying seated as he slides a hand into his slacks pocket.

For a moment, I think he contemplates it.

But then he says, “A valiant effort,” he praises. “But not a successful one. I have a meeting to tend to, so I think it’s best you go.”

Standing, I don’t bother shaking his hand and exchanging pleasantries. Picking up the coffee I barely drank, I walk over to the door and pour it into the garbage. “You’ll probably be able to use this shit as lighter fluid. Tastes like jet fuel.”

He chuckles as I set the empty cup back on the table. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

“And Luca?” I meet his eyes. “I don’t know what’s going on between you and my wife, but she’s wearing *my* ring for a reason.”

His lips curl up, the amusement back on his face. “Friendship.” When I’m quiet, he casually adds, “That is what I’m offering your wife. It may not be gold or diamonds, but I’d fathom to guess it’s far more valuable to her right now.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Georgia / Three Years Ago

THE SOUND OF something sizzling perks my ears up as I walk toward the welcoming smell coming from the kitchen. Rubbing my eyes, I poke my head around the corner into the open pocket door to see Lincoln in front of the stove, flipping eggs in a pan.

When he sees me, his eyes rake down the borrowed shirt I fell asleep in. He doesn't compliment me like he usually does, but his eyes glimmer with unspoken appreciation when they land on my bare legs.

"Did you come to bed last night?" I ask, leaning my shoulder against the doorjamb and letting the shirt ride up my thighs.

He begins plating the food onto two plates, not paying any attention. "I couldn't sleep, so I went to the gym and did a little overtime at the station."

I frown. "All night?"

"I've got court coming up," is all he says.

Heaviness settles onto my lips, pulling them down further. When he turns to me, holding a plate of eggs, bacon, and sausage, I see the bags hugging the underside of his glassy eyes and realize he hasn't slept at all since yesterday morning when he left.

"Lincoln," I say, taking the plates and setting them on the counter. "You need to get some sleep. The last time you stayed up past twenty-four hours, you nearly crashed the truck when you were driving home."

"I want to have breakfast with my wife," he says. "Is that too much to ask?"

Biting on the inside of my cheek, I relent. "It smells delicious."

We sit at the cherry table he found online for six hundred dollars. His father helped him go to Long Island to pick it up. I'd offered to come. He said he and his father could handle it.

So, I stayed home.

It's five minutes of silverware scraping ceramic when he breaks the silence. "Can I ask you something?"

I look up at him. "Of course you can."

"Do you consider us friends?"

The question pinches my brows. "Friends?"

His chin dips.

It's an odd question. "You're my husband."

Jaw grinding, he sets his fork down on his plate and takes a deep breath.

"That isn't what I asked, Georgia."

His tone throws me off. "Are you upset right now?"

"I—" He cuts himself off, closing his eyes and rubbing them with the pads of his fingers as he blows out a breath. "If friendship is what you need, then I can be that for you."

There's a twinge of pain lingering in his tone that makes my appetite waver. "Where is this coming from, Lincoln?"

He pushes his plate away, as done with the short-lived meal as I am. "I want to be the person you go to when you need somebody. Not your father. Not Leani. Not Luca."

Lips parting, I inhale a quiet breath.

"I know you talk to them," he says, leaning back and meeting my eyes.

"I know you go see them when I'm at work."

I don't say anything.

His head tilts. "We used to be in this together."

"We still are."

"Are we?" he questions. "Because it seems to me like you regret the choice you made by marrying me."

Is that what he thinks? "That's not true."

"Then tell me why you're going behind my back to see the very people you ran away from."

Shoulders stiffening, I try not to let the accusatory words sink in too deep. After all, I'm not the only one who's going behind people's backs and lying about it. "I think you're forgetting something important, Lincoln."

His eyebrows go up.

"At the end of the day, it's your bed I fall asleep in," I point out, standing and pushing the chair back. Flashing him my hand, I add, "It's *your* ring I'm wearing. Not Luca's. It's you I said 'I do' to, not him. It's you that I went home with when I was engaged. It's you that I trusted enough to give me a life I wouldn't have gotten if my father got his way."

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing as his eyes briefly scan my ring before looking away.

If that's not enough for him, I don't know what will be. "Do you trust me at all?" I ask him.

My heart squeezes as his silence stretches.

I walk over to him, sit on his lap, and cup his face, forcing him to look me in the eye. "Do. You. Trust. Me?" I ask slower, feeling my hands shake with the anticipation of his answer.

But his remaining silence screams the truth.

The burn of tears prickles the backs of my eyes when he chooses not to say a word. "Then what more needs to be said?" I whisper defeatedly, starting to move off his lap.

He stops me.

His arm hooks around my waist and lifts me up and onto the edge of the table, then positions my legs so they're parted in front of him.

Slowly, his hands trail up my bare legs, lifting my shirt as he goes until I'm bare to him. His eyes flicker upward. "No panties this whole time?"

"You never came to bed last night."

A noise rises from his throat as he drags me to the very edge of the table and presses his mouth against the inside of my knee. "A missed opportunity," he murmurs against my skin, trailing his mouth north.

The tension coiling in my chest lowers to my stomach as he continues his path of kisses up my thigh, his broad shoulders keeping my thighs open to him.

I should stop him.

Make him talk to me.

Ask him what he needs to make this better.

But I don't.

My hands go to his hair, combing through the short strands as he moves my calves over each of his shoulders. "Please don't stop," I beg when his mouth stops short of where I want him.

I can feel him smile against me, his teeth biting down on the soft flesh at the apex of my thigh and earning him a sharp breath. He lifts his head to look at me through his lashes, his eyes darkened by lust.

"Your pussy is mine," he states.

Shakily, I nod. "Yours."

He grabs my hand and drags his finger along the rings resting there before dipping his head between my legs and showing me exactly how “his” I am.

Back arching, I moan out his name as his tongue swipes over the nerves that send shockwaves down my legs.

My free hand goes back to his head, gripping his hair as he works me skillfully to the brink. I lie back and submit myself to the feeling he creates with his lips and tongue, gasping when a finger joins in. Then two.

“Lincoln,” I rasp when a third enters me.

“You’re mine, Georgia. Say it.”

“I’m—” I suck in a breath when he hits my G-spot, and black dots cloud my vision.

He does it again.

And again.

And again.

“Say it,” he commands. “Tell me you’re mine.”

My stomach tightens, and a spark of warmth travels down my spine as I start to break.

“I’m yours,” I cry out, feeling the orgasm take over my body when his lips suck my clit into his mouth as he slams three fingers inside of me like I’d wanted his cock to last night.

The overwhelming feeling blinds me as I struggle for air, my body coming off the table as he rides out the wave of pleasure coursing through me.

When he lifts his head, I see myself glistening on his lips. “You better remind Luca Carbone of that the next time you see him. I’m sure it won’t be long.”

I gape as he stands and adjusts himself. He starts walking down the hall, leaving me spread and sated on the table. “I’m going to bed.”



A PLATE OF cookies gets shoved in front of my face, making me jerk back from the catalog I was searching. “Hannah?”

Lincoln's little sister sets the plate full of chocolate chip cookies in front of me. "They have extra chocolate in the middle," she says, sliding the plastic-wrapped platter closer to me. "I heard you have a sweet tooth like me."

The teenager leans against the counter with one expectant eyebrow popped up. Does she want me to eat one right now? "How did you get here?" I ask, peeling open the wrap and taking one of the cookies out. She's eyeing them, so I grab another one and pass it to her with a knowing smile. "A cookie tax."

Hannah grins, biting into the treat. "Mom had to go to one of the stores down the street, so I told her I'd drop off the cookies. Last time we went out, she wouldn't stop talking to some old woman she ran into. I was bored out of my mind."

"So you decided to make a cookie delivery?"

"It's your birthday tomorrow," is all she says.

My lips twitch. "It is," I murmur.

It's basically the anniversary of the night Lincoln and I met. He hasn't said anything about it, so I haven't either. Leani already tried making plans to host a party at their house, but I turned it down, knowing it would be another fight in the making with the man I married. With good reason, I guess. There's no doubt in my mind that the people on the guest list would cause nothing but trouble.

Trying not to think about Lincoln's parting words after he opened my legs on the breakfast table, I clear my throat. "Thank you, Hannah. This is very thoughtful."

She finishes her cookie and brushes her hands off. "Are you and my brother going to get divorced?"

My eyes widen at the question. "What?"

"I heard my mom and dad talking about it. They said Lincoln spends a lot of time there now because something is wrong at home. He's been coming over to fix random things at the house that aren't even broken. He even offered to help me paint my room."

I frown, and simultaneously, Hannah and I say, "He hates painting."

She nods. "Exactly. So, are you breaking up or something?"

"Hannah..." What am I supposed to tell her? "No, we're not breaking up. Things have been a little tough lately, that's all."

"So fix whatever the problem is."

I force a smile. "I wish it were that easy."

"What's so hard about it?"

I'm not even going to try to explain the dynamic I have with my family. "It's complicated. But everything will be okay."

My wavering smile doesn't seem to appease the teenager. "My parents like you. And they don't like seeing either of you sad. Especially Lincoln. I'm sure your parents wouldn't want to see you that way either."

Something tugs on my heart. I'm fairly certain my father would be happy to see that. Then he'd be proven right about the life I've chosen for myself.

But I don't tell Hannah that.

I swallow the truth.

Like always.

"For the record," I tell her, "I don't want Lincoln to be sad either."

"Good." She nods approval. "Me neither."

I gesture toward the cookies. "Thank you for these. Tell your mother I appreciate them."

She stuffs her hands in her pockets and glances at the door for a minute before looking back at me. "If it makes you feel better, I told Lincoln to pull his head out of his butt and make things better. And our parents said that if he loves you, he should try to fix things before they're actually broken."

All I do is stare at her.

Hannah shrugs. "Hopefully, he listens."

Absentmindedly, I slowly move my head up and down. "Yeah," I murmur. "Hopefully."

After she leaves, I pull out my phone to call him, but I'm distracted by the voicemail left from the number I was told not to save.

When I click on the message, I hold it to my ear and feel the subtle rise in my heartbeat. "This is Jack Powell returning your call. I spoke to Shawn Hart, and I think I know how we can help you. But we'll need more recordings. Give me a call back when you can."

I delete the message and rub my clammy palms along my leggings. The feeling of betrayal weighs heavily on my shoulders, but I try brushing it off as I dial the number and listen to it ring.

That night when I get home from work, I'm surprised when I see Lincoln's truck parked in the driveway. It's enough to help me forget about the conversation that's clung to my conscience all day.

When I walk upstairs and turn into the open dining room, I see Lincoln sitting on the floor with white pieces of wood scattered in piles around him and a screwdriver in his hand.

"I thought you took that overtime shift," is how I greet him.

He looks up from the instructions on the floor. "I told them I couldn't make it." Setting the tool down, he pats the spot beside him. "Come here."

Hesitantly, I set my things down on the counter and take the seat beside him on the carpet. That's when I realize what he's building.

"Bookshelves," I whisper, touching the wood.

"For your birthday."

My eyes dart to his.

"I didn't forget."

Guilt creeps up my chest.

He doesn't let me talk. "We met four years ago today," he notes, brushing a dark piece of hair behind my ear. "I know I'm a lot, but it's because I want to give you a life you're happy with. I may not be able to give you a bookstore, but I can build a few shelves."

I smile. "I don't want a bookstore, Lincoln."

He meets my eyes.

"I just want my husband."

His hand cups my cheek. "You have me, Peaches. Even on the days you might not think it."

Yours, I told him only days ago.

"The same applies to you, you know." I slide onto his lap and wrap my arms around his neck. "I don't want to fight. I don't want you to be mad."

He presses his lips against mine. "Tell me what you want," he says, his mouth brushing mine with each syllable.

All I say is, "For you to trust me."

For a moment, his eyebrows pinch.

My whispered, "Please," has his throat bobbing.

But eventually, he says, "Okay."

I don't know if he means it though.

Hours later, when he's naked and asleep in bed, I crawl out of it and check my phone.

Unknown: Meet me tomorrow at 12

Unknown: You know where

I look back at my sleeping husband.
And then I delete the texts.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Lincoln / Present

I KNOW A fed when I see one, and the clean-shaven man with a military haircut wreaks of the FBI. Beaugard said he's been having regular meetings with the lead detective on the case for the past month to go over what they already had, but I never pressed for details because I knew damn well he wasn't going to give them to me. I'd rather be ignorant than pissed.

"Are you Lincoln Danforth?" the fed asks, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket to flash me his badge.

"That's what the name plaque says," I answer, picking up the nameplate that Conklin had given me when I got my own office and setting it into the box I've been packing all morning.

"I'm Special Agent Powell. I was assigned to the Del Rossi case. Is now a good time to talk?" He watches as I open the desk drawers and begin emptying them as well. "They said you were approved for early retirement, so I figured I would catch you while you were here."

I stop packing and lean back in my office chair. "Well, you got me. Big fan of Glen's work by the way. Real up and coming star. Family of yours?"

He deadpans at the mention of the actor. "Original."

I chuckle. "What can I do for you, Agent Powell?"

He looks fresh-faced. New. And I recognize the determination in his eyes to prove himself because it was the same look I had. He walks into the room and studies the bare walls. "Beaugard mentioned that you applied for medical retirement because of the injuries you sustained over last year's shooting. I'm sorry to hear."

The cordial condolence isn't genuine as he picks up a piece of scrap paper and studies the random scribbles on it that I used to get a pen working earlier. "Thanks. But I highly doubt you came here to talk to me about my retirement."

A small smile tilts his lips. "You're right." He faces me, giving me a once-over to size me up. "I remember hearing about the shooting. When the

news was reporting one officer down and another in critical condition, the state was up in arms. Everybody thought there would be two funerals to attend.”

My jaw tics. “Did you attend Conklin’s service?”

He shakes his head. “Unfortunately, I was unable. Back before I got promoted to the federal bureau, I’d been to a few services. Never been able to listen to bagpipes the same way again.”

They’re hauntingly beautiful during the processions, I’ll give him that.

“I’m not going to waste your time,” he says, cutting to the chase. “We’ve been working with a lot of people to take down the main players in the city, and Nikolas Del Rossi has been on the list for a very long time.”

Is that his way of confirming my suspicions? “And you’ve never gotten this far until now?”

The jab doesn’t faze him. “We’ve had a witness willing to testify for years, but we’ve been working our asses off to collect the evidence to ensure that the charges will stick. It takes more than one elderly woman’s testimony to make things happen.”

An elderly woman? “Who’s the witness?”

“A former employee,” is all he says. “It’s interesting that all of a sudden, we’ve got a detective who’s able to put all the right puzzle pieces together, thanks to his dead partner.”

I say nothing. It’s better than reacting to his accusation left unspoken between the lines.

“What I find strange is that the very same detective used to be married to the daughter of the man we’re looking to charge federally,” he concludes. “You want to try explaining that?”

No. “Matt Conklin was always good at finding patterns between people. He knew that the drugs coming into our jurisdiction were tied to dealers in the city. He was thorough in his investigation. Kept notes. Laid it out. If it weren’t for him, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

He doesn’t comment on that. “And I suppose that your relationship with Georgia Del Rossi was never brought up by your former partner, was it? Because if I were him, I would be asking some important questions. Like what you know about her father. Or what she does.”

I know what he’s trying to do, and it’s not going to work. “Matt never asked me about Nikolas Del Rossi. He knew that my ex-wife was estranged

from her family, but he didn't know the reasons and didn't pry into business that wasn't his to know. He respected my privacy."

"I find that hard to believe."

"That's your problem then," I reply easily. Then I tell him the only truth he needs to know. "I had no idea who Georgia Del Rossi was when I met her. So, if that's your next question, you can scratch it off the list."

He watches me with humor dancing in his eyes. "When did you realize who she was? More importantly, who her father was?"

Leaning my elbows on the edge of the desk, I offer him my best smile. "When a bullet tore through my body, and another killed one of my closest friends. That's when I realized who her father was. And if you're asking me this to try to paint me as one of the bad guys who knew something and didn't say anything, then it's obvious you're on the wrong side."

"I don't think you're one of the bad guys," he says after a long moment of silence. "I've met my fair share of crooked cops, Danforth. You're not one of them. You are, however, a very convincing liar."

If he expects a response, he's not getting one.

"If it were up to me," he adds, "I would have your pension taken away and make sure you don't get a dime from your retirement. Because I highly doubt one of your closest friends was investigating your former father-in-law without getting a little encouragement from you or feeding you the information as he acquired it. Fortunately for you, I'm one of the few people who are willing to question that."

"Don't you think you have bigger fish to fry than someone you *think* knows more than they should?" I question. "If you've been working on this case for as long as you say, then you've been waiting for a break like this one. As far as I'm concerned, you should be thanking Matt Conklin for his contributions. His death is going to lead to one of the biggest breaks you're ever going to get in your career. You'll get notoriety when this goes public."

He seems to contemplate that, his hands sliding into the pockets of his slacks. "And what do you get?"

I lift my bad shoulder. "I'll get to know that the person responsible for my partner's death is locked up." I lean back in the chair, crossing my arms over my chest. "You can think all you want, Powell. Put me on the stand when the day comes. Question me. Strip me of everything I've worked hard for if you think that's what I deserve. But I don't want this to turn away

from putting away Conklin's killer. If you want to fuck me over, fine. Do it *after* you get Del Rossi behind bars."

Powell's expression is unreadable. Under different circumstances, I'd probably befriend the guy. He's got one hell of a gut on him, and he knows what to look for. But I don't want him trying to spin this into something it isn't.

Not until the case is closed for good.

I leave him with one last truth. "The only thing I'm guilty of is falling in love with the wrong girl. So, if that's all you have to say, then you should probably go. I'm sure you have a lot of work cut out for you."

Half his lips curve upward at my dismissal. "I can see why everybody likes you. And lucky for you, I want the notoriety more than I want the trouble trying to prove I'm right about you."

If he expects some sort of gratitude, he's not going to get it from me. "Do you think the witness will be enough to put him away?"

Powell stops at the door. "No, I don't."

My eyebrows go up.

"But," he adds with a smirk when he sees my expression. "We do have audio recordings from another source with conversations that are incredibly damning to Nikolas Del Rossi."

Recordings? "Somebody infiltrated The Del Rossi Group?"

He doesn't confirm or deny. "Tomorrow morning, we're going to execute a search warrant at Nikolas's business. We believe there are files there that will incriminate him and others in a similar scheme that his former partner was involved in. With the amount of information we have, I have no doubt he'll be going away for a very long time."

Who could have recorded conversations with him that would be damning enough to send him away?

Powell nods toward the box on my desk. "I'll let you get back to packing. Good luck in retirement, Detective. Hopefully, you can stay out of trouble."

All I do is smile tightly at him as he disappears from my office.



KNIGHT SETS A six-pack of Corona down on the kitchen counter.

“Wow,” I muse. “Am I dying? I don’t know the last time anyone bought me beer.”

He snorts. “You better not be, jackass, or else you’ll ruin my whole proposition.”

My brows shoot up. “I’m not into dudes, Knight. Not sure what kind of proposition you came here to get me drunk for.”

Flipping me off, he steals one of the beers and cracks it open with the corner of his phone case. He leans against the opposite counter, crossing one ankle over the other. “Hannah told me you were done with the state.”

Hannah? “Since when do you talk to my *little* sister?”

“Don’t be like that. We saw each other in passing the other day and she brought it up.” He pauses only to sip his beer. “I’ll forgive you for not bringing it up to me if you consider my offer.”

“And what offer is that?”

“To join my team.”

I should have known. “Knight—”

“You have the skill set,” he points out. “You know how to be stealthy. You know how to trail. You’ve done undercover work before. You’d be the perfect person for the job.”

But a private investigator? “I don’t know, dude. Getting hired to follow cheating spouses doesn’t sound that interesting to me.”

“We do more than that.”

I eye him skeptically.

He relents, humor hidden behind his beer bottle. “Okay, we do a lot of that shit. But they aren’t the only calls we get. We recently got a case from the family of a murder victim. They don’t think the police are doing their job, so they want us to see what we can find that they aren’t.”

“Is that supposed to entice me?”

Knight shrugs. “I’m just saying that there are things you could help us with. My men don’t have the same training as you. And now that you’re free—”

“I still have another month before I’m done.”

He doesn’t argue with me about it. “Look, you don’t have to say yes. Just think about it. I know you, Hawk. You’ll be bored a week after you’re officially done. Then you’ll be driving everybody crazy looking for shit to

do. This might not pay as well as your current gig, but the money is decent, and it's better than sitting at home brooding alone."

"I don't brood."

Knight has the audacity to snort. "Whatever you say, man."

I down half my beer and wipe my mouth off with the back of my hand. "How did you and my sister even get on the topic of me anyway?"

His face twists like he's trying to fight flinching, which makes me think I won't like the answer. He neutralizes his face and says, "I asked how you were, and she mentioned your retirement." I have a feeling that wasn't the only thing that was said, but he doesn't let me question it before he speaks up. "If you make up your mind, you know where to find me."

He tosses his empty beer into the garbage and starts heading to the door.

"Hiring you guys to follow Georgia was what put the final nail in the coffin," I say. "When she found out..."

I'll never forget the look on her face.

The betrayal.

"You were right. I shouldn't have done it."

Knight turns to me. "For what it's worth, I never thought it would end like that. If I were in your shoes, I'd want answers too. And she wasn't sharing them."

All I do is nod once.

"Lincoln..." He stops himself, sighing. "You know how we'd found some shit when you told us to stop trailing her?"

A heavy weight settles in the bottom of my stomach. "I told you I didn't want to know."

"Is that still true?"

I'm hesitant to respond because...Is it? And what did he know that he's held on to this whole time?

"Let me know if you change your mind," is all he says, disappearing down the stairs.

I'm tempted to go after him and ask what he knows, but something holds me back.

Once upon a time, Georgia had asked me to trust her. And I didn't do that. Maybe if I had, things would be different.

So, I finish my beer, discard the bottle, and think about what comes next.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Lincoln / Present

THREE DAYS AFTER the feds stormed the Del Rossi Group, Nikolas's face is plastered on the front of every newspaper in Middle Point. The red-faced shot of the business mogul being escorted off his property by two police officers makes me want to call Beaugard and ask for the details, but the last time I got ahold of him, he'd told me to go get a life.

I hadn't taken it personally.

"Large black coffee, no milk or sugar," the woman behind the counter calls out.

As I grab it, my phone starts ringing. When I glance down at the screen, my brows pinch when I see Estep's name. "Danforth," I greet, nudging the front door open with my hip to go outside.

"It's Jon Estep over at the DA's office."

"What can I do for you, Jon?"

He clears his throat. "This is a courtesy call. I thought you'd like to know that Jakob Volley was found dead in his cell early this morning."

I stop in my tracks in the middle of the sidewalk. "How?"

"He allegedly hung himself using the sheets from his bed," he answers. "There have been multiple incidents since you met with him that have required infirmary visits, stitches, and overnight stays. My best guess is that he'd had enough."

I don't buy that for a second. What was it he said to me? Something about us both knowing he wasn't getting out of there? "So, you think he committed suicide?"

What he says next makes me clench my coffee cup a little tighter than necessary. "It's not my position to think anything, Mr. Danforth. I was simply his attorney."

"So that's it? There's not going to be an investigation? He's just gone when things happen to start heating up with Del Rossi?"

Estep sighs heavily. “Even if I thought his death was under suspicious circumstances, I have no power to do anything about it. Frankly, Rikers Island has already seen nineteen deaths this year. It’s not uncommon for the prisoners to decide they don’t want to continue their sentence, knowing they’ll never get out.”

That’s the politician’s way of saying his death is going to be lumped into the others. The magic number twenty. Unfortunate, but unimportant.

“If Volley was having such a hard time there, why didn’t you try harder to get him moved when I suggested it?” I question. I’d told him we could try getting him transferred if he worked with us, but Estep barely batted an eyelash at the suggestion.

“Do you know how much time that takes?” he counters in exasperation. “That requires a lot of strings to a lot of different connections. And if you’d like me to be blunt, there are some people I’m not willing to waste those favors on. A cop killer is one.”

I can appreciate his honesty, even if I think it’s a little fucked up. But what do I expect? There isn’t one defense attorney that I know who would answer differently. “He could have helped build something big for you, Estep.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I guess we’ll never know,” is his answer. It’s detached. Unaffected.

And I get it. I’ve been the same since I started this job. “I guess not.”

He ends the call, leaving me staring at the blank screen. I go through my contacts to find Beaugard’s name, but he doesn’t pick up.

As I walk toward the building for my six o’clock appointment, I get a text message back from my former boss.

Beaugard: What did I tell you about getting a life?

Me: Hard to do when the body toll goes up

Beaugard: That’s not on you

Me: That’s what they said about Conklin

Bubbles appear and disappear at the bottom of the screen. I stop outside the door of the psychotherapist’s entrance and wait for his reply. He’s not one to beat around the bush or offer me some Pinterest-level advice.

Beaugard: We got the call this morning

Me: And?

Beaugard: Volley already had his trial

Beaugard: You can't get justice for everyone

That's not what I want for Volley. It's because of him that Conklin is dead. But if he was killed so he didn't talk, then it could risk the case being built against Del Rossi.

Me: Just tell me one thing. Is there enough to get Del Rossi put away without him?

Beaugard: Get a life, Hawk

It's not the answer I'm looking for, but at least the next hour will preoccupy my mind while I wait for him to tell me what he knows.

The good doctor is waiting for me when I arrive, holding the door open as soon as I walk into the sitting area.

When I step into her office, the newspaper on her desk catches me off guard. It's open to the continued story of the headline.

Local Business Owner Under FBI Investigation.

The sound of the door closing behind her has me glancing over my shoulder. She steps beside me, following my gaze back to the paper. "It's everywhere," she says sheepishly.

She subtly walks over to her desk and closes the paper before grabbing the notepad and pen from beside it.

"Taking notes?" I tease.

Color creeps into her cheeks. "I was curious."

"Nothing illegal about that."

We walk over to our usual seats. She doesn't sit until I do, so I sink into the cushions and stretch my legs out. "Anything else you're curious about?"

She sets the notepad on her lap. "There are a lot of things, but I've accepted some of those I may never know."

"Why is that?"

"Because everybody deserves to have a secret or two," she answers easily, a warm smile on her face. "I'll never know everything about you. That's life."

I'm tempted to ask what it is she wants to know, but I don't. "I found out today that the man who shot me is dead."

The sudden turn of conversation seems to startle her.

Before she can ask how that makes me feel, I offer her the information. “I’m not sad about it, but I’m also not a total monster. He pulled the trigger, but he didn’t make the call. He was as much a part of the chess game as we were.”

The good doctor wets her lips before leaning back in her chair and glancing down at her notes. “You said once that Georgia might as well have handed him the gun. What exactly did you mean by that?”

One day, I wonder if I’ll ever be able to see what she said about me. “The short answer is that the lies we told ourselves caught up to us until we couldn’t keep lying anymore.”

“And the long answer?”

Taking a deep breath, my eyes go back to the paper she bought that’s laying face down on her desk. “I guess it’s time,” I murmur.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Lincoln / Two Years Ago

K_{NIGHT} STARES AT the cash I extend to him, then lifts his skeptical eyes up. “Hawk, it’s one thing to have me check into Georgia’s father, but this...”

I press the cash into his chest, forcing him to take it before the bills can flutter to the ground. “I’m not paying you to give me your opinion. I need facts. And it’s obvious that there are some things Georgia is holding back. She’s been getting text messages and phone calls to an untraceable phone, and I need to know who it is.”

“Do you think she’s cheating?”

The question is a punch to the gut. One I’ve asked myself when I wondered if I should reach out to Knight about this. “No, I don’t. But I think whoever is reaching out to her is associated with her father, and that’s why she’s not telling me.”

His expression doesn’t change. “What are you going to do once you have the information?”

“I guess that’ll depend on what the information is,” I answer. “So, can you do it? You said you got a guy who can manage some digging. I can’t keep asking my friends at work to help me with this. I need an outside source to tell me who’s on the other end of that phone.”

He looks down at the call log with the number on the top of the paper. “If this is more than you think it is, it can be a hard wake-up call. Do you want to risk that? I’ve had people regret ever asking me to help them because of the shit my guys have dug up.”

“I can handle it.”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I still think you should talk to her about this first. If she finds out—”

“If she finds out, it’ll be my problem,” I cut him off. “Are you going to do this for me or not?”

There’s a moment of hesitation before he dips his head and tucks the money in his pocket. “I’ll see what we can find.”

I dip my head. “Thank you.”

Knight scans over the call history that I requested from my phone provider and lowers the paper onto his desk. “I’m only doing this because your gut is usually never wrong. I just hope it’s worth it to you. Because I’ve seen people torn apart over the shit they’ve asked me to find.”

“Then that’ll be my mess to clean up.”

His silence says a lot as he leans back in his chair. When I walk out of his building, there’s a twinge of doubt in the back of my mind that nips at my conscience.

I want you to trust me.

I remind myself that trust works two ways.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Georgia / Two Years Ago

LEANI'S VOICE WAS shaky when she called to tell me to come over, leaving a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach as I drove up the long, windy driveway. As much as I wish I didn't care about the frail woman, I know she has very few people in her corner. I know how that isolation feels, so I'm willing to be the bigger person despite the consequences.

Fingers tighten around the steering wheel when I see an unfamiliar car parked next to my father's; I take a deep breath as I stop beside it.

"Be the bigger person," I remind myself, stepping out of the car to see the front door cracked open and Leani standing there with a wary expression on her face.

As I walk up to her, I ask, "Whose car is—"

"Shh." She cuts me off, pulling me inside and quietly closing the door. When she turns to me, I gape at her discolored face.

"Oh my God," I whisper, studying the blues and purples that makeup clearly couldn't cover.

Leani guides us into the kitchen. "It doesn't matter," is the first thing she tells me.

I shake my head, swallowing the shock down when I get a better look at her in the light. "How can this not matter? Look at you, Leani!"

She won't meet my eyes for the longest moment, but when she does, there's something I've never seen in them before. Defiance. "What matters is ending this."

Ending what? "What are you—"

"He's with his lawyer." She gestures toward the study. "They've been having a lot of meetings lately, mostly away. But his lawyer showed up this morning looking intimidated, and Nikolas hasn't been right since."

What does this have to do with me? "Leani, why am I here? Why are *you* here? If he's done this before, why stay?"

“For the same reason you came back,” she tells me firmly, grabbing my hand. “Because we’re trying to protect the people we care about. I have sacrificed so much, been *punished* for so much. It all needs to end. The lies. The betrayal. Everything.”

Her grip is stronger than I expect, causing me to wince when her nails dig in until crescent indents are left behind. “I have given up my life for love, and it was a love I was never able to have.”

All I can do is blink at her. Did she actually love my father?

“So what I want to know is this. How much are *you* willing to sacrifice for love?”

For love.

Lincoln pops into my mind, and I know she knows she has me.

“What did you call me here for?” I ask, shoulders squaring at whatever idea she’s been cooking.

“I need you to listen very closely to me.”

Nerves buzz under my skin as the stretch of silence lasts longer than I’d like it to.

“I had an affair with William Murphy shortly after he became partners with your father. I was in love. He always made me feel appreciated, and I felt like I mattered in a world where us women rarely are. We’d both been having some troubles in our marriage that were caused by the stress of MDR’s rapid growth, and things went too far. Your father was never going to love me the way he loved your mother, but he hated when anybody had control over something he considered his. And that is what I was. His.”

She takes a deep breath and winces, holding her side and making me wonder if she has more injuries than I can see. “William Murphy treated me like a person rather than a pawn, and I will be forever grateful for what he has shown me. But I don’t want to keep being punished for falling in love. Your father is losing control because he was driven by greed and money, and now he’s drowning in the consequences of his actions.”

Leani looks away from me.

“You loved William.”

Her eyes sadden. “I did.”

It’s more than sadness. There’s grief. “Did my father do something to separate you two?”

A fresh glaze settles into her eyes. “He made a deal with the devil,” she whispers, shedding one tear and hastily swiping it away.

“Stefan Mangino.”

She dips her head. “Stefan has intervened in your father’s life since your mother turned away the Mangino family. Your father thought if he could strike a deal with him, that they would be even. William—” Her voice breaks. “William was in over his head with the people he was working with. I told him to stop, but he couldn’t. He was becoming a risk, and Nikolas knew it was only a matter of time before he was caught. So, he set him up in the hope of proving to Mangino that he was loyal. He wanted William out of the picture and Stefan Mangino to let go of the vendetta he had against him.”

But he didn’t. “So my father got his partner locked up, the business in his name, and Stefan Mangino became an investor.”

Her throat bobs. “He thought he could show Mangino that they were on the same side. That they didn’t have to be enemies. But Mangino would never forget what your mother did. So he went back on his promise to Nikolas and started making the business beneficial to him and his... associates.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

She reaches into my bag and pulls out the phone to reveal the recording in process. “I’m telling you this because you have gotten good at playing the role of the dutiful daughter. But you are like me, Georgia. You are done wondering when the punishment will end.”

When she releases my hand, I hit the red button that stops recording audio. “Why tell me this when he’s here and put us both at risk? Why not go to the police yourself and tell them what you know?”

When she lifts her shirt, I suck in a breath when I see the large bruise covering half of her torso. “Because I won’t survive any more of his wrath. You have far more officers on your side than I do on mine.”

Lowering her shirt, she takes my hand in a softer grip. “I can’t have children of my own,” she tells me, her lips wavering. “And I’ve taken that frustration out on you when it wasn’t deserved. But you are better than your father. Better than me. You have something worth living for. Something to lose. Do something with it.”

Something crashes in the study, making both of us flinch as voices begin raising.

My eyes dart to her, dipping to her torso where the bruises are hiding. “Why is he speaking to his lawyer anyway?”

She swallows. “He wants to void the contract with Mangino before he can run the business into the ground. He needs his lawyer to figure out how.”

If Stefan Mangino is as powerful as he seems, then no lawyer would be able to void a contract like that.

As if she knows what I’m thinking, she murmurs, “The devil never takes back a deal without a sacrifice. And I fear that one of us may be the lamb brought to slaughter.”

“So, what do you propose?”

The study door opens, and Leani pulls me off to the side and out of sight when a man with a red, round face scurries down the hallway.

As he opens the door, he spots where we’re hiding and freezes. His eyes widen when he sees me before they dart behind him.

In a voice low enough for only us to hear, he says, “If you were smart, you would get out while you can.”

He says that to me, not Leani.

“You can’t help him,” I state.

The stranger scoffs. “Nobody can. I wish I’d never accepted his business in the first place. But a mad man’s logic is a sane person’s confusion.”

What does that mean?

He darts out the door before I can ask.

Leani tugs me into the kitchen. “Evan Maloney. That’s his lawyer who’s done very sketchy work for your father. Nikolas has worked with him on deals that the Coleman legal team didn’t want to touch. And I know for a fact that the business Maloney and Nikolas have done is hardly the legal kind.”

My brows pinch. “Then what—”

A door slams, and footsteps creak along the floorboards of the hallway.

Leani presses a finger to her lips to silence me, her eyes warily moving away from the archway as my father beelines for the front door.

When he slams it closed behind him, she closes her eyes and releases a shaky breath.

“I don’t know what you plan to do with those recordings, but you should know that everything comes with a price. But no matter what, you’ll always wind up paying something for freedom.”

“What’s the price you’ve paid?”

“I will never be free, Georgia. But I will accept any form of peace I can get, even if it takes everything away from me.”



CLENCHING AND UNCLENCHING my fists, I walk through the front door of the high-rise and go over to the directory by the elevators.

“Can I help you with something?” the woman behind the desk asks with a smile.

I turn around and offer her a sheepish look. “I was told that Luca Carbone was here today. Do you know what floor he’s working on?”

Her eyes widen a fraction. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Oh. Well, no—”

“Mr. Carbone and his son are very busy.” She cuts me off. “I’m afraid nobody sees him without an appointment.”

I can tell there’s no room to convince her, but before I can even try, the elevator door opens, and she quickly stands. “Mr. Carbone, I was just—”

The second Luca sees me, he looks over his shoulder at the elevator where a group of men are talking as they begin entering the lobby, then grabs my arm and pulls me into the nearest room.

When we’re closed into what looks like a cleaning closet, he flicks the lock. “What are you *doing* here?”

His tone has me standing straighter, which puts me closer to his six-foot height. “I need help.”

“Then why don’t you ask the detective?”

I glance at the door, where voices are gathering by the front entrance. “Because you know this world better than I do, which means you’re the only one who can help me with what I need.”

The way he looks down at me doesn’t make me uncomfortable, but it does make me wonder what’s going through his mind. There’s too much interest lingering, and it reminds me of what Lincoln said that day. “You have my attention.”

Wetting my lips, I try taking a step back to put as much distance as possible between us. It’s hard to do in the tiny space, and I bump into a

bucket and broom. Luca catches it before it topples over, his quick reflexes bringing us chest to chest as he slowly puts it back where it was.

Swallowing, I take a deep breath. "Can you please move?"

That grin returns, spreading across his whole face. "Am I making you uncomfortable, Georgia?"

I don't entertain him with an answer. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"That depends." He steps back and leans against the opposite wall. "What exactly do you need help with?"

The voices from outside start fading, and I'm not sure how long we'll have before they come looking for Luca. "I need to talk to Stefan Mangino."

His expression drops. "Come again?"

"I need to talk to—"

"Oh, I heard you," he says, the playfulness on his face long gone. "But now I'm wondering if you recently fell and hit your head. Are you insane? That can be the only reason you'd want to do that."

"Can you or can you not help me?"

He blinks slowly. "How much do you know about Mangino? Because it's far more than I thought you did, which makes me wonder if your father is really starting to crack."

Hasn't that been the problem all along? "I know enough to understand that he's the answer to my problem."

"The answer..." Luca laughs. "That man is not the answer to anything. You wanted out of this world. And now you're asking me to bring you straight to the leader of it? No."

He starts to go toward the door, but I put my hand on his to stop him from opening it. "Please. He hurt Leani. Badly. I may not be close to her, but whatever pressure he's under, he's taking out on her. And he's on something. Drinking more. There was powder on his desk last time I was there. He's losing it. She's going to wind up dead if this keeps going on."

I can tell he wants to argue, but he doesn't.

"I'll do anything," I whisper. "Just help me end this. There's got to be something that Stefan Mangino wants from my father to finish this."

Luca shakes his head, his eyes darkening as he turns from the door and blocks me in. "One thing you should be very careful of is your choice of words, little Del Rossi."

I swallow.

He reaches forward, placing his hand against the wall to box me in. “You would do anything?”

“Within reason.”

The grin on his face isn’t playful or friendly. There’s something sinister behind it that matches the shadows masking his face. “There is no such thing as reason in the world you want to step into.”

“Not into,” I correct, pressing myself against the wall. “I want him to get me out of it.”

It’s obvious he doesn’t think it’s possible. “I wish I had your delusion.”

“It’s called optimism, Luca.”

“Not all of us are afforded that in life.” Using his free hand, he wraps a strand of my hair around his finger.

“W-what are you doing?”

He tugs gently on it. “You said you’d do anything, right?”

My heart starts thumping in my chest, but I don’t trust myself enough to answer. If my voice breaks, if the shakiest sound comes out of my mouth, Luca will know he’s gotten under my skin.

And that seems...dangerous.

“Kiss me.”

The two words have me looking up at him. “I thought you said you didn’t want to marry me. You made it seem like you weren’t interested.”

His finger releases my hair and pinches my chin before his palm slides to cup my cheek. The only thing he says before closing the distance between us is, “I lied.”

Suddenly, his mouth is on mine.

My body locks up, not returning the kiss or letting my hands wander the way they automatically do when Lincoln is the man in front of me.

This feels wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

It lasts only seconds, but it might as well have been an eternity by the time Luca pulls away and sees my rigid body.

He steps back, staring at me as I wrap my arms around myself and keep my eyes on the ground. “I’ll make a call.”

I blow out a breath.

Clearing his throat, he unlocks the door and turns the knob. "Wait a few minutes before leaving after me. I'll make sure my father and his men are gone. But, Georgia?"

Cautiously, I lift my head.

"Mangino gives no mercy," he says. "Not even to his family, and they are the few people he's loyal to. I would know."

My lips part, but nothing comes out.

His eyes glaze as he stares down at me. "And *never* tell him that you'll do anything. Do you understand me? He will take advantage of you. He will use you. Twist your words. If you want out, make him a bargain he can't refuse. Make it worth his while."

Taking a deep breath, I find my voice. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because maybe one of us can get out," he murmurs, looking at the door. "And thanks to his son's death, it sure as hell won't be me."

It's hard to swallow.

Luca takes a deep breath. "I've made a lot of mistakes, but the one I think I'll regret is not trying to win you over. Because if I'm going to be stuck in this hellhole of a life, I think you could have made it worth it."

What? "You don't mean that."

When his eyes meet mine, they're hollow. "I guess we'll never know."

He opens the door and makes a quick escape, closing it behind him.

My heart drums in my ears as I wait the longest five minutes of my life before moving from the closet. The receptionist is gone, and so are Luca, his father, and the others they were with.

Locking myself in my car, I glance into my purse at the audio recording still playing.

I turn it off.

Take a deep breath.

And drive home wanting nothing more than a shower and to wipe off my tingling lips.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Lincoln / Two Years Ago

GEORGIA IS SITTING at the dining room table in the dark when I get home, her bare feet tucked on the edge of the upholstered cushion with her arms hugging her bent legs.

Maybe it's the thunderstorm currently raging outside, or maybe it was the shitty meeting I had with the district attorney about a repeat offender who killed three people and struck a deal to get charged with vehicular manslaughter rather than second-degree murder like he deserved, but there is something off-putting in the air.

"Are you okay?" I ask, setting my bag down.

It takes her a long time to look at me, but when she does, there's something in her eyes that I see all too often at work.

Fear.

"Georgia?"

I walk over and kneel in front of her, seeing the redness in her white hues and the puffiness in her lids that make it look like she's been crying.

Her jaw quivers. "I need to tell you something."

The seriousness in her tone makes me still.

Repositioning, I prepare myself for whatever she's about to say. But right as she opens her mouth, I knock over my bag and spill the contents. Including the notes with her father's name all over them and the pictures that Knight just gave to me this morning.

Pictures of her on the phone.

Of her father meeting with suited men.

Of her stepmother walking into town with makeup caked onto a swollen face.

Her eyes drift over the images taken from a long-range camera, and a tiny breath puffs past her lips. "You..."

She bends down and collects the last one I had Knight's man snap of her before I told him to stop. Her eyes flicker between me and the photo of her

walking into a high-rise in the city. According to Knight, there were at least twenty different offices inside. But the one that captured my attention was the main office for Carbone Realty.

“Georgia—”

The fear is wiped away, and anger takes its place. “You were having me followed?”

“I—”

“We said no more lies.” She cuts me off, pushing past me.

I stand before I fall, ignoring the mess scattered on the floor as she furiously swipes at her face and walks into the bedroom. When I see her grabbing a bag and stuffing clothes into it, I try to stop her. “Come on, Georgia. Hear me out.”

“No. I’ve *tried* hearing you out for *years*, Lincoln. I’ve tried believing that my father was wrong about you, but that just proves he was right.”

What? I follow her as she storms out of the bedroom and back down the hall. “What are you talking about?”

She tosses her hand toward the information Conklin and Knight passed along to me. “He told me you were looking into him, but I didn’t believe it. Then I gave you the chance to tell me over and over again, but you didn’t. I let myself believe it wasn’t true. But this?” She picks up the photo of her entering the gate leading up to her parents’ house. “This is a line I didn’t think you would cross.”

If she wants to point fingers, she wouldn’t make it out unscathed. “Maybe if you told me what was going on between you and your family, I wouldn’t need to resort to this. I’ve asked *you* hundreds of times not to go. I’ve reminded you what you walked away from years ago, but you still chose them.”

“It wasn’t about choosing anyone.”

“It was to *me*,” I yell, grabbing the photo from her and throwing it back onto the floor. “All of the work I’ve done trying to make you happy never seems to be enough. And for what? You may not think you’re picking sides, but you are. And no matter what I do for you, for *us*, you throw it back in my face by forgetting who put you in this position to begin with.”

She grips her bag in her hand. “If I can look past the things he’s done, why can’t you?”

My nostrils flare. “Because.”

“Because *why*?”

“Because you’re living in some sort of delusional reality where the shit he’s involved in is kids’ play. Open your goddamn eyes, Georgia, and stop being so fucking naive.”

She pales at my raised tone, so I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose. Yelling isn’t going to get me anywhere, so I try taking a few calming breaths.

“I can’t just shut off my emotions like you do, Lincoln. It doesn’t work that way for everybody. You may think it does because you’ve trained yourself to, but I feel *everything*. I feel anger. And sadness. And grief. I feel sad. And mad. And confused. But you know what I haven’t felt in a long time?”

All I do is watch her.

“Happiness.”

My shoulders tense.

I gesture around us. “Look around you, Georgia. How can you be miserable when I’ve given you everything? You have a roof over your head. The cupboards are full of food. Your shelves are full of books. What more could you want?”

“You can’t just keep throwing money and sex at our problems, thinking they’ll disappear.”

Is that what she thinks? “I buy you things to make you happy. To remind you that I give a fuck. What has *he* done for you?”

This time, she doesn’t answer. Instead, she grabs her bag and walks to the door leading downstairs.

I put a hand on it. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“Well, I don’t want you to keep lying to me, so I guess we’re both going to wind up disappointed tonight.”

Using all of her strength, she yanks open the door and walks down the stairs with me following a few steps behind.

“One day, you’re going to realize that the person you’re trying to see the best in is not who he says he is.”

She stops at the bottom of the stairwell. “And what about you? Because you’re not the person you used to be either.”

I start to reply but close my mouth.

Putting her coat on, she reaches for the door handle and hesitates. “When my father told me that you were digging into him, I didn’t want to believe it. Because I only have room in my heart for one liar, and he took

that spot. I thought you, of all people, could understand when I said I needed someone to trust.”

“If you know he’s a liar, then why give him the benefit of the doubt?”

She opens the door. “I’m not giving him the benefit of the doubt. I’m trying to fix everything he’s done.”

“That isn’t your responsibility.”

“Then whose is it? *Yours?*”

I don’t answer.

She grips the bag in her hand. “He’s the only family I have left, and I’m doing everything in my power to save him from crossing lines he’ll never come back from.”

“You have me,” I remind her.

Her eyes skate down the front of me. “No,” she whispers, shaking her head. “I don’t think I do anymore. I don’t think I have for a while. If I did, you wouldn’t have hired somebody to follow me like I’m in on one of my father’s schemes.”

She walks out but stops halfway.

Looking over her shoulder, her eyes dim.

“I kissed Luca Carbone today.”

My hand on the stairway railing tightens, the wood creaking in my grip.

I don’t say a word.

Neither does she.

I watch her get in her car and back out of the driveway, not looking back once as she disappears down the road.

That’s when a new kind of fury takes over.



THE SAME BIG-BOOBED secretary is sitting at the desk when I storm into Carbone Reality. “Mr. Danforth, it’s lovely to—”

Ignoring her, I veer right down the hall to the same conference room where I met Luca before.

His secretary is hot on my heels. “Mr. Danforth, he’s in a meeting right now. You can’t go in—”

I don't pay her any attention as I throw open the door and find the man I'm looking for standing in front of blueprints that he's presenting to a group of men who stare as I round the table.

Luca straightens as my right hook meets his jaw. He goes down, and a string of startled cusses and gasps fill the room as they watch him fall on his ass, taking the prints down with him.

I tower over him, half-tempted to punch him again. Maybe even throw my foot back and land a hit to the ribcage. But he looks too pathetic sitting there on the floor.

It wouldn't be a fair fight.

"Keep your mouth and your hands off my wife," I growl at him, feeling the burning gazes of our audience piercing my back.

Quietly, I hear a feminine voice say, "We need security at—"

"No," Luca calls out. "Don't call security, Lyla. I can handle this myself."

He rubs his jaw and cracks his neck before standing, unafraid to stand mere inches away from me when he reaches full height. "The problem with men like you is that you don't know what you have, so you take advantage of it. You're lucky that my mouth is the only thing that touched her."

Somebody clears their throat on the opposite end of the room, but that doesn't stop the current exchange. "And what about men like you? Are you really trying to tell me that you'd cherish her? If she wanted that, she would have chosen you to begin with."

It's Lyla who says, "Mr. Carbone, I can get him escorted out if you'd—"

He raises a hand to silence her. "Detective, I have no doubt in my mind that she would have chosen me if she'd given it a chance. You just wish you could say the same. It may be your ring on her finger, but that doesn't make her yours. If it did, you wouldn't be here right now."

Teeth grinding, I take another step toward him and force myself to stop. He wants a reaction. He wants me to hit him again.

So, I won't.

"Georgia has a mind of her own," he tells me as if I don't already know that. "There are things that neither one of us would be okay with her doing. But she always does what she thinks is best."

And he thinks that's him? "You're a far cry from the best option."

"I'm not talking about me, Danforth."

I don't let him feed me more bullshit, so I back away, turning to the people watching us. "Sorry to interrupt your meeting."

All they do is stare as I walk out, brushing past the wide-eyed secretary as I make my hasty exit.

It may be your ring on her finger, but that doesn't make her yours.

When I slam the truck door behind me, I stare down at my swollen knuckles. Clenching them, I back out of the spot I haphazardly parked in and try calling Georgia.

It goes to voicemail immediately three times.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Lincoln / Two Years Ago

CONKLIN GAPES AT me. “You punched him in the face?” he asks, watching Marissa pass me a frozen bag of vegetables to put on my hand.

“He kissed her.”

He puts more Goldfish crackers onto the plate for Cooper. “She said that she kissed him.”

I don’t know if I believe that though. “He had it coming.”

“And if he decided to press charges?” my friend counters with raised brows.

There’s no way he would want police anywhere near him or his business. “His father would never allow police to go near their family.”

Marissa takes Cooper. “I’ll let you two talk. I don’t think Coop needs to be part of this conversation.”

My eyes go up as she takes their son into a different room with his snacks and some toys. I look at Conklin. “Should I be worried?”

Clearing his throat, he leans back in the chair and grabs the Corona he grabbed from his refrigerator. “Hypothetically, let’s say Georgia did kiss Luca. Where does that leave you two?”

“With a sore hand, clearly,” I grumble, bending my fingers under the bag of peas.

He nods. “Sure, but when you talk to her, what are you going to say? Are you going to forgive her? Is this something you’ll break up over?”

“Whoa.” I reach for the beer he passed to me when I got here and take a swig. “Look, I haven’t thought that far ahead yet. When I got back from seeing Luca, her car was still gone.”

His eyebrows lift higher. “So, where did she go when she left?”

I give him a knowing look. “Where do you think?”

The gaping expression he gives me gets shaken off when he moves his head back and forth. “I’m just going to say it. I think we need to stop looking into her family.”

“What the hell, man. No way.”

He leans forward. “It was one thing to look into them when I knew they were estranged. You made it seem like she has no connection to them. I’m not saying the man is up to any good, but if Georgia is willing to be around them—”

“That makes it more relevant. We need to separate them, not encourage her to hear her father’s bullshit. You said so yourself that he’s not involved in anything good. I don’t want her to be around that.”

Conklin scrubs a hand down his tired face. “I hate to say it, but don’t you think that’s up to her to decide? There’s a reason you married her, and it’s because you love her. So maybe—”

“The reason I married her is because her father kicked her out when she refused to marry Luca-Fucking-Carbone.”

The silence I’m met with makes me curse. Closing my eyes, I drop my head back and take a deep breath.

Conklin pulls my attention back to him. “I’m going to need you to start from the beginning. Because what the fuck, Hawk? You married her because she got kicked out? And are you talking about the same Luca Carbone that I think you are? Because double what the fuck.”

I should have kept my mouth closed. “It’s a complicated story that would probably fill in a lot of gaps if you knew the whole thing.”

“Then start talking.” He gets up and goes to the fridge, grabbing two more beers from it and popping the caps off. Putting them on the table, he drops down onto his seat. “Something tells me we’re going to need these. Start spilling.”

Chugging the rest of the first drink he gave me, I take the second one with a sigh. “It all started at The Barrel...”



AFTER TWO MORE unanswered calls and an embarrassing amount of unread text messages, I pull up to the front door of the last place I want to be.

The second I see the smug look on Nikolas’s face, I want nothing more than to wipe it off. “It was only a matter of time,” he says in greeting.

“Is she here?”

It's a dumb question. I parked next to her car.

"She doesn't want to see you, I'm afraid," Nikolas informs me. "We all knew this would happen eventually, Officer. You were going to mess up, and she would realize where she belonged all along."

"Detective."

"Ah. Of course. How could I forget?" He takes up the doorjamb to make it harder for me to storm in like I want to. "How *do* you like that promotion? I hear it's no more than a glorified secretarial position. Very little reward or glory. It must be hard getting all of those drug users off the road from behind a desk."

He knew I wouldn't be able to do the same kind of work putting away the users and dealers coming in from the city if I was promoted. I'd already figured that was his motive. What I still don't know is what it cost him to make Chamberlin pull those strings.

When I give him a thorough once-over, I see something interesting. Eyelid tremors. Dilated pupils. The alcohol on his breath smells like expensive whiskey. Top shelf, I'm sure. But that's not what's making him fidget. I've made enough DUI arrests on drugs to know when someone is on them.

He grabs the door. "As of right now, you're trespassing on private property. So, I highly recommend you leave before it becomes a problem."

"I want to speak to my wife."

"*My daughter* does not wish to see you."

"She's. Not. Yours."

Nikolas grins. "Evidently, she's not yours either." As he begins shutting the door, he pauses with a contemplative look on his face. "If I were you, I would take what pride I have left and stop while I was ahead. You're only going to get yourself into a place you can't get out of. And, trust me, the consequences will be dire."

"Is that a threat, Nikolas?"

"It's a promise. One I know too well."

"I'm not going to give up until this is over," I state, standing my ground.

A grim expression is painted over his facial features. "Then I suppose it'll be a race to the graveyard, Detective."

He shuts the door in my face, leaving me gawking at the wood knocker in the center of it.

As I walk to the truck, I see the curtain of an upstairs bedroom quickly close. I grab my phone and type out a message, staring at the window that somebody is watching me from.

Me: I'm sorry

There's no response on my phone.

But I see the curtain flicker again.

Nobody appears.

Nostrils flaring, I get into my truck and slam the door closed behind me.

Me: When you're ready, you know where to find me

Me: And if I don't hear from you...

Me: Then I guess I have my answer

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY

Georgia / Two Years Ago

EVAN MALONEY, MY father's lawyer of twenty-five years, is soaking through his suit as he sips his second glass of water. Bullets of sweat drip down his face as he looks over the paperwork that Leani found locked in a safe in their bedroom.

The combination was my mother's birthday.

"I'm not supposed to do business outside of Nikolas Del Rossi," he says for the third time in the past hour of being in the study he's met my father in countless times, tugging on his shirt collar to loosen it from his pudgy neck. "When you called, I thought he would be here."

Unfortunately for him, my father was called away to a cryptic call to the Del Rossi Group headquarters, where he thinks cops will be raiding the business. They won't be, but Leani said we needed him distracted, and that was the first thing I could think of to get him to leave.

Whatever he's planning on hiding will more than likely take him a few hours.

"As you can imagine, Nikolas is a little tied up at the moment. Which means you can explain to me why we found a document stating that I own shares in both MDR Inc. and The Del Rossi Group. I'm not an expert on any of this, but fifty-one percent means that I hold majority stakes in the company, so this meeting is perfectly justified."

His throat bobs with a nervous swallow. "I haven't seen this document before in my life," he states.

If there's one thing I've learned from Lincoln's stories all these years, it's how to tell if someone is lying. His hands are shaking as he holds the paper, his eyes won't meet mine, and there are sweat stains around the collar of his shirt.

Leani passes me the second document that she took from his locked desk drawer. I didn't get a chance to ask her how she knew how to pick locks. Apparently, there's a lot I don't know about her.

“Then how do you explain this?” I question, showing him the document with my forged signature at the bottom. It’s nearly identical to the one he’s holding, except this one shows that I signed over all of my shares to Nikolas Del Rossi. It also has Evan Maloney’s name on the bottom, where he signed and dated it five years ago.

“I...” He clears his throat. “This seems like it’s something you should be discussing with your father. Not me. It’s him I work for.”

“It isn’t like you’re going to be of any help to him where he’s going if this ever gets out,” I point out. “Unless you’re a defense attorney too?”

The pudgy man pales. “No, ma’am.”

“I didn’t think so.” I smile sweetly, turning my father’s office chair to the side and crossing one long leg over the other at the knee. “You do like being a lawyer, don’t you, Mr. Maloney?”

His eyes bolt up to mine. “Of course, Ms. Del Rossi.”

“Danforth,” I correct, holding the necklace around my neck.

His teeth grind. “Danforth. My apologies.”

“It’d be unfortunate for the events you’ve participated in to get you disbarred. Agreeing to legitimize forged documents seems like it could really ruin somebody’s life. Don’t you think?”

He gawks at me, and I wonder what he sees.

My father was merciless when it came to getting what he wanted. I know that firsthand. The best thing I can do is channel that for this meeting so his lawyer knows I mean business.

“You said that you do business for him, but you were hired on as an attorney for The Del Rossi Group, correct?”

He gives me a terse nod. “Yes.”

“And since I own fifty-one percent shares in the company, that means I have *more* control over the company than my father. Is that also correct?”

Maloney’s nostrils flare. “Anybody with fifty-one percent ownership of a company would, in fact, have more say in the company’s welfare. Yes.”

He’s not confirming in words what I already know: that he signed illegal documents to give my father the full control he wanted.

“So, hypothetically, if I wanted to make changes to the company’s leadership, then I would have the power to do that. Right?”

He grinds out, “Right.”

“Including the sale of the company itself?”

He picks up a few of the papers and eventually nods, trying not to fidget with his damp shirt. “*Hypothetically*, there are steps I would need to take in order to make such a hefty change, Ms. Del—*Danforth*. And it would take a long time to do it the right way.”

“I’m not asking you to do it tomorrow; I’m simply asking if it’s possible,” I reply easily.

“Yes,” he finally says, his jaw grinding back and forth. “If you own more shares than him, you have the power to do what you please with the Del Rossi Group, should anything happen to Nikolas or unless you buy him out. That’s what the contract says. Changing ownership will be a lengthy process, but it’s not an impossible one.”

“Good.” I lean back in the chair and look around the study, which still smells like expensive tobacco. I wonder what will happen to it. “Mr. Maloney?”

His eyes lift to mine.

“You do realize if this goes to court one day, you’re going to have to testify, right?”

For a moment, I think his heart may have stopped. It would be unfortunate if he suffers cardiac arrest, considering we’re far from done here. “My job would be at risk if they knew—”

“That my father blackmailed you.” I cut him off pointedly. “Deals have been cut before for people who have done a lot worse. I’m sure with the right convincing, you’d get a slap on the wrist and be told not to do it again. Especially since you’re making it *right*.”

His hand drifts over the papers, collecting them into one pile. “As long as I never have to be involved with this company or family again,” he mumbles under his voice.

“Once this deal is finished, and Nikolas is far, far away, I’m sure you won’t have to. I know I plan on being gone the second the ink dries on the contract.”

He stands, sweat stains darkening what was once a pretty sky-blue button-down as he fastens his jacket. “For your sake, I hope you are. Because the people you’re playing with are not harmless, *Ms. Danforth*. I would know. I’ve had the misfortune of getting tied up with them for far too many years.”

I stand, flattening a hand down my dress. I wore my prettiest one—purple, not too tight or too short or too revealing. But enough to show that I

want to be taken seriously without being considered a threat.

I gesture toward the door, following him out to make sure he doesn't linger any longer than he needs to in case my father gets back earlier than expected.

It's only when I open the front door that he turns to me and says, "I felt bad for what my part was in this when he asked me to help him. You were so young. So innocent."

I hold the door tighter. "But you still went through with it."

"I was young too and needed the money."

An excuse. One he's clearly already justified to make himself feel better about himself. "And what about now? Do you feel bad for me for the hell I've been put through thanks to your hand in it? All the control I've lost? The lying I've endured?"

To my surprise, he meets my eyes. "Perhaps part of me still does," he admits, dotting his sweaty head with his handkerchief before tucking it back into his pocket. "But I can see that you are far more like your father than I'm sure he even knows, which means you'll be just fine."

It's clearly not a compliment based on the sneer he gives me, but I still smile at him regardless.

At the end of the day, when the paperwork is filed, he won't be my problem anymore. He can judge me all he wants, but just like him, I'm doing what I need to in order to survive.

"Thank you for coming," I say.

He grumbles under his breath while getting into his car and slamming the door.

When he's out of sight, I close my eyes and let the facade fade. My palms are clammy, and my heart is racing a million miles an hour. I was glad he didn't pick up on that, or he wouldn't have said as much as he did.

Leani's hand brushes my arm. "It's not true. You aren't like him."

"I know." I turn to her. "I asked Luca to help me set up a meeting with Stefan Mangino. I think it's time we weighed our options, Leani. If you want this to end, we might need more than the police's help to do that. And now we have a bargaining chip."

She swallows. "You think he would help?"

I take a deep breath. "I think that his hate for my father will be exactly what we need to walk away from this."

For the first time since she came to me, I see something in her eyes I haven't seen before.

Hope.

She takes my hand. "Thank you."

I shake my head. "Don't thank me yet."



THE SMELL OF cigar smoke makes my nose itch as I wait in the corner booth of Sofie's Deli on Eighth Avenue. It's a tiny establishment in the city that doesn't exactly look up to code but has had people coming and going since I sat down twenty minutes ago.

I look at my phone.

Twenty-*three* minutes ago.

When the back door opens and a plume of smoke rolls in, it triggers old memories of my days spent in my father's study. But all of those fade when Stefan Mangino casually sits in the spot across from me.

"Ms. Del Rossi," he greets.

"Danforth," I correct by default, earning the smallest curve of his mouth.

It takes everything in me not to fidget when he gives me a once-over, landing on the silver pendant hanging from my neck. "Of course," he remarks, studying the GD engraved on the heart. "How could I forget?"

I don't answer.

"I was surprised when Luca told me you requested a meeting," he admits, smiling when an older woman brings over two drinks that neither of us ordered. "Thank you, Deidra. Tell Joseph I'll return his call later about his proposal."

The woman nods once. "I will. Thank you."

When she disappears, he turns back to me. "I thought this might be the best place to speak. For comfort reasons."

I highly doubt he cares about my comfort. "It seems like a..." Nice isn't quite the word I'm looking for, so I settle with, "busy place."

Humor dances in his eyes. "It could use some work. The owners are interested in working with me to get a loan of sorts to fix it up."

A loan. "That's kind of you."

He smiles. "Believe it or not, I'm not an unreasonable man. However, if people make deals with me and then choose to back out on them, then it becomes a problem. I can't afford problems in my line of work."

"Investments," I say carefully.

He chuckles. "Among other things."

Gathering what little courage I have, I sit straighter in my seat. "My father doesn't love me as much as you think he does. If he did, none of this would have happened."

Interest arches one of his brows. "And what is 'this' exactly?"

"You believe in close family values, right?" I question.

Stefan Mangino dips his head. "Yes."

"Then would you turn away your child the second you realize they can't give you what you need anymore? Would you send them off with no knowledge of the world for anybody to take advantage of? I know..." I pause. "I know about your son. I'm sorry for your loss. I imagine you cared about him and wanted a lot for his future."

Something passive darkens his face. "I did."

"My father's actions don't seem like love to me. He was trying to make sure he kept his business. *That* is what he loves. Money. A good reputation. At this point, I'm a faraway thought in the back of his mind."

His head tilts as he studies me. "Why exactly did you want to meet me?"

Wetting my lips, I rip the Band-Aid off. "I wanted to believe that the man I knew could be saved, but he's gone. He's been gone since my mother —" I swallow the words. "That version of him has been gone for a very long time. It doesn't exist anymore. If you truly want to take away the one thing he loves, I can help. All I ask is that you leave me and my husband out of it when it's done."

The smile he offered me before stretches wider across his face. "Has anybody ever told you that you're very much like your uncle?"

Uncle William? "I hear I'm more like my mother than anything."

His smile doesn't fade or waver. "I knew them both, and you're a perfect mixture of the two. Beautiful and ruthless."

I cringe at the compliment that doesn't feel like one.

"In this world, my dear," he muses, "that isn't a bad thing."

“But I don’t want to be part of it,” I tell him, meeting his eyes and holding them. “I never asked for any of this. All I want is to be far away from here, where my father’s indiscretions can’t follow me.”

“How exactly do you propose to do that?”

“I’ll sell you The Del Rossi Group to do as you please with,” I answer. “I don’t want to know what that is, frankly. But we both know that my father is slowly cracking. Do you want to keep doing business with somebody who could put yours at risk or take it over so you know it’s in capable hands?”

Something sparks in his eyes. “And what exactly do you plan to do about your father?”

“The same thing I’m sure you’ve been planning to,” I reply easily. “Set him up to take the fall. After all, you don’t invest in failing businesses.”

A group of people walk in and greet the women behind the counter by name. This place may not be aesthetically pleasing, but the food must be good enough to look past.

Stefan Mangino leans forward. “And how do I know you’re serious about this? Offering me a company you don’t have any say in is a very risky move, Ms. Danforth.”

That’s where he’s wrong.

Grabbing the copy of the paper I acquired from Evan Maloney, I slide it over to him. “That is where you’re wrong. Because my uncle left me fifty-one percent of the shares in MDR Inc., which was bought out by the Del Rossi Group using forged documents and an outside investor.”

He knows who the investor is based on the quirk to his brow and curve to his lip.

“My father recently forged paperwork in my name that said I willingly sold him those shares when I knew nothing about them. Last I checked, forgery is illegal.”

His eyes sparkle with something that resembles pride and humor.

I take a deep breath and lean back. “I may not know a lot about your world, but I do know that the only thing Al Capone went down for was tax evasion.”

Stefan Mangino glances between me and the document. “You do realize locking your father away would put him in a peculiar spot if he chose to talk.”

Swallowing, I nod. "I'm not going to beg you for my father's life. He clearly didn't care enough about mine to give me the same courtesy. But that doesn't mean I want anything bad to happen to him. I understand that people have to pay the consequences of their actions. And his are piling up. Trust me when I say that the shame of this scandal would be plenty punishment enough. Being plastered on every news station and paper would damage him more than losing me would."

A thoughtful noise rises from his throat as he scans the document before sliding it back to me and gesturing for somebody behind the counter.

"This is not going to happen overnight," he points out. "Deals like this take time."

"So give me time."

It's bold. Not a question.

Thankfully, he doesn't seem offended. "Your husband is going to make this difficult for you. He already has a foot in the door that should never have been there. If you're able to pull this off, you'll need to get rid of him first to be successful."

Get rid of him.

The same woman from before comes over with a bag of food that would normally make my stomach rumble if my appetite were intact. He passes her a few large bills and waves her off, saying, "Keep it."

When it's just us, he takes one of the sandwiches out of the bag and sets it in front of me. "Because I'm inclined to agree with you, I'll give you time. Your father losing everything would make me a very happy man. But if my name becomes part of the equation, there will be a problem."

"I'll make sure it doesn't."

He stands. "Beautiful and ruthless," he says again, much quieter as he watches me. "It was a pleasure doing business with you, Ms. Danforth."

After he leaves, I close my eyes and try to calm my shaking hands under the table.

Get rid of him.

It's the last thing I want to do.

But haven't I already started?

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Lincoln / Two Years Ago

IT'S BEEN TWO weeks of silence echoing in the empty halls of the house, and every creak in the night sounds like my demons taunting me with their laughter.

I made it a point to give Georgia her space to show her that I was willing to be patient. I knew she still went to the bookstore because I needed to make sure she was okay from a distance, but that was the extent of my prying.

And it killed me.

"You look like shit," Conklin notes, patting my shoulder as he pours himself a cup of coffee from the breakroom pot. "Still nothing?"

Grumbling, I chug down the rest of the burnt coffee beans and set the mug into the sink. "No. I don't know what to do, man."

Sympathy coats his face as he turns and leans his back against the edge of the counter. He looks thoughtful as he sips his drink. "I guess the question you need to ask yourself is if you want to make it work."

"Of course I do," I snap.

He eyes me. "Fine. Follow-up question. Do you want to make it work because you love her or because you don't want to prove her father right?"

I go to answer but stop myself. Can't it be both? "He doesn't deserve to win after everything."

Conklin shakes his head. "Nah, man. You can't look at it as winning or losing. This isn't a game. This is your life."

Then why does it feel like that? "If you were in my shoes, what would you do?"

For once, he doesn't seem to have an answer. I could always count on him having some sort of advice for me. But I think this goes above what he's used to.

He scratches the column of his throat. "I thought you might want to know that we pulled over Jakob Volley last week. He had almost thirty

grams of heroin and twenty grams of coke on him and ten grand cash.”

Christ. That amount of drugs is an A-level felony. “Where’d you yank him?”

“He was coming in from the city. We think he picked up the supply from his contact and was bringing it in to distribute to the local dealers.”

I nod in agreement. Most of the local dealers go through at least two other people to get their drugs. “He’ll get locked up for a while with that amount of shit. Good catch.”

Conklin clears his throat. “He already made bail.”

I gape at him. “They didn’t hold him? He’s a repeat offender. This is at least his third felony.”

My friend shrugs. “I’m just as surprised as you are, Hawk. I thought they’d keep him until a court date, but they said the jails are full. Somebody posted his bail within a day of his being in holding.”

“How much was it?”

“Two hundred thousand.”

“Bail bond?”

“Paid in cash.”

“Full?”

Conklin dips his chin once.

“Who paid it?”

His hesitation makes me prepare for the worst. “It was paid under Carlo Salvatore.”

“Okay, so there must be video surveillance of him paying it. We must have a face to the name.”

I can tell I’m about to be disappointed when Conklin sighs. “It was paid under the name Carlo Salvatore, but it was apparently a lawyer who came in to complete the transaction. Evan Maloney. Well-known attorney in the tri-county area. Has an office in Manhattan and here in Middle Point.”

Of course. “So we still don’t know who Carlo Fucking Salvatore is.”

All he does is shake his head.

“Great.” I hit the wall as I walk out of the breakroom. “Just fucking great.”

Conklin follows me, his coffee still in his hand. “Maybe Volley will strike a deal and talk. We could get him to tell us who Salvatore is. If not, he’s looking at five years. Maybe more because of his history. Guy like that wouldn’t survive prison.”

We stop at my office, and I scrub my tired face. “If you find out more, can you let me know?”

“You got it.” He pauses, looking around before lowering his voice. “Maybe you should head home and get some rest. When was the last time you slept?”

His guess is as good as mine. “Just tell me when you get an update on Volley.”

He nods, knowing the fight isn’t worth it.

Before I close myself inside, I sigh. “And thank you. For...everything. I don’t know what I’d do without your help.”

Conklin chuckles. “Now I *know* you’re tired. You’re getting sappy on me.” I flip him off, causing his chuckle to turn into a snort. “Lucky for you, you’ll be stuck with my ass until the day one of us retires. Can’t get rid of me that easy.”

Rolling my eyes, I close the door and turn at the mess of papers and folders scattered everywhere.

Leaning against the door, I drop my head back and think about what Conklin said. I love Georgia, but do I hate the thought of her father being right more?



A FEW DAYS later, Conklin and I walk into our favorite deli for lunch. We barely walk through the front door when we stop at the same time when we see the people across the room.

Conklin grabs my arm. “Don’t,” he says quietly when Georgia steps into Luca’s arms.

Hot, boiling anger fuels a fire that burns under my skin.

My friend’s grip on me tightens when my wife looks in my direction and freezes. But she doesn’t step away from the man she ran away from all those years ago.

Conklin quietly says, “Come on, Hawk. It’s not worth it.”

Isn’t it though? My muscles tense when she meets my eyes, and I see the decision in them then and there. She stands to her full height and steps

into him, dipping her head in the crook of his neck and wrapping her arms around him like she's seeking comfort.

Forget about anger.

Rage is what takes over my limbs.

Conklin tugs on me when I step forward, dragging me to the door with more force than I thought he had in him. He pushes me out and stands in front of me to block my reentry. "Go. I'll meet you out there in a minute."

My eyes flicker from him to the woman who's still wearing my ring.

Swallowing, I make myself nod.

Because what the hell can I do? Punching him clearly didn't work, so there's no point in making a scene by doing it again.

Defeat has me standing down, letting him close the door that separates me and them.

Before I walk to the car, I see Georgia approach Conklin as he talks to the person behind the counter. She touches his arm and says something to him.

Not me.

She doesn't try to reassure me.

Doesn't try to comfort me.

My nostrils flare.

Chest inflating with hot air, I peel my gaze from the window and make an escape before I change my mind about going inside.

It's not worth it.

She's not worth it.

I don't believe the lie.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Georgia / Two Years Ago

THE TENSE MUSCLES under my arm flex as Matt Conklin peels his arm away from me. “Please,” I whisper, swallowing the burning hurt rising up my throat. “You have to get him to stop.”

Matt rubs his eyes. “Georgia...”

“We both know it’s not good for him.”

It.

Me.

When he opens his eyes, there’s reluctance in them. “You know he’s going to do whatever he thinks is right, regardless of what I tell him.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I nod and look down to the floor.

Matt’s voice lowers. “I didn’t expect this from you. Who would try destroying a man who would do anything for someone? That shit ain’t love, Georgia. This whole thing is fucked up.”

Fighting the tears prickling the back of my eyes, I stand taller. “Just try. Not for me. For him.” There’s no point trying to justify my choices. He wouldn’t understand them anyway. So I swallow the pain and meet his eyes. “It’s all I’ll ask of you.”

Rubbing his lips together, he nods once. “I hope you know what you’re giving up. But I don’t think you do.”

My bottom lip starts trembling, so I force them into a tight smile. “Trust me. I know.”

He looks at me one last time before shaking his head. “Damn shame,” he murmurs, turning away from me and accepting the bag of food that the cashier gives him.

When he walks out, I stiffly head over to where I’d left my coat and purse in the booth. I don’t meet Luca’s eyes when I say, “I’m going to wait five minutes before I leave. You should too.”

“Georgia—”

“No.” I glare at him. “I appreciate your help, but I don’t want anything from you outside of this. *Nothing*. I’m doing my part, and all you need to do is yours.”

He reaches out, but I dodge his touch.

“Don’t,” I seethe, putting my jacket on. “Don’t touch me.”

Luca has the audacity to roll his eyes. “You do realize if we’re going to be convincing, you need to let me touch you once in a while, right?”

I gesture around us. “We already performed. There’s no audience left. I think we’re good for right now. Wait a few minutes before leaving.”

Sidestepping him, I leave out the back entrance and take a deep breath as soon as the air caresses my face.

Get rid of him.

It isn’t until I’m in my car that I let the tears I held back fall.



WHEN I OPEN the door to my childhood bedroom, my heart startles when I see my father standing at the window, looking over the driveway.

I keep a grip on the door handle and watch as he slowly turns to me. “Care to explain why you met with Evan Maloney alone, daughter?”

Did Maloney tell him?

Wetting my lips, I watch as he studies me. His eyes are bloodshot, with bags underneath them, as he approaches where I stand by the open door.

“Are you okay?” I ask, feigning innocence. When was the last time he slept? “You look a little tired.”

“I’d be better if I knew what my daughter was up to behind my back.”

I don’t ask him how he knows I met with his lawyer because then he’ll suspect more than he already does. “He was the only lawyer I knew. I figured if he worked with you and the company, he could help me.”

It’s not completely untrue. I don’t know many lawyers. I’ve heard of some through Lincoln, but none I would reach out to if I needed something.

He doesn’t need to know that.

My father watches me with accusatory eyes. “And what could you possibly need help with?”

I say the first thing that comes to mind. The one thing that he wouldn't question. "I wanted to know about filing divorce papers."

Surprise arches one of his brows.

"I didn't want to bother you about anything because you've been busy," I add, releasing the doorknob and smiling at him. "I'm sorry if you feel I went behind your back."

When he reaches out, it takes everything in me not to flinch when he brushes my cheek with the back of his hand. "That is good news. It was only a matter of time before you came to your senses."

He walks toward the door, studying something on the wall. "You should be careful, Georgia."

His words stiffen my shoulders.

Slowly, I turn around.

He tilts his head. "I can feel them watching us. There are people tracking our every move. I will not let anybody take what I have. That cop of yours is becoming too much of a threat, and I don't trust him."

Alarm settles in my nerves. "You don't need to trust him. He's gone, remember? I'm working with Maloney to make sure of that."

His eyes scan my face. "He'll always be around, daughter. That's the problem."

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Lincoln / Two Years Ago

I'VE BEEN STARING at the papers served to me since I got them forty-five minutes ago.

It's been four and a half weeks since I spoke to Georgia.

Two since I saw her and Luca at the deli.

And this is what I get when I get home.

Fucking *divorce* papers.

"Son of a bitch," I yell, slamming them down onto the ground and walking away from the scattered mess they leave behind. I'm half-tempted to rip every goddamn book off the shelves that she left behind, but I don't.

I want to hit something.

Scream.

Get in my truck and go somewhere.

Anywhere but here.

And just as I grab my keys, I see Conklin's name glowing on my phone screen. "What?"

Conklin pauses. "You good?" he asks hesitantly.

"Define 'good,'" I grumble, telling him about the unexpected delivery.

"Shit, man. I'm sorry."

Not wanting to talk about it, I scrub my eyelids and stifle a sigh. "What's going on?"

"I wanted to let you know that Volley has an arrest warrant out for him. He failed to appear in court. They're going to try bringing him in today or tomorrow."

He's our best chance at getting the answers we want. "Who's going to get him?"

"Night shift is going to go over to his last-known address tonight. Kent and Lewis."

I shake my head. "No. Tell them to leave it to us. We'll go first thing in the morning."

“Hawk—”

“I need this right now, Conklin.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“And we both know that Kent hesitates,” I point out. “He’ll drag his feet until it’s too late, and then Volley will get away. He and Lewis don’t know that Volley moves volume at night. It’s better to get him first thing in the morning.”

He knows I’m right. “You going to be okay?”

No. “I could use a drink.”

Or five.

“Come over,” he replies with no hesitation. “Marissa is about to make dinner. You can sleep here tonight if you need to.”

I stare at the paperwork on the floor, feeling my nostrils flare. “Yeah. I’ll be over in twenty.”

Because the last place I want to be is alone here with the noise in my head.

Georgia and her goddamn divorce papers can wait.

As soon as I arrive at Conklin’s place, Marissa gives me a hug, Cooper mimics her, and Matt hands me a whiskey with two ice cubes.

He clinks his beer bottle against it. “To new beginnings.”

I take a long sip as we settle onto the couch where a football game is playing, but I don’t cheers to shit.

Fuck new beginnings.

I never asked to start over anyway.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Lincoln / Present

THE GOOD DOCTOR watches me as I clench my fists together and grind down on my teeth.

“What happened then, Lincoln?” she asks softly.

I shake my head, feeling the burn of bitter emotions rise up my throat. “You know what happened. Don’t make me relive that day.”

Don’t go.

When Georgia showed up the next day with that goddamn bottle of Johnnie Walker and offered me her body, I should have gone alone.

At least Conklin would still be alive.

Theresa Castro walks over to me and sits on the edge of the cushion beside me. “Jakob Volley was the one who made the decision to pull the trigger that day. It could have been anyone on the other side of that door.”

It could have been.

But it wasn’t.

She reaches out, her touch startling me when her hand lands on my tense forearm. “What makes you so sure that those bullets were meant for you?”

Swallowing, I stare at her palm. “Because he told me when I visited him in prison. Right before he was killed for talking. Just like Conklin was killed. Just like the others were.” When I lift my gaze, there’s a hollowness inside of me that drains every ounce of energy I have left. “I have a body count attached to me all because I wanted to help a girl in need. They’re all dead because of *me*.”

She shakes her head. “It wasn’t you who killed them.”

That doesn’t matter. “It might as well have been, doc. You said it yourself. We all make decisions that lead us here. Mine painted targets on their backs in bright red fucking paint.”

Removing her hand, she settles it into her lap and watches me. “The reason I wasn’t home to see my husband off for his trip was because we’d

gotten into a petty fight the night before. I stayed at a friend's house instead of talking to him about why I was upset. I ignored his calls. I ignored his texts. I didn't tell him to drive safely or that I loved him. For a very long time, I blamed myself for the accident. I may not have been the person who got behind the wheel drunk, but I know he was distracted because of me."

I know what she's trying to do, but it won't work. "That's not the same thing."

"Isn't it?" she questions. "When the officers discovered him, his phone was still open with a half-written message to me on the screen. The person who struck him had a blood alcohol level twice the legal limit, so he was found completely at fault and survived to face the consequences of the life he took. And I'm sure he still feels that weight every single day. But I know my husband wouldn't have been so distracted if I'd just talked to him after the fight. If I'd picked up my phone the first time he called. If I hadn't been so stubborn, maybe he wouldn't have been texting me. So, tell me, Lincoln. How is me holding on to that blame any different than you?"

I try to come up with a million reasons why it's different, but nothing sticks. Because I know she's right. She's right, and I hate it.

Blaming myself has always been easier.

It's put a face to the consequence.

Reminds me why it's important to fix it.

To find justice.

Because I survived, and I'm the only one who can. Not Conklin. Not anybody else. Me.

Don't go.

All I can do is swallow the words that wouldn't have been the truth.

Theresa stands, walking over to her notepad and writing something down on the front. When she comes back over, she extends a paper out to me and waits until I take it.

When I look at the signature at the bottom of the release form that clears me for duty, my eyebrows pinch. "Why are you giving this to me now?"

"Because you're ready."

"It's not like I'm going back to work," I point out, staring at the pristine signature written in fresh black ink. "I don't know why this matters now."

The good doctor asks, "How do you feel when you walk out of these sessions?"

I hesitate only a moment, thinking about what my father said about me. “Lighter.”

“You didn’t have to keep coming,” she points out gently. “When you chose to take the early retirement, you could have called and told me you were ending our sessions. But you didn’t. You wanted to lift the burden off your shoulders. Maybe subconsciously, you needed to know that this wasn’t your fault. That’s why this matters. If it didn’t, you would have given up long before now.”

Dammit. I stare down at the paper before glancing up at her.

Her smile is soft. Warm. “What are you going to do now?”

Now? I slowly shake my head. “I don’t know,” I admit, feeling a lump stick to the back of my throat. “One of my buddies mentioned having a spot for me at his security business. I’ve considered it. But I think I’ll take some time off for a while. After things...settle.”

Things.

She knows what I’m talking about.

She read the paper.

Sticking her hand out, I follow it up to her face and watch as she waits for me to shake it. “I think taking time off is a wonderful idea. It’ll give you a fresh perspective.”

All I can do is nod as I take her hand and squeeze it once.

When I stand, I look down at her. “Do you think you’ll move on from your husband?”

Her hand twitches in mine. “One day. Yes.”

“You deserve that.”

“You do as well, Mr. Danforth.”

My lips twitch at the formality that draws a line between us again. “I suppose asking you out for appreciation coffee would be frowned upon even after our sessions end then?”

Slipping her hand out from mine, her smile grows as she steps back. “If you need me, you know where to find me.”

That’s not a yes.

But it’s not a no, either.

“I hope you get everything you’re looking for in life,” she says as she opens the door for me. “I truly believe that you deserve it.”

It’s a goodbye if I ever heard one.

I stop as soon as I step into the hall. “If you ever decide to take me up on that coffee, you have my number.”

I know she won’t use it even before she says, “Goodbye, Lincoln.”

As I stare at the paper in my hand when the door closes behind me, it feels like I can breathe for the first time in a long time.



BEAUGARD STEPS ONTO the screen in front of the podium lined with microphones, quieting the station from its mindless chatter. “I want to thank everyone for coming. As of today, the New York State Police, in partnership with the FBI, would like to announce the arrest of Nikolas Del Rossi of Middle Point for the following charges: criminal possession of a forged instrument, unlawfully concealing a will, false impersonation, and forgery in the first degree. Del Rossi is also being charged for criminal possession of a controlled substance in the seventh degree after agents located cocaine during their search. At this time, this is an ongoing investigation. When we have more information, we’ll be sharing it with the public.”

The questions start from the reporters attending the press conference, but I tune them out, settling into my chair.

“You should get a dog,” my sister announces, popping another chip in her mouth as my mother tidies up the living room, even though I told her not to.

If she’s trying to lighten the mood from the interview happening on the TV, I welcome it. “I don’t know about that.”

“You’ve always wanted a dog.”

“Dogs take time.”

Hannah snorts. “What else are you doing with your life right now? You’re divorced and jobless.”

“Hannah!” our mother scolds.

I snort. “I’m divorced and *retired*.”

“And your ex-wife is apparently from an even more fucked-up family than ours,” she notes, pointing her Dorito toward the screen almost as if she’s impressed. “I knew something was going on that you weren’t saying, but I didn’t think it’d be her father being arrested for all of *that*.”

Mom sighs. "Can you please clean up your language. It's unladylike to swear."

Since when has that ever stopped her? "Ma, your favorite word was shit for yeas."

She stops dusting the shelf with old pictures I should really take down to glare at me. "Yes, because you and your sister were little shits growing up."

Hannah and I start laughing.

She lets that go. "I can see why Georgia was estranged from her family if the FBI have been involved in whatever mess her father is tied to."

I don't enlighten her on anything I know. The less she knows, the better. "I wouldn't feel too sorry for her. She's clearly still supporting him."

A frown wrinkles the edges of her mouth. "I don't even know what I'd do in that situation."

Hannah throws a chip at her. "You could support your son, for starters."

Mom shoots her a look. "Hannah Marie! I just vacuumed the floor!"

"If Lincoln had a dog, it'd clean that up," she defends, popping another chip in her mouth and getting crumbs on herself.

"I'm not getting a dog," I tell her.

Mom picks the chip up. "I always support your brother. But I can't help but feel for Georgia a little. She obviously wants what's best for her father. I would hate to be put in a position where I had to choose. Family is important, and she was split between the one she was born into and the one she married. That couldn't have been easy."

My lips twitch. "It should have been."

Sympathy coats her face. "Life rarely has choices that are easy to make, sweetie. That's all I'm saying."

We fall to silence as Beaugard ends the press conference by telling the media that he'll keep them updated on new charges as they come. Which means they must have gotten a lot from their warrant. I make a mental note to show up at the station with his favorite donut and a coffee to see if he'll tell me anything.

It's doubtful, but worth a shot.

"You should get an English bulldog," Hannah pipes up. "I've always wanted one of those. A girl named Frankie."

"I'm not getting a fucking bulldog. If you want one so badly, you get one."

“Mom and Dad won’t let me get a dog.”

“Then get your own place.”

She frowns. “Forget a dog. You should get laid so you’re not such a grump.”

Our mother groans. “Little shits,” she repeats, walking out of the room and plugging her ears. “I guess that’ll never change.”

Snorting, I lean back in the armchair. “I’m not trying to be a dick. Eventually, you’ll want your own place after you graduate.”

“In three years.”

“Three years go by quickly.”

She frowns.

I can tell she’s nervous. “You’ll figure it out.”

She’s contemplative, staring into her bag of Doritos that she stole from my snack cupboard. It doesn’t take her long to snap out of it. “Mom isn’t totally wrong, you know.”

My brows pinch. “About what?”

“I may not know Georgia as well as you, but she never came off as a malicious person. I’m not saying take her back or anything. We all want you to be happy and move on with your life. But maybe this”—she gestures toward the TV—“is the chance for you to close that chapter of your life once and for all. I know you care about her enough to make sure her father can’t do anything, but she’s not your responsibility anymore.”

So, she feels bad for Georgia too.

I guess my ex-wife had a lot of people fooled.

Me most of all.

“I heard Opal is single.” She starts laughing when I shoot her a glare.

“You and Mom are relentless.”

She throws a chip at me. “Opal wouldn’t be dumb enough to date you anyway.”

I roll my eyes. “Like you’re any better. When was the last time you even talked to the opposite sex that you weren’t related to?”

She goes to answer, then stops herself.

I give her a pointed look. “Maybe we’re both doomed.” I eat the chip she threw at me.

All Hannah says is, “I hope Mom and Dad will be okay with four-legged fur grandchildren then. Because we’re both going to be disappointments otherwise.”

My eyes go down to a text from Beaugard asking if I want to meet up with him for lunch tomorrow.

Shooting him a text back instantly, I stand up and snatch the bag of snacks from my sister before she can finish the bag. “You’re young. There’s hope for you.”

“And not you?”

I shrug. “I think that boat sailed, sis.”

“You’ve always been a good swimmer.”

I roll my bad shoulder, feeling the twinge of pain in it. “Not anymore.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Georgia / Present

WHEN THE DOOR opens to the interrogation room, I turn from the one-way mirror over to Jack Powell as he walks in. “Sorry. This was the only open space here when I asked you to come in.”

Somehow, I doubted that. I walked by at least two empty offices, but I don’t comment on that.

“Christ. Is the fucking AC on?” He opens the door and yells out, “Someone get some damn heat in this room!”

He closes it, pulling the chair out from across the table, and sitting under the draft coming from the vent. After a minute, it shuts off.

“I’m looking forward to going back to my own office,” he tells me, sipping a cup of coffee and making a face. “Especially to get away from whatever this shit is. Did they offer you anything to drink?”

“They” are the two officers who escorted me through the station. I wasn’t cuffed, but I might as well have been. “I’m fine.” I pause. “Thanks.”

He pushes the full cup of coffee away from him and leans back. “We had to make it look like you were being questioned,” he apologizes. “It would have looked suspicious otherwise, given the state of your father’s affairs.”

I already figured as much. “Is he going to strike a deal?”

Powell shifts. “I haven’t spoken to his lawyer, but I’d be surprised if they didn’t try going for a plea. I’ll know more within the next couple of weeks.”

All I do is nod, my eyes going back to the mirror and wondering who’s behind it.

He glances behind him as if he senses my curiosity. “There’s nobody back there.”

My eyes go to him.

His smile is friendly. “But if there’s somebody you want me to call...”

“No,” I say quietly, rubbing my goose-pimpled arms. “There’s nobody.”

He hums, stretching his legs out. "It's none of my business—"

"Then don't say anything," I cut him off.

His chuckle is low. "I'm starting to see why you two got married. Look, I think Detective Danforth is a cocky motherfucker. You're not going to see me trying to advocate for him anytime soon."

"So, what is this?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Everybody needs someone. And you don't exactly have a long line of people waiting out the door."

Well, fuck you too. "I guess that's what happens when you agree to help the FBI arrest your father. People aren't keen on trusting you after that."

If he disagrees, he doesn't say. "Why exactly didn't you want me to tell him that you were speaking to me? Wouldn't it have made things easier for you two?"

There are some things I chose not to share with the federal agent in front of me. Like the meetings I had with my lawyer and Stefan Mangino. That would lead to way more questions than I was willing to answer. "For the same reason you wanted to make it look like I was guilty coming in here today. We need to make it believable."

"How long do you plan on pretending?"

I stare down at the table. "Until it's safe not to," I finally answer.

"I promised you our safety."

It's not his promise I need though.

It's Mangino's.

"So, what now?" I ask him.

"Now, we wait."

"That's what we've been doing. Why did you want me here if there was nothing left to say?"

He smiles and stands. "Because there was someone I thought you might like to see."

Knocking twice on the opposite door, he waits until it cracks open.

I stand, gaping at the woman I haven't seen in years. She looks so... different. Her hair is white. Longer. Her wrinkles are more pronounced. But her smile is just as warm. "Mrs. Ricci?"

She walks in. "Hi, sweet girl."

I turn to Powell. "This is the witness," I realize, blinking in awe. Mrs. Ricci went to the FBI to tell them what she knew.

She gives me a hug, squeezing me tightly against her. In my ear, she whispers, "I told you I was going to do right with my freedom."

I peel back, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I thought something bad happened to you."

It's Powell who says, "When we promise protection, we stand by it. Remember that, Georgia."

Paying him no mind, I give my former housekeeper a quick once-over. "You look good. Really good."

She brushes my face, letting her eyes drift over me. "I wish I could say the same. When was the last time you had a proper meal and a full night's sleep?"

Her bluntness is welcoming. "It's been a while. I've been a little busy."

Mrs. Ricci turns to Powell. "Can I have a few minutes with her?"

He dips his chin. "I'll be outside if you two need me."

When we're alone, she takes my hands in hers and studies me with concerned eyes. When her gaze lands on my face, she says, "When you told me it was for love, did you mean it?"

My eyes widen at the question. How does she remember that conversation? It's been years since we had it. "Why—"

"Answer me."

I take a deep breath. "At first, no." Her lips twitch, but they don't fall like she knows the answer already. "But it grew, just like you said it would. It became...something. Raw, maybe. But something real."

"Then how did you wind up here?"

Rubbing my lips together, I peer at the closed door and then to the cameras in the corner of the room. The light isn't on. "I did it *because* I love him. We both did things and lied about them, but I don't think either was out of malicious intent. I did what I needed to do to make sure he got out of the line of fire." Wincing at my choice of words, I correct myself. "I *tried* to get him out of the line of fire."

"He's alive, sweet girl."

"He almost wasn't."

"That wasn't your fault," she tells me softly.

"All of it is," I disagree, earning me an unfavorable expression. "Him loving me is why he was there. He would have done anything for me, and that's why I needed him to hate me instead. So, no. I lied to you back then. It wasn't for love. It was...convenience. A lie. A ruse. But when it

blossomed..." My throat thickens. "It was ugly and beautiful all at once. And I may not get it back, but at least I know he'll be okay one day."

Her hands tighten around mine. "All love is a little ugly, Georgia. That's what makes it real."

All I can do is lift my shoulders. There's nothing else I can say. I did what I needed to. He's gone, just like Stefan Mangino wanted him to be.

She lets go of my hand to cup my face, brushing away a tear I hadn't realized I'd let fall from the ducts I fought them to stay in. "I will make sure your sacrifice is not in vain, child."

When she lets go, I clear my throat and try not to feel the absence of her warmth. "Maybe we both can do good with our lives now."

Her smile grows.

"Are you happy?" I ask.

"Happier than I have been in a long time," she admits, telling me exactly what I need to know in order for relief to flood my tight ribcage. "The question is, are you?"

We both know I'm not. "I will be. One day."

Sympathy curls her lips. "One day," she repeats.

During our hug goodbye, I ask her one last favor as quietly as I can. "Go after Nikolas. Nobody else. Leave the rest to me."

I can only hope when we depart that she knows who I'm talking about.



THE DELI IS closed to the public, and only I know the reason why when I walk in to find two men in the same spot as before.

It's the man across from Stefan Mangino who stands first to greet me. "Ms. Del Rossi. I'm Isiah Cross. I'm Mr. Mangino's attorney."

I take his hand. "Did Evan Maloney send you the transfer paperwork and closing documents?"

"He did," the lawyer says, gesturing for me to sit. I slide into the booth and stare at the paperwork in front of me. "All I need is a signature, and the sale will be complete."

Wetting my lips, I reach for the pen when I hesitate. "Carlo Salvatore?" I read under the name associated with Stefan.

“It’s a business alias, of sorts,” he explains nonchalantly. “For privacy reasons.”

I doubt it’s for privacy, but I don’t bother questioning him. “And our deal?” I ask, lifting my gaze to meet his.

“I will not touch your father unless he gives me a reason to, nor will I go after you or your precious detective.” He says it like he’s bored.

When I nod and pick up the pen, I stop as the tip touches the paper when he adds, “You should have included money in your bargain. A nest egg for your fresh start.”

“Then it wouldn’t be a fresh start, would it?” I counter matter-of-factly, signing my name in cursive where his lawyer directs me to. After all the papers are completed, I lean back in the booth. “I never wanted money. If I did, none of this would have happened. All I want is peace.”

As his lawyer collects the paperwork and puts it into a manilla folder, Stefan Mangino extends his hand out to me. “Then peace is what you’ll get.”

I get a chill as soon as my hand fits into his.

Wanting to leave as soon as possible, I get out of the booth and pause when he says, “I hope you get everything you want out of life, Georgia. It seems to me like you’re not the only one who’s gotten a second chance to live it.”

Swallowing, I look over my shoulder at him, wondering what he means.

All he says is, “Volley had to go. He knew too much, thanks to your father. You’re very lucky that he was a bad shot.”

I pale.

Lincoln.

“Good luck,” he offers me.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Lincoln / Present

BEAUGARD PLAYS THE tape for a second time as I stare at the grainy screen and the two women in the frame.

"...was ugly and beautiful all at once. And I may not get it back, but at least I know he'll be okay one day."

My former boss pauses the video. "Thought you might want to see that for yourself."

Sweat dots my palms as I stare at the girl holding on to the elderly woman. The witness Powell had mentioned working with them on the Del Rossi case is a former employee of Nikolas.

Georgia's housekeeper.

Her only friend as a child.

"All love is ugly."

"So my question is," Beauregard says, "what are you going to do about it?"

I look at him, finally blinking and coming to terms with the fact that Georgia and I both fucked up.

She wanted me to hate her.

She let me defile her.

Use her.

She did exactly what she sought out to.

Beauregard pats my shoulder. "You two have your whole lives ahead of you. Now more than ever. It'd be a damn shame to let that kind of love slip by you."

All I can do is shake my head as I stare at the women on the screen. "Did you know that she was working with that jackass?"

Beaugard has the decency to act like he feels bad. "At first, no. But as he divulged the details of the case he was putting together, I realized how involved she was in this. Conklin did a lot of the footwork that filled in the

gaps, but Georgia went out of her way to record conversations with her father that might as well have been the lock on his cell.”

Georgia was the inside source Powell had mentioned to me. “All those times she went to her father’s house...” My Adam’s apple bobs with the realization.

Beaugard clasps my good shoulder. “I don’t know what is in store for you and Georgia. But I do know that her decision to help the FBI couldn’t have been easy. She made a choice when she sent those audios in.”

She chose *me*.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and listen to him open and close the door behind him.

When it’s just me, I rewind the tape.

“I did it because I love him...”

Hearing the words she never said aloud is like a blade to the heart.

“It was...convenience. A lie. A rouse. But when it blossomed, it was ugly and beautiful all at once.”

I hear her say it again.

And again.

And again.



WHEN THE APARTMENT door swings open, Georgia’s eyes widen. “Linco—”

I don’t give her a chance to speak before my mouth is on hers. She immediately melts into my front and kisses me back. Her hands find my shoulders, then trail down my back, and wind up at my hips, gripping my shirt.

When I pull back, I lean my forehead against hers. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Why didn’t you tell me you loved me? Why didn’t you tell me about Powell? I have so many fucking questions and not enough patience in the world to get them answered.

The amber in her eyes becomes glossy. “If I told you what I needed to do, would you have let me?”

She knows my answer.

I wouldn't have.

"I wanted to tell you," she says. "You always had big goals in your life, and the last thing I wanted was for you to lose them because you got involved in something dangerous. If one of us was going to risk it, I needed it to be me. What did I have to lose?"

Letting out a harsh breath, I whisper, "Me."

Her inhale is shaky.

I wipe away a fallen tear. "Peaches," I whisper, feeling the words get stuck in my throat. "Why didn't you tell me you loved me?"

She snuffles, biting her bottom lip. "By the time I realized I did, it was too late."

Fuck me.

We were protecting each other and ripping each other apart at the same damn time.

"I need you," I tell her, closing the distance between us.

I pick her up and carry her into the bedroom. When her back hits the mattress, it's a rush of fallen clothing and desperate touches. My lips find any piece of skin they can, savoring the smell, the taste, and the warmth I've been missing.

As I tug off my jeans and leave a trail of kisses up her stomach, between her breasts, and into the crook of her neck, her palms gently push on my chest.

Her eyes drift over the scar, her shaky fingers grazing over it as a loose breath escapes her. "I need you to promise me something."

I've never let anybody other than my doctor touch me there. The sensation leaves goose bumps over every inch of my skin when her featherlight touch caresses the rough tissue.

"Anything."

Her other hand cups my face, making me look her in the eye. "I need you to promise me that it's over. Whatever you have against my father is done. Because I can't—" Her voice breaks, making my heart sink. "I can't go through this again. I can't lose you again, if I even still have you. I don't want to sit at home wondering if you're coming back to me or if somebody else took you before I ever had the chance to say I'm sorry and that I love you. Because I do, Lincoln. And I should have said it before, but I couldn't. I just..."

"You needed to trust me first."

A stream of tears rolls down her face, and I try using the pads of my thumbs to swipe them away as they come.

“Don’t cry,” I plead. “You put away someone you cared about for *me*. Nothing I can do will ever compare to that level of love, but I will try my fucking hardest to show you that I’m worthy of it.”

She releases a breath. “We need help, Linc. I think we’ve crossed too many lines to start over without somebody to guide us.”

Swallowing, I press a gentle kiss against her lips and nod against them. “I know we do, baby.”

Her legs wrap around my hips as she arches up until her core presses against the tip of my hardness. “You said I was yours once,” she whispers, using the heels of her feet to lower me down until I’m sinking inside her. “That never changed. Not for me. It never did.”

My heart skips momentarily at the thought I’d tried my damndest to ignore. “And what about Luca?”

“Luca never had me.” Her mouth opens as I fill her to the hilt. “But I needed you to think he did so you would let me go.”

All I hear is *Luca never had me*.

“I’m yours,” she reassures, swiping her fingers over my lips. “Even when you didn’t want me to be.”

I lower my mouth down to hers as I move over her, in her, kissing one corner of her mouth and then the other. Peppering kisses across her jaw, her neck, her collarbones, all the way down to her breasts.

Her fingers slide over my back.

Down my torso.

Kneading the skin of my waist before cupping my ass and pulling me into her. She meets each thrust with ready hips, sucking a breath when I hit the spot that has her eyes rolling back.

My fingers dance along her arm as I extend it over her head and lock it into the sheets by threading my fingers with hers. She squeezes my palm, her legs simultaneously tightening around my hips, when I trail my finger over where the rings used to rest on her hand.

“Yours,” she whispers.

“Mine,” I promise.

Our movements sync, our hands staying interlocked as we build each other closer to the edge that we’ve always been good at getting to.

Her head tilts back as my hips meet hers, and a silent orgasm crests on her face. I bury my head in her neck and my cock inside her one last time, sinking my teeth into the spot above her pulse.

I can feel her heartbeat against my chest as I pull out and draw her into my side.

“If we’re going to be honest with each other from here on out,” she says softly, “you should probably know that The Del Rossi Group has been sold. It’s no longer in my family’s name or any of our responsibility.”

“Sold to who?”

“That doesn’t matter anymore. The point is, we’re free.”

No, I suppose it doesn’t.

She squirms, peeking up at me through her lashes. “You should also know something else.”

“What is it, Peaches?”

Her hand goes to the necklace I got her for her twenty-fifth birthday. “I’m not one hundred percent positive that the divorce papers filed were legitimate. The lawyer I used had a history of forging false documents...”

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

Lincoln

THE ICE CUBES in the tumbler of amber liquid clink against the glass as it's raised to a pair of red lips.

"Macallan," I appreciate, sliding onto the bar stool beside the slender brunette and setting my glass of cheap IPA down on the counter. "That's four-hundred-dollar whiskey you're drinking."

One of her tweezed eyebrows arches as she turns, letting her bourbon-colored eyes roam over the length of me inquisitively. "A man who knows his stuff. I'd almost be impressed if we weren't in a bar."

Chuckling, I give her a cursory glance.

Her brown hair is cut to her shoulders. Straight, not wavy or curly. There's limited makeup on her natural face.

"Are you finished?" she asks, taking another slow sip of the top-shelf drink, her lips wrapping along the edge and pulling my attention to their fullness.

I flash her a grin, unfazed at being caught.

Beautiful and sassy.

A dangerous combination.

"What's your name?" I ask instead of indulging her.

"Georgia," she drawls playfully. Those amber eyes flicker between my fresh buzz cut that I got this morning and my lopsided smile. "Georgia Danforth."

All I do is watch her.

Her eyes lift to my hair again before lowering to meet my eyes. "But you already knew that. Didn't you, Detective?"

Reaching over, I thread my fingers through her hair and pull her head back gently. "I would be very bad at my job if I didn't. And an even worse husband. Wouldn't want that."

She draws her bottom lip into her mouth and nibbles it, hardening me.

Leaning in, I press my lips against her ear and say, “Be very careful, because you’re making me think about all the things I want that mouth to do to my cock.”

She releases her lip and smiles, turning her head to line up our mouths. “Then what are you waiting for?”

She’s trouble, and she knows it. “After couple’s therapy,” I say, nipping her bottom lip.

Her groan makes me grin. “I don’t suppose we can skip it?”

I shake my head, brushing hair out of her face before leaning back. “No. I think we should go. Plus, I promised Knight I would stop by his place on the way home and grab the file he wants me to work on next week. He thinks the case we got hired for is one I’ll like.”

She blows out a breath, but she knows this is what’s best for us. “Fine. But just know me and my mouth were feeling extra generous today.”

My dick hardens in my jeans. “You know what I’ve told you about games, pretty girl.”

Georgia pecks me on the cheek and winks, finishing off her drink and sliding off the stool. “I guess you’ll have to punish me later for it.”

Oh, I fucking plan to.

“By the way,” she says, sliding her hand into mine as we leave The Barrel. “Your sister sent me a link to a nearby farm that’s selling labrador puppies. I think it’s a sign to finally get one like we used to talk about. And there’s one that looks just like the bookmark you gave me.”

We stop by my truck. “A puppy is a lot of responsible,” I point out.

She squeezes my hand. “So is managing a bookstore, but Claire trusted me with that.”

Very true. I peck her forehead. “Then we’ll reach out and see how much they’re asking for one and go from there. Deal.”

Georgia wraps her arms around my waist. “It sounds like a deal, detective.”

Did you enjoy this book? Leave a review.

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without my boyfriend answering every question I had about the legal process. Shout out to “The Cop” for not being completely annoyed with me when I asked you to explain things like you were talking to a second grader. It helped. It really did.

I also want to thank Aliana Milano for reading this over for me last minute to ease my anxious mind. This story is so different than my other romances, so it was very challenging to write outside my comfort zone. Your words were so kind and so encouraging.

I hope you all enjoyed *What’s Left of Us*! It turned out to be one of my most challenging books to date, but I really love how Lincoln and Georgia’s story turned out.

Until next time,
xx B

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste is a new adult and contemporary romance author who gives voices to raw, realistic characters with emotional storylines that tug on the heartstrings. She was born and raised in upstate New York, where she still resides with her four-legged feline sidekick, Oliver “Ollie” Queen. Her love for reading and writing began at an early age and only grew stronger after getting a BA in English and an MFA in English and creative writing. When she’s not writing, she’s working out, binge-watching reality game shows, and spending time with her friends and family.

Website:

authorbceleste.com

Facebook:

[AuthorBCeleste](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorBCeleste)

Instagram:

[@authorbceleste](https://www.instagram.com/authorbceleste)

TikTok:

[@authorbceleste](https://www.tiktok.com/@authorbceleste)

OceanofPDF.com

How much are you willing to sacrifice for love?

WHAT'S LEFT OF US

B. CELESTE

