

DIRTY SOULS MC BOOK 8  
RILEY'S STORY

*Stolen*  
**SOUL**



**EMMA CREED**

# STOLEN SOUL

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DIRTY SOULS MC BOOK 8

EMMA CREED

Stolen Soul

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First Edition

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*For Yvette who fell for the devil.*

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## AUTHOR NOTE

**\*\*\*Warning\*\*\***

Stolen Soul and all books in the Dirty Soul's Mc series are a work of fiction, and contain adult content. Due to the nature of the series, you should expect to come across various subject matter that some readers may find disturbing.

**This book is intended for readers 18+**

*Please contact the author if you have any questions.*

Who can define what love is,  
and what its limits are?  
Love is all consuming.  
It can heal you.  
And it can break you...



---

**‘Bound not by blood but loyalty.**

**We live, we ride, and we die**

**by our own laws’**



“Don’t go anywhere.” Liam gives me his best attempt at warning eyes before he takes the knife he sleeps with under his pillow and slides it into his belt. Making sure his hoodie is covering it over, he climbs out the tent and slides into his boots.

“Where you going?” I scowl back at him. Just lately he’s been taking on more risky jobs. There was a time that he’d let me go with him. He’d never admit it, but no one can hotwire a car faster than I can.

“I won’t be long, just stay in the tent, and stay out of trouble.” He points his finger at me before backing away toward the car that’s pulled up in the distance. It’s loaded up with kids around his age, and I watch him leave with a heavy sigh before doing as I’m told and retreating back into our tent.

I got no business feeling sorry for myself. Yeah, it’s boring as shit being stuck here alone, but I’m lucky to have a brother like Liam. Ever since we ran away from dreary Dana and her eye-wandering husband, Ray, Liam has worked tirelessly to keep us both warm and fed. It’s taken him some time, but he’s

finally earned himself enough trust to be included in some of the more profitable jobs that are happening.

It won't save us from living underneath this bridge anytime soon, but it does mean decent meals and warmer clothes when the winter kicks in.

I zip up the tent and light the candle in the lantern so I'm not shrouded in darkness. When I lay back on my pillow, I wonder how long Liam will be as I watch the flames flickering shadows on the tent roof.

I saw a notice in the window of a salon today— they were looking for help, no experience required. I guess it'll just be sweeping up hair and making coffee, but since Liam's stopped taking me on jobs I've been feeling useless. I haven't brought it up with him yet, but I don't see why I couldn't at least try to take the job. We don't have to run from child services anymore now that I'm over eighteen.

If I had a steady wage coming in, maybe, in time, we could get our own apartment.

I'm about to close my eyes when I hear the sound of an engine. The headlights shine brightly through the thin lining of the tent, and I suddenly start to panic. It can't be Liam— he hasn't been gone long enough. It could be a police squad car doing a random spot check, and with me being here alone I'm certain to get taken in. I often get mistaken for a minor, and with no ID it's hard to prove otherwise. The only thing I have with my real name on is a library card, and that proves nothing.

I remind myself to breathe and stay calm. No good ever came out of panicking. But it's hard when my heart's beating so erratically and my palms are slick with sweat.

When the engine cuts, I do just as Liam said, remaining in the tent and keeping still. It's too late to blow out the candle. The person outside will already know someone's in here, and my heart thuds wildly against my chest as the confined space around me starts to close in.

Footsteps approach and I shuffle as far back as I can, trying my hardest not to make a noise. What if it's not a policeman? What if it's a looter or someone Liam's pissed off? The tent zip starts to open, and when a huge, dirty hand reaches inside, a loud scream screeches from my throat.

Kicking at the hand when it grips around my ankle, all thoughts of being silent and still evaporate. But no matter how hard I struggle to fight it away, the grip is too strong, and I'm too weak. I get dragged out of the tent and onto the rough ground outside, and out of fear, I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Liam!" I scream for my brother so loud it feels like my throat is ripping open. And when rough, dirty fingers engulf my mouth, I choke on the sour taste of them.

"Shhhhh, it will be so much easier if you come quietly," a deep voice whispers in my ear, followed by the warm, slimy tongue that slides over my jaw.

"Please let me go. My brother will be back any minute," I warn, hoping to scare him away.

"You'll never see your brother again, little girl."

The hand from the arm he has wrapped around my middle slides up and fists my tit, and I automatically start to fight against him again.

"I don't want to have to drug you, but if you won't come quietly, you will leave me no choice," he warns, holding me firm as I struggle against him.

“No, please.” I fight against all my instincts and manage to still myself. I can’t bear the thought of not being unable to control my own body.

“Now that’s a good girl.” His hand strokes over my head like he’s petting a dog, and I feel myself deflate when he lifts me onto my feet and starts dragging me toward the waiting van.

It’s dark blue with roof racks, and the side door is already open. When he shoves me forward, I feel my bones rattle as I land inside. The sound of the door rolling shut throws me into darkness, and I instantly start feeling the walls in an attempt to escape.

The driver’s door opens and automatically turns on the interior light up front. I watch the man get behind the wheel and listen to him whistle.

“Boss will be happy with you.” He laughs to himself before he starts the engine, and when I launch at him, ready to attack, I’m blocked by the clear Perspex barrier between us.

“Calm down, fiery one. You are gonna need all your energy for what’s to come.” He chuckles.

The interior light goes out, and I fall back on my ass and slide across the floor when he shifts into reverse. I scream in frustration, madly scratching at the metal walls around me to try and locate a door handle, but it’s too dark, and we’re moving so fast my head is spinning.

I use up all my energy banging at the walls and yelling for help, but my captor turns up the stereo and drives on as if I’m not even there.

When I realize all my efforts are useless, I slump back to the floor and wrap my arms around my legs. I shiver from fear,

and my stomach rolls with motion sickness, but all I can focus on are the words the man said to me...

*“You’ll never see your brother again.”*

I can’t believe it, I won’t believe it, because there has never been a time in my life when my brother hasn’t come through for me.

Liam will come. I just have to hold out and be strong until he does. Clutching the cross that hangs from the chain I wear around my neck in my sweaty palm, I remind myself how to breathe.

With no idea of what I’m heading into, I’m petrified, but I refuse to let anyone see that. I won’t be broken. I will fight against whatever I have to until my brother comes to rescue me.





“You forget that I’m not in the business of snatching children,” I snap at my brother impatiently when he eventually enters his office. He’s kept me waiting for over ten minutes in this hell hole, no doubt a tactic to get under my skin.

“Sorry, Raphael, I forgot that trading women is a far more moralistic way to do business.” Adriano sniggers as he passes me to take a seat in the high-backed leather chair on the other side of his desk.

“Why did you call me here?” I dust some fake lint off the cuff of my suit and try to act like being here doesn’t unnerve me.

“To discuss business, of course.” The smile he gives me is sadistic. I want to slice it off his face. “I’ve become a little overcrowded. I thought maybe you might like to take some stock off my hands. For a reasonable price, of course.”

“You know my stance on your supply choices, Adriano.” I move to stand up, but the smugness in his laugh fixes me back into my chair.

“You think you’re so superior, don’t you, Rafe?” My brother’s head shakes in amusement.

I may be three years younger than him, but I’m almost two feet taller. His attempts to belittle me often fall as short as he is.

“I don’t claim to be a good man, just a better one than you.” I raise my brow and await his comeback.

“Everything I’m offering is of legal age. There have been some judgment errors lately. I’m sure after a little time in your care, they would be profitable to you.”

“Legal?” I check. It would be a lie to say he hasn’t piqued my interest. I won’t admit it to my brother, but business is lagging lately. Supply is short, and my clients can be very particular about what they pay for. An error suggests the females Adriano has appear younger than they actually are, and in my industry, that shit sells.

Technically, I’ll be doing them a favor. If I don’t take these women off my brother’s hands, I have no doubt that their fate would be death.

“I’ll take a look.” I shrug, remaining cool as I stand on my feet and wait for him to lead the way. I will not have him think he has the upper hand.

Adriano leads me and my right-hand man, Ricardo, through his elaborate hall. With all the paintings and artifacts he has on display, you would be forgiven for mistaking his home for an Italian museum. I’ll give Adriano his dues— he creates a good illusion. Most of the people who pass through these walls—either to do business or attend one of his lavish parties—have no idea that a cellar of horrors lies beneath their feet.

Adriano stops at the small door beside the kitchen. It looks like it leads to a storage closet, but I know better, and as he nods at the armed guard protecting it to grant us access, I prepare myself for what lurks below.

The second he opens the door, I'm hit with the offensive aroma of piss and feces. The damp air sticks to the back of my throat, and there is nothing I can do to block out the helpless cries.

Ricardo holds his arm up under his nose and follows us down the staircase toward Adriano's stock pens. I refuse to look into the cells that line the walls as I pass them. I get no pleasure in seeing children suffer, in fact, it's always repulsed me. Many times I've thought about ways to shut my brother's organization down. But that's not a possibility, not while I'm a prisoner to him myself. It kills me to admit, but Adriano owns me just like he owns the poor wretched creatures who surround me now. The only difference between me and them is that I'm bound to him by secrets instead of chains.

"In there." He stops at one of the cells and gestures with his head for me to take a look inside. There are four women crammed into the small space, none of them clothed. At my guess, I'd say they'd been down here a while, and it's hard to tell if they are attractive due to the bruises on their skin and the mats in their hair.

"All are over eighteen." Adriano announces, "Nico took a liking to the blonde one, but the rest are intact," he assures me.

I move toward the bars and look at the girls more closely. They all have potential. Adriano's men are trained to only take those that look young.

I have the space and facilities to accommodate them, and I'm sure they will be easy to train after living in these

conditions.

“I’ll take them, have Nico transport them to my place in Peyton.”

I immediately turn on my heels and start walking toward the door out of here. The air is far too suffocating for my liking, and the noises surrounding me will haunt me in my sleep if I stay down here much longer. I have enough horrors of my own to keep me awake at night.

I’m about to take the stairs back up when a small stream of light shines through the barred window on my right and catches my eye. A glint of red toward the back wall has my feet changing direction and moving closer to the cell.

I’m intrigued by the way the young woman looks, her arms and legs stretched out and chained to the wall behind her, like Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. My brother always did have a keen eye for art. Da Vinci is one of his favorites; he even claims to own an original sketch in his collection, although I’ve never seen it for myself.

The girl’s head hangs forward, and her lack of movement has me questioning if she’s even alive.

“Open this door,” I order one of Adriano’s guards, and it pisses me off that he automatically looks at his boss for permission to proceed.

“Go ahead,” Adriano tells him, and I don’t look away from the girl to check if he’s curious or fucking smug by the fact I’m intrigued.

The key rattles in the lock, and the girl still doesn’t move. So, deciding the guard isn’t moving fast enough, I shove him out the way and impatiently force the bar door open myself.

I step closer to her, slowly, so I can take in her wonderfully long, milky-colored legs. The black and purple bruises marring them look so pretty on them. She's fully naked and has a tiny strip of black hair between her legs. Her stomach may be a little concave due to starvation, but she has the most perfect set of tits I've ever fucking set eyes on.

Maybe it's the way the sun shines through it, but her red hair looks almost too vibrant to be natural, and I hate that it hangs forward, covering her face from me.

I already know she'll be beautiful.

"Who is she?" I ask my brother once I'm close enough to touch her.

"This one," he laughs to himself. "I call her *Briga*," he scoffs—the Italian word for *bother*.

The girl lifts up her head as if she's been summoned, and I almost stumble backward when her eyes lock onto mine.

They're blue, crystal fucking blue. Almost wolf-like. And I swear she's fucking snarling at me like one too. Her head tilts slowly to the side as if she's the one scrutinizing me, and something about the way that feels gets my fucking dick hard.

"How much?" I flick my eyes over her body again. Already I know that I have to have her, regardless of his price or the pleasure it will give him to be in possession of something that I want.

"This one is troublesome, brother. She does not sit silently," he warns, and when I notice that she's wearing a tiny gold cross on a chain around her neck, it surprises me. Prisoners are never allowed possessions.

When I reach my hand out to touch it, she shows me her teeth.

Fuck...

“I warned you, brother, this one is lively. I allow her to keep the cross so she can pray to God for her mercy.” Adriano laughs spitefully, and Ricardo joins in.

“Is she pure?” I choose to ignore their amusement.

“Of man, but not of the devil,” my brother answers.

“Age?” I question him further.

“Nineteen.”

I breathe a sigh of relief then my head spins to my brother so I can catch him in a lie.

“She was collateral damage that had to be removed. I had my men take her as a favor for an old friend. She will not be much use to me.” He shrugs before leaning in closer to whisper, “But I do enjoy taunting her.”

The girl drops her head again, and instantly I crave those fucking eyes back on mine. Moving slowly, I steadily lift my hand under her chin to raise her head and bring them back onto mine.

“Do you know how to be a good girl, *Briga*?” I ask, unable to resist stroking the pad of my thumb over her soft, pale cheek. I watch, mesmerized, as she rubs those rose-pink lips together, and she shocks me when her head pulls back, and she shoots a sharp, accurate mouthful of spit at my face.

“Perfect,” I calmly whisper back at her, somehow containing my rage as I wipe her saliva from my face with my fingers. I take pleasure in the way her eyes stretch wide with fear when my other hand slides down to grip her neck, and I force my soaked fingers straight to the back of her throat.

She chokes and gags around me, and as I feel her flex around my fingertips, I imagine how good my cock will feel, filling their place.

“How much?” I pull my fingers out of her mouth. The strings of saliva that drip over her chin make it almost impossible not to give in and fuck her face right here, right now.

Ricardo and Adriano be damned.

They could watch if they wish.

“What do you intend to do with her?” Adriano asks with a wicked grin on his face. And I make sure the disobedient little bitch’s eyes are fixed with mine before I tell him.

“Ruin her. Break her...” My spit-soaked fingers slide down her throat and lift the crucifix that rests around her neck. “Fuck her until she screams for God’s mercy.”

The girl stares right back at me. If my words are scaring her, she isn’t showing it.

“Then, she shall be a gift to you, my brother.” Adriano pats his palm against my back and chuckles before walking away.

I listen to his footsteps disappear up the staircase, but my eyes don’t move from the girl. She’s my property now and far too desirable to send away to one of my trainers. I’ve already decided that I will be taming this one.

Adriano’s guard sets to work releasing her chains, and her gaze remains fixed on mine even after she’s completely undetained. A part of me expects her to bolt and run, but she does nothing.

“Take off your shirt,” I order Ricardo, still not backing down from the stare-off I’m having with the girl.

“Take off my... what?” he questions.

“I said, take off your fucking shirt.”

Ricardo knows I hate it when I have to repeat myself.

He doesn't argue or question me a second time. And it's only a few short seconds before I feel his shirt fall into my waiting palm.

I shove it into the girl's chest, realizing my own strength when she stumbles backward. “Unless you want me to fuck you all the way back to Colorado, I suggest you put that on,” I keep my tone stern, and I'm a little disappointed when she nods her head so agreeably. I thought Adriano said she was troublesome.

“Take her to my car.” I bark my command to Ricardo, choosing to ignore the shocked look on his face.

Ricardo will have been expecting the girl to travel to Peyton along with Nico and my other purchases. But my brother rarely shows generosity, and this gift of his shall be coming home with me. I take another long look at her and wonder if I actually want her to lose that spark in her eye that screams defiance.

Maybe I should let her keep it... for a while.

Eventually, I turn my back and walk away from her. Loosening my tie and undoing my top button on the way up the stairs, I finally allow myself to fucking breathe. I wasn't about to allow the girl to see the effect she had on me down there. Masters never show their toys' weakness.





**E**very muscle in my body aches as I pull on the shirt. My fingers fumble to do up the buttons while I try to figure out if what just happened is going to be good or bad for me.

The back of my mouth feels raw from where he assaulted me with his fingers, and I can feel him there every time I swallow. The man he left down here with me looks pissed as hell and also a little pathetic, standing shirtless with his arms crossed over his sturdy chest.

And despite the fear of the unknown, I can't help feeling glad that I'm leaving this place. I believe that the man's threats were real. I felt his words chill my bones when he spoke them. But nothing could be worse than the horrors down here. At least now I have a shirt. It's more than anything else I've had this past week.

Ricardo suddenly lunges at me, grabbing the back of my neck in his huge bear-like hand and forcing me out of my cell. My legs are weak and wobbly from standing for so long, and as he rushes me up the narrow staircase, I fear they might give in on me completely.

The light shocks my eyes when we reach the open door at the top of the stairs, and remembering that my arms are no longer bound, I use my hand to shield them.

Up here isn't what I expected. I must have been drugged or knocked out when I arrived because I can't remember these marble floors or the artwork on the walls. The place really is luxurious.

"Don't try to run." Ricardo points something hard and metal into my shoulder as he moves me toward the front door of the property, and I can't help but snigger a laugh at him. I have no intention of running. My legs can barely walk, let alone outspint a man twice my size.

Outside, the air is warm, and as sunlight touches my face, I feel a sudden rush of hope. I don't know how I'm going to do it just yet, but I will bring back help for the innocents trapped in this place.

"Get in the car." Ricardo opens the back door of a long, black street car that's parked in front of us, and I do as he asks, settling onto the leather seat. I'm surprised when he doesn't join me, instead he slams the door closed and leaves me alone. There's a partition between me and the driver, so I'm isolated enough to check my surroundings and try to come up with a plan.

The inside of the car smells brand new. The gray leather interior squeaks under my sweaty thighs. There's even a small bar and a mini-fridge which my fingers twitch to rip open and seek out water from. I remain seated, though. I can't take risks until I know what I'm up against. What I can guarantee is that this is going to be a much more comfortable ride than the one that brought me here.

Everything is already so different from the way I was treated by the others. No chains, I have clothes to cover my body, and being left unattended... is that trust or a test?

The windows are tinted, so I doubt Ricardo can see me. But I can see him, standing tall with his back to my door and facing the property. I move slowly, reaching across the seat to test if the door on the other side is locked.

Of course, it is.

The door opening behind me almost has me leaping out of my skin, and realizing that I'm stretched across the seat with my ass in the air and no panties beneath Ricardo's shirt, I quickly scramble into a less compromising position.

"Looking for something?" My new owner's voice ricochets through me like a strike of lightning. His Italian accent isn't too heavy, but it's present, along with the threat in his tone.

When I turn to face him, he's staring back at me blankly, as if he's expecting an answer. But I don't give him one, just straighten myself in the seat and avoid eye contact.

"Ricardo, you can ride up front," he orders his man before bending his tall body and sliding onto the seat beside me. The door shuts, trapping us alone, and suddenly the air turns thick.

He waits until the car is moving before reaching forward, opening the mini-fridge, and taking out a bottle of water.

"Drink," he commands, tossing it on my lap without bothering to look at me. And I notice this because I can't seem to take my eyes off him as he glances out the window thoughtfully, his elbow resting on the window's ledge and his finger sliding sideways under his thick bottom lip.

*Is it fucked up to find him beautiful...?*

*Yes!*

I shouldn't be thinking that about a man who claims his intentions are to ruin me, but I'm convinced the combination of golden-brown skin, with his sharp, handsome features and dark eyes, would have any woman on her knees. His facial hair is neat and blends perfectly into his freshly-trimmed dark hair. I hadn't realized when he was choking me with them, but his fingers have tattoos on them— Roman numerals from what I can make out. I almost wish I'd spent more attention in class when I had the luxury of school so I could know what they meant.

His body language suggests that he's tense. His leather shoes tapping against the soft carpet beneath them, and the hand he has resting on his knee is stiff.

"I told you to drink," he snaps, his eyes still staring out the window. I've been starving for days. I can't remember the last time I was offered water, yet I'd forgotten about the bottle on my lap while taking him in.

My fingers shake as I unscrew the lid, doing as he demands, and the cool refreshing water takes the sting out of my throat as I drink it down.

My thighs are sticking to the leather seats, and my palms are sweating. There's so much I want to ask him, but I'm afraid. And if I speak, he'll hear all that fear in my voice.

I've worked too hard at being strong to permit him that.

He doesn't speak to me for the rest of the journey. In fact, he doesn't do anything except glance at me occasionally. He seems different from how he was in the basement, less controlled and less confident, but also like he could snap at any moment.

My stomach is growling for food, and my lips are desperate for more water when the car eventually stops in front of some tall cast-iron gates. I watch him shift in his seat, straightening the fabric of his expensive suit as the gates open and we continue through them. Ahead of us is another impressive house, but this one is less traditional than the one we left a few hours ago. The front is mainly glass, and despite the modern elements and size of the building, it has a cozy cabin-like vibe to it.

I just hope there isn't a basement.

When my door opens, Ricardo reaches in to grab me, but the man beside me shakes his head and dismisses him. Ricardo shrugs before closing the door, and I watch as my new owner steps out onto the gravel, then stands to hold his door open for me. His fingers tap on the roof of the car while he waits for me to climb out. But I take my time to crawl across the seat, staring up at the big house in front of me as I slowly stand up beside him.

“Are you going to behave, or do I need to detain you?” he asks, and when I slowly turn to look at him, I can't help smiling as I shake my head. I'm enjoying the feeling of freedom far too much to put it in jeopardy.

“Good choice.” He nods, moving forward as if expecting me to follow him...

Which I do.

Inside the house has dark wooden floors and red brick walls. The natural light coming in through the glass makes the space seem wide and open.

“Oh!” An older woman bursts out from a door to our right, stopping in her tracks and letting her mouth hang open when

she notices me. The way her short, gray hair is curled so tightly reminds me a little of my grandma.

“Sylvia,” he nods his head at her curtly, continuing to move through the house and up the staircase. I follow him, noting that there are no photos on the wall, no artwork. Everything here is plain and understated, yet the place feels so extravagant.

When we reach the top of the stairs, he makes a right and eventually stops in front of a door. There are five other doors in this corridor. I wonder if this is his room? Does he intend to do the inevitable now and get it over with?

His long pause and the way he shifts his eyes between the two doors on each side of him suggest he’s making some kind of decision, and I assume he’s made it when he opens the door to his left. The way he holds it open as he shows me inside is almost gentlemanly, and I try not to act impressed when I see that the room is twice the size of the apartment me and Liam crashed at a few weeks ago.

The room is in keeping with the rest of the house, with natural brick walls and oak beams. Light pours in through the large glass folding doors that span the length of the room and lead onto a balcony overlooking the beautiful grounds at the back of the property. I look at the huge, king-size bed that’s made up with fresh white linen and imagine how satisfying it could be to crawl inside it and sleep for a week.

“This will be your room,” he tells me in a low, husky voice that almost distracts me from whatever he’s just told me.

I stare at him, confused. Surely something so luxurious can’t be for me? But before I can question him, he turns his head away from me and moves across the room to open another door.

“Shower. I will have something more appropriate brought up for you to wear.” The way his eyes dance over my body causes my stomach to flip, and I don’t need my inner conscience to tell me that it’s twisted as fuck.

A man who looks like this one can make a girl forget the danger she’s in.

He steps away from the door, and when I see the bathroom it leads to, I notice the shower is bigger than the cell I’ve been kept in for the past week.

“Thank you,” I manage to whisper. I’m grateful for his hospitality, even if I am wary of it. His eyes stare hatefully back at me, reminding me that this show of kindness mustn’t cause me to drop my guard. I must still fear this man. Not that I’m about to let him know that, whoever he is, I will refuse him the power of my fear, just like I did the others.

Liam always taught me that fear is a weakness and to always act strong even if I don’t feel it.

He turns to leave, but when my voice breaks out, it stops him on his way to the door.

“Why?” I ask when curiosity gets the better of me. “Why are you being so kind to me?” He spins around, slowly starting to stalk back toward me, and I can’t help the gasp I make when his fingers grip around my throat.

“Do not mistake this for kindness.” He forces my back against the bathroom door frame, and his nose slides up my cheek. I struggle to swallow against the arch of his hand, and his nostrils flair against my skin as he inhales me. “You smell like piss and Ricardo.” His free hand fists at the bottom of the shirt I’m wearing, pushing it up just enough to expose my bare pussy beneath it. “Take a shower. I shall be feeding you in one

hour.” His grip on my throat loosens as his palm slips up to cup my chin and his index finger and thumb pinch my lips together painfully.

The way he looks down his nose at me with the hint of a wicked smile makes me want to spit at him again, but instead, I hold my ground and stare right back at him until he releases me and leaves.

I wait for the door to shut behind him before rushing inside the bathroom and locking the door behind me. I take a few steady breaths before heading for the shower, twisting all the buttons until the water starts to flow and I find a comfortable temperature. Stripping out of the shirt I’m wearing, I pace the floor, trying to get my head straight as the room starts to fill with steam.

I’m too weak to escape right now, but I’m already in a better position than I was back at the other house. There are no chains here. The doors don’t even have locks on from what I can see. If I can hold out and build up my strength, I should be able to escape. I’ll find Liam, and we can get help for the people back at that prison.

To do all that, though, I’ll need to build up the man’s trust.

When I step inside the shower, the water stings my skin as it pelts against my sore body. It’s been a week since I’ve washed, and I’ve forgotten how good it feels to be clean.

I spend far too long in the shower, washing my hair, and using all the luxurious products to cleanse my skin. I wonder if the sponge in here belongs to him as I slide it over my body and squeeze it between my legs. Has it touched his body too? What might that look like?



Heavenly, I imagine, because whoever the man is, he makes cruelty seem almost desirable. I shake that thought right out of my head and remind myself to focus.

Once I'm finished, I wrap myself up in a soft white towel from the rail, then use another to dry my hair. When I unlock the door and step back into the room, I half expect him to be there waiting for me. I'm even slightly disappointed that he isn't, which is really fucked up, but I'll put that aside for now.

As I move toward the bed, I notice the clean white shirt that's ironed to perfection and laid out for me. My fingers touch the soft fabric, and I smile to myself when I predict that this one belongs to him, not Ricardo.

His idea of something more appropriate is something that belongs to him, and I can already see the potential in that.

I finish drying myself off and put on the shirt because I figure being compliant is how I'm going to win my freedom back. That, and the fact that the thought of eating is far too tempting to compromise.



“Don’t look at me like that!” I warn Sylvia as she sets the table I’m sitting at, ready for dinner.

“Like what?” the old woman scorns back at me. She’s the only person I can think of who I’d allow to speak to me this way, and that’s because the woman practically raised me. She wasn’t too afraid to clip me across the ear when I was five years old. She probably wouldn’t be afraid to do it now.

“Like you’re judging me,” I accuse, pouring myself a good helping of single malt from the decanter.

“I just wasn’t expecting a house guest. A little warning would have been courteous.”

“It looks to me like you’ve done well enough.” My eyes glance over the food that she’s laid out. There’s fresh bread, a selection of cheeses, some cooked meats, and fresh fruit. Not too shabby.

“Is she one of your brother’s girls?” Sylvia clears her throat, keeping her attention focused on the task at hand. She knows what me and my brother do, and she’s against it like every other self-respecting woman would be. With me, she

takes the *out of sight out of mind* approach, but when it comes to Adriano's endeavors, she's intolerant.

Sylvia cares for me despite all my faults, and she's never given up her search to find a good man within me. Maybe it's because I pay her so well, but I like to think it's more to do with the fact she's the closest thing to a mother I've had since I lost my own.

"She came from Adriano," I admit, "but she belongs to me now."

"You've never made a habit of bringing your work home, Raphael," she points out. And she's right about that. I've trained many women before, and I enjoy women regularly. I never bring them to my home.

"Treat her more like a guest than an investment if it helps," I shrug, lighting up a cigar and resting my head back against the chair. I always suffer from headaches when I return from a visit to Adriano. I put it down to the weight of all the guilt.

"I wouldn't know how to treat an investment," Sylvia snaps, letting the cutlery in her hand clatter onto the table, and with her lips pursed together tightly, she storms out the room, meeting Ricardo at the door. The giant brute of a man leaps out of her path when it becomes clear she's stopping for no one.

"What's gotten into her?" he asks, turning his head to watch her out. He's put on a fresh shirt since we got back. He was really pissed at having to give up his last one.

"She's unhappy about the girl," I explain, shrugging it off as no big deal.

"Someone should remind that old battle-ax who runs things around here." Ricardo picks an apple from the fruit

bowl on the table, tossing it in the air and catching it before he crunches a huge bite out of it.

I ignore his comment because Sylvia is more than just my housemaid, she's my family, and any good memories I have from my childhood belong to her. She's earned her position within my household.

Ricardo has the privilege of being part of a big family, so he doesn't always understand. His mother and father still summon him and his siblings home every Sunday for big family dinners.

"Did you speak to security?" I ask him, checking my watch. I wonder if the girl will disrespect my hospitality by arriving late.

"All taken care of, boss. We have a man on her door and another on the ground beneath her balcony," Ricardo confirms, setting my mind at rest. "Do you really think she's as fiery as Adriano says?" he adds, wiggling his eyebrows.

"I really fucking hope so." When I draw back on my cigar, filling my lungs with the rich, oaky flavored smoke, it complements the single malt aftertaste in my throat.

"Go get the girl," I instruct, starting to get impatient.

It's been over an hour since I left her, and all I've been thinking about since that moment is what she might be doing. I could have given in to the temptation and stayed to watch her shower. I could have demanded that I get inside the damn thing with her, smashed her hot little body against the tiles, and fucked all that innocence right out of her. Yet something captured within those wolf-like eyes is making me desire something much more valuable.

I want her to be so desperate for me that she hurts.

I want her submission.

And I don't want it to be forced.

Believe it or not, I've never raped a woman. I've never had to. Women submit to me far more easily than they expect themselves to. I don't romance them. I train them.

Every trainer has his own approach, and mine was always to give a little and take a lot. To make them so desperate for your affection that they'd be prepared to give up their souls to please you. And once those souls belong to me, I sell them to the highest bidder.

Some might call that underhand and immoral, but when I compare myself to my brother, I'm not so bad.

It's been a long time since I've done any training myself. There are trainers in all my houses who take care of the workload these days. Mainly because I much prefer to fuck for pleasure.

But there are always exceptions, and the girl upstairs will be a pleasurable task to handle.

Ricardo returns a few moments later, kicking open the door and shoving my new plaything through it, and I don't miss the snarl she shoots at Ricardo over her shoulder as she tumbles inside.

"Leave us." I shoo him away, and he snarls at her before backing out of the room and closing the door behind him.

The girl looks fucking irresistible in my shirt, so much so that I decide that's all she will wear from now on. The white fabric is a perfect canvas for the vibrant red hair that she now has braided over to one side and resting over her shoulder.

And I also know that beneath that shirt, she's not wearing any underwear. I didn't provide her with any.

"Sit." I gesture my head to the space beside me, and when she holds her head up confidently and struts toward me, I see right through her act. She's nervous. I can tell by the way she's blinking too fast, and the way she tugs at the bottom of my shirt self-consciously and rubs her lips together gives her away.

She sits where I tell her to, and her eyes search longingly over the food that's displayed in front of her like she wants to devour it.

"Can I get you a drink? Maybe some wine?" I offer politely, and when she nods back cautiously, I smile at her. The girl will naturally be suspicious of everything, thinking that I'm luring her into a trap.

I reach for the bottle of Chateau La Lagune, 2003, that I went down to the wine cellar to pick it out for her myself. I'm sure the dark. fruit tones and a hint of vanilla will complement the taste of her lips if I decide to take them tonight.

Usually service would be Sylvia's job, maybe even Ricardo's, if she's busy. But I want to be alone with the girl, and so I pour for her myself. Her fingers twitch, and her mouth practically drools in anticipation of the food in front of her. But I decide to make her wait a little longer.

"What is your name?" I ask, trying to keep the aggression out of my accent.

"Does it matter? You own me now, don't you? Why don't you name me?" She stares up at me fearlessly, and I admire the effort she's putting into this pretense as I take a sip from my glass.

“Yes, I own you. I could name you if I wish. But I’d like to know your name. I might see it fit for you to keep it.”

“Riley,” she eventually speaks up after a lot of thought, her eyes dropping back to the food rapidly.

“Would you like something to eat, Riley?” I act as if I don’t already know the answer to the question.

“Yes,” she answers, her hand reaching out to take one of Sylvia’s home-baked rolls, and then she gasps when I smack it away.

“Uh-uh,” I shake my head at her slowly. “I asked a question. I never gave you permission.”

She doesn’t beg me like I expect her to or even plead me with her eyes. Instead, she folds her arms over her chest like a spoiled little brat, causing my cock to stretch tight against my slacks.

“What do you want from me?” She narrows her eyes as if she’s trying to read behind mine.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I admit honestly, although she will probably think this is all part of a game.

“Well, whatever it is, you better get it over with before my brother finds out who has me and kills you all.” Her warning is so passionate that I’m certain she believes the words herself.

Lifting my shoulders, I pout at her pathetic little threat. I have no idea who her brother is. I don’t fucking care, either. It’s unlikely he will discover where she is or ever see her again.

“Is your room okay?” I move the conversation on. The fact her thighs are almost fully on display to me is far too distracting.

“Much better than my last accommodation,” she answers flatly, with the tiniest hint of a smirk on her lips.

Sarcasm, I like it.

“You will find things very different here,” I assure her, picking up a cheese knife and cutting off a corner from the Brie.

She licks her lips hungrily as I press the point of the knife into the soft cheese and bring it to my mouth.

“You mean you don’t rape children?” Her words turn the creamy texture sour in my mouth, and I swallow it down heavily, resisting the urge to take her over my knee and thrash her for making such accusations.

“No, Riley. I don’t hurt children.” Somehow, I manage to answer her calmly.

“And what about me? Are you gonna hurt me?” There’s a slither of fear in her voice that makes the skin on my back tingle.

And I contemplate that thought for a while...

I’ll bet she looks beautiful when she cries.

“Not unless you give me a reason to.” I’ll make her no promises nor give her false hope, and suddenly she doesn’t look quite so confident. Her fingers stroke over the cross around her neck as she raises her chest in a long, drawn-out breath.

“So what do you do?” she asks, no longer interested in the food anymore.

I have the overwhelming urge to lie to her, like her opinion of me actually fucking matters.



“I buy things, I improve them, and then I sell them for a profit.” I take another sip of my drink and watch the way she nods, satisfied by my answer.

“Property?” she questions, and I can’t decide if she sounds hopeful or innocent. Maybe both.

“Yes.” I tell her what she wants to hear and let the lie settle heavily in my stomach.

“You must do well for yourself.” She looks around the room, clearly impressed by her surroundings

“I get by.” I attempt humor, but it falls flat with her.

She looks down sadly at the feast in front of her, and it tugs at something inside me, something that feels fucking uncomfortable.

“You should eat.” I decide she’s waited long enough. Who knows when my brother last fed her?

“Is that you giving me your permission?” Riley stares at me blankly, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think she was mocking me.

“It is,” I nod, urging her to continue, and she quickly grabs at the bread roll she aimed for earlier. She piles her plate with food, desperately fast, rushing to get it to her lips, and I sit back and watch her. Her eyes continuously flick in my direction, timidly checking me for a reaction like the runt of a litter waiting for the alpha to decide she’s had enough and push her off the carcass.

Maybe she will be easier to tame than I originally thought.

I let her eat until she’s full. It doesn’t take very long, but I can tell she feels better for it by the sweet, slightly

embarrassed smile she gives me when she finishes the last thing on her plate.

“Good?” I check.

“Yes, thank you,” she whispers, lowering her head gratefully.

“I’m pleased you enjoyed it.” I wait for her to finish sipping her wine before continuing.

“Riley, I wish for you to enjoy the time you spend here, and to do that, I’m going to need you to abide by my rules.”

“What are they?” She puts down her glass and sets a serious look on her face.

“You will have the freedom of movement around this house, but I have armed guards that are all ordered to shoot to kill if you decide to try to run from me,” I threaten, and though she looks a little shocked, it’s not the fear I expected.

“You must trust me, trust that I know what is good for you,” I continue to explain, and when she breaks out into a tiny laugh, it makes my jaw tense.

“How could you possibly know what’s good for me?” she questions me, which is irritating in itself. How fucking dare she?

“Because I can read you,” I decide to answer her. “I know that this confidence is all an act and that deep inside, you are just a scared little girl. You can’t lie to me, Riley, and you can’t hide yourself from me.”

“What is your name?” She tilts her head curiously, seeming unfazed by what I’ve just told her.

“You don’t need to know my name.” I shake my head as I raise my glass from the table and bring it to my lips. She

shocks me when she stands up from her chair and moves closer to me. Then, resting the tip of her index finger on my shoulder, she slides it across my back as she moves behind me and leans down to my ear.

“I disagree. I think I should know your name.”

Her husky whisper teases, and my cock turns to steel merely from her lips being close to my skin.

“And why’s that?” I take a calm, steady breath through my nostrils.

“Because I’m going to scream it,” she promises seductively.

It makes me grip the armrests of my chair to hold myself back, and that is not how this works. When I fuck this girl, it will be on my terms. She will be the desperate one, aching and begging, prepared to fall apart for me.

“I’m going to scream your name for the devil to take you after my brother puts a bullet between your eyes.” Her soft whisper becomes a harrowing threat, and pure rage douses my arousal. The girl squeals when I snatch up her tiny body and throw her onto the table in front of me. I don’t care that the plates shatter and the glasses smash. Food scatters all over the floor, and when my hair falls out of place, some of it covering my eyes, I still see the horror on her face.

Climbing over her body, I force her legs apart with my knee and make sure she feels my solid cock touch between her legs.

“I could make your brother dead within the hour,” I warn, bracing my hands on either side of her head.

She may be petrified, but she doesn’t look away from me. She holds her eyes firm to mine, attempting to show me no

fear.

“Don’t fuck with me, Riley. I’m not a patient man.”

“What will you do, kill me?” She lifts her head at me, and it burns me up inside.

“I’ll make you suffer until you beg me for death,” I threaten, watching her pretty eyes grow wide as I sit back on my knees and rip open the shirt she’s wearing. The buttons fly loose, scattering on the floor, and she looks fucking beautiful laid out in front of me.

Her chest is rising and falling fast enough for me to know she’s terrified. I see the flicker of fear in her ice-blue eyes when I press my palm against her tight stomach, and she shivers slightly as I let my fingers absorb her soft skin. Keeping the pressure tense, I slowly push it higher up her body, through the valley that her pretty round tits make, then wrap my fingers around the sacred little trinket she wears around her neck. I rip hard enough for the chain to break and snatch it from her body.

“You won’t be needing this anymore. I am the only god you’ll be praying to from now on, and you can call me Rafe.” I have to force myself to pull away from her before I fuck her virgin cunt raw on my table as punishment for toying with me.

Marching across the room, I throw open the doors. I don’t torture myself by looking back at her, instead my gaze is fixed forward. Ricardo looks startled as he shoots up from the chair he was resting in.

“Take her back to her room.” I slide my hands through my hair, attempting to tame it back into place as I head straight to my office.

“Take it dinner went well?” he calls after me, but I ignore him, slamming the door behind me and locking it.

I need a barrier to keep me from her before she makes me lose any more control. How dare the little bitch threaten me? People have lost their lives for much less.

Opening my fist to look at what rests in my palm, I realize I’ve clenched the tiny crucifix so tight that it’s drawn blood. I rub over the gold with my thumb. It’s not expensive. 18-carat at best. But it means something to her. I watched how all that determination and hate, mixed with a little fear, had turned instantly into sadness when I took it from her.

This is just the start of what I will take.

I open my top drawer and place it inside, locking it shut before fixing myself another drink.

The girl is going to be a challenge, possibly my biggest test yet, because of the effect she has on me.

But nothing is unbreakable.

She will learn that.



TWO WEEKS LATER

I pushed him too far. The anger behind his eyes was real, and I no longer have any doubt in my mind that the man who has me is capable of hurting me.

The punishment I'm suffering for testing his limits isn't a thrashing like it would have been in the other prison.

Rafe, as he wishes to be called, has decided to use himself as my punishment.

And I'm disgusted to admit that it's working.

It's been two weeks since our encounter at dinner, two weeks since he's spoken or even looked at me. And to add to the head fuck, I'm being treated like a well-honored guest rather than a prisoner.

All my meals get brought up to my room. I've been supplied with more bathroom products than I could ever use, and the wardrobe has been filled with clean white shirts... all identical to the one I was given the day I got here.

I've even been supplied with underwear.

I'm free to leave my room just like Rafe promised, but it also turns out his threats about the guards were very real. There are armed guards scattered all over his property, inside and out, and Ricardo seems to have, begrudgingly, taken on the role of my personal babysitter.

He follows me around the place like a bad smell, and I know it isn't his own choice. The man obviously dislikes me, and I predict that it's because—despite his size and threatening demeanor—I don't fear him.

Not the way I do his master.

Today, after finishing the delicious lunch that the housekeeper brought up to me, I decided to take a walk around the grounds. They look so beautiful from the balcony where I spend most of my time. Naturally, Richardo accompanies me, staying a few paces behind me as I explore the orchard and take in the fresh air. The mountain landscape all around us is so pretty I could stare at it for hours.

Ricardo, on the other hand, just stands, looking frustrated as he waits for me to move on. It bothers me that Ricardo is so uninterested in it, and I'm not sure why.

I wonder how different it would be if Rafe were here with me? Does he take the beauty he has here for granted too?

“What does he do during the day?” I attempt to start a conversation with the boring brute as we make our way back to the house.

“He works.” The answer is blunt, but it surprises me that Ricardo even took the time to respond.

“Does he ever smile?” I stop to smell the roses that are in full bloom as we walk along the gravel path.

Ricardo shocks me even more when he laughs at me. His shiny leather shoes crunch through the gravel, and his hands remain in his pocket.

“When he gets what he wants.” He raises his eyebrows at the ground where he's staring.

I think back to the last time I saw him and how his body had pushed heavily onto mine. The rage in his eyes as he snatched away the only precious item I'd ever possessed.



He and my last captor have both jumped to the same conclusion that the cross I wore around my neck symbolized my faith.

They were wrong.

The cross belonged to my mother. It's all I have left of her now, and for that reason, I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to get it back.

"How would one go about pleasing him?" I question as we move on along the path. I could ask the housemaid the same question. She's warm and friendly and often makes polite conversation when she brings me my meals. But with Ricardo, I know whatever I say will get back to Rafe, and I want him to at least think that I'm sorry for pushing his buttons.

"Raphael is unique. The man only pleases himself." Ricardo gives me far more information than I expected.

Raphael, it's the first time I've heard his proper name, and it's every bit as beautiful as he is.

All a part of the man's deception.

"I made a mistake. I taunted him, and it made him mad." I look down and act ashamed. For this plan to work, I'll need Ricardo on my side. It won't be easy, but I've had greater challenges. I survived living on the streets for long enough.

"You did," Ricardo agrees with an amused chuckle. "You're lucky you still have a throat to fuck, *Briga*." I hate that he calls me that. It reminds me of the man who kept me before. Ricardo knows that too, which is why he does it.

"And if I wanted to apologize?" I stop in my path and turn to face him. I've been using my eyes as a weapon for years. They've fed my hungry belly and got me out of enough scrapes in the past.

“Rafe will come to you when he’s ready. Have patience.” Ricardo, unaffected by my charms, steps around me and continues to scrunch the gravel under his feet all the way back to the house.

My head turns when I notice movement coming from one of the downstairs windows out the corner of my eye. I’m just close enough to see him staring out at me. His body rested against the window arch, and his arms folded over his chest. He doesn’t move when he realizes I’m looking back at him. Instead, he knits his brows together and stares harder as if daring me to look away from him.

My skin tingles and the nipples beneath my shirt tighten as I feel his eyes blaze into me, and I remember the firmness in his hand when it touched my body. He was so hard when I felt him press between my legs, recalling it makes my pussy pulse and causes a hunger to spread inside me.

Rafe’s eyes continue to scrutinize me as the memory plays out in my head. I want to close my eyes so I can visualize him on top of me again. Even with cruelty on his face, he looked handsome.

Eventually, I tear myself away from him, heading back into the house and straight to my room. My cheeks are flustered, my body hot, and once I’m alone, I have to resist the temptation to touch myself in all the places that beg for attention.

I’ve never touched myself like that before. Figures, since I spent the majority of my adolescent years sharing a tent with my brother.

Here, thinking about Rafe while holding myself back, I have to work really hard to convince myself that the reason

I'm not giving in and touching myself right now isn't because I want my captor to be the one who gives me the pleasure.

After eating another meal alone in my room, I take a long soak in the luxurious bathtub and bury myself in a book that I selected from Rafe's impressive library.

I can't help feeling deflated that my conversation with Ricardo hasn't had any effect. Maybe I should have spoken to the old woman after all. And since boredom is so exhausting, I get into bed, turn off the lamp and close my eyes, attempting to drift off.

The noises I can hear aren't too loud to start with, just low rumbles like moving furniture accompanied by the occasional moan. I turn on my side and hold my hand over my ear to dull out the sounds. But they grow louder and harder to ignore. It's systematic thumping now, and the moans have escalated into screams that are undoubtedly female. And the way she cries out his name is like a siren to the fucking heavens.

The frustration builds inside me, heating every coil until I can no longer lie here and listen.

Throwing back the covers, I storm toward the door, ripping it open and shocking the amused-looking guard waiting on the other side.

He blocks my path as I attempt to get to the door opposite mine where the sounds are coming from.

"Let me pass," I attempt a calm tone, taking a steady breath.

"Sorry, Miss Riley, boss doesn't want to be disturbed." He smirks back at me, refusing to budge, not even when I slam my fists into his chest.

I can't explain why, but I need to see who she is. I want to know what appeals to him about her. Is she the reason he's ignoring me? Have I been self-obsessed by thinking that he's been ignoring me to hurt me? Maybe he simply doesn't care.

"Let me through," I protest, practically climbing the burly guard's body in an attempt to get past him. The noises seem to have stopped, and when the door in front of me clicks open, I slowly slide off the guard's body and watch the tall, stunning blonde step out of the room, followed closely by him.

His hair is messy like her long, manicured nails have fingers clawed through it.

The top half of his body is bare and covered in a sheen of sweat. I haven't seen him topless before, and I swallow thickly as I take in his perfect frame. Of course, he has just the right amount of hair covering him, and I follow the dark trail through the solid abs that must take dedication to maintain. And despite all the emotions swirling inside my head, my mouth waters at the sight of him.

The jeans he's wearing low on his hips hang open at the front, his belt is unbuckled, and the patch of dark between the open denim makes my pussy flutter.

He rests his forearm on the doorframe, and I despise the way he looks at me with the slightest hint of a smirk on his lips as he dips his head to place a kiss on the blonde woman's cheek.

She's stunningly beautiful, the tight sequin dress she's wearing matches the heels she's carrying in her hand, and she looks every bit as satisfied as she'd sounded.

"Luca, please see that Cecilia gets home safely." Rafe pulls his eyes from me to instruct his guard, then gestures his head

toward the blonde. Her fingertips lightly trail over Rafe's chest before she gets escorted away, and I feel the sudden urge to launch myself at her.

I watch them leave down the hall, knowing that I should turn away from Rafe and go back to my room, but the sight of him, and the fact it's seemed so long since we've been close, keeps me rooted to the spot...

"Did I disturb you?" Rafe questions, his arm still resting on the door frame and that rotten smirk fixed on his lips.

I don't answer him. Instead, I force my eyes away from him and look at the floor. It feels like he has the power to read me through them, and I don't want him to know what I'm feeling. He'd use it as a weapon.

When he pushes himself off the doorframe and starts to move toward me, I back up against the wall. Keeping my eyes focused on his bare feet.

How is it possible that I even find them attractive?

Lifting his arms, he presses his palms flat against the wall on either side of my head, and it's so overpowering that my eyes slowly lift all the way up his sweat-soaked torso to his handsome face. He leans in so close that his nose touches my cheek, and I hate the fact he smells like her.

"Jealousy looks pretty on you, Riley. You should show your emotions more often," he whispers before slowly pushing himself off the wall and backing away from me. When he slams the door to his room, putting a barrier between us, it makes me want to punch it out of frustration.

It takes a while for me to pull myself back together, but eventually, the heat in my veins simmers back down, and I retreat to my room. I'm mad at myself so much more than I

am at him. Furious that I've allowed his actions to provoke such a reaction. How is it possible for a man to make you so angry and aroused at the same time?

But the thing that gets to me most is the fact that he's right...

I'm fucking jealous.



Making Riley think I fucked that blonde bitch the other night may have got me the reaction I wanted, but now it seems she's playing a game of her own.

“How long has it been?” I stop pacing the carpet in front of my office window and look toward Sylvia.

“Three days.” She stands on the other side of my desk, looking almost proud of her answer.

“Not a single thing in three days?” I check I'm hearing her right.

“Well, she does have access to water from her en-suite, so maybe she has drunk, but she hasn't eaten a morsel.”

My fists tighten in aggravation. I know exactly what game the girl is playing, and I am not a man who tolerates games. Riley hasn't left her room since the night I ensured she heard me fucking the ditsy little brains out of Cecilia's skull.

“She's testing me again.” I unintentionally air my thoughts out loud as I look out the window onto the lawns where she was wandering just a few days before. The mountain range

behind my property is the perfect backdrop to admire her against, and it pisses me off that she's denying me the view.

Is it not enough that I've treated her well since she's been here? Ensured she has everything she needs and is comfortable? Does she not appreciate me for taking her away from the repulsive conditions that my brother kept her in?

Obviously not.

This is how the insolent little bitch has decided to repay me... by starving herself.

I should let her.

I could stop sending her food, supply her with nothing until she begs me to feed her, so she becomes so desperate that she'd eat the fucking food off the floor beside my feet.

"She's challenging," Sylvia agrees, the amused smile on her face confirming she admires the girl's disobedience.

"And you've tried everything?" I check.

"I've sent more food to her room in the past few days than I have fed any of your men this month," she assures me. "She didn't even buckle at the cake selection I made for her."

Running my hand through my hair, I release a frustrated breath. Riley is taking up too much of my energy. I've wasted far too many hours of my time thinking about her since I brought her here, and just when I think I've taken some of the control back, she pulls a stunt like this.

It's time to put an end to her nonsense.

"Take up her dinner at the usual time, leave her alone with her meal, and do not disturb her again until morning," I instruct, turning my back on Sylvia and hoping that she takes it as a hint to leave.



I've been trying to get the feelings I have toward the girl in check for nearly three weeks now. There's just something about Riley that's special. Her spirit seems almost unbreakable, which makes it even more of a prize to me. As much as that spirit irritates me, I'm starting to admire it too. The more I think about it, the more I'm becoming tempted to let her keep it.

Sylvia leaves, closing the door behind her, as I open the top drawer of my desk to take out Riley's necklace and the brown envelope that was delivered to me this morning.

I swallowed my pride last week and called Adriano to ask him for Riley's details. Since then, I've had my own man, Gioele, seek more information.

Riley Hayes is nineteen years old and from Utah. Her father is unknown, mother deceased. She and her brother, Liam, have been under child protection since she was fourteen. Technically, they are both classed as missing people. Runaways, according to the files the police have in their system.

I let the gold chain slip through my fingers and rub my thumb over the delicate gold cross in my palm. This has become a new ritual for me over the past few weeks. Avoiding her hasn't been easy, and it's pathetic that holding on to this cheap trinket makes me feel close to her. The fact I even have the need to feel close to her is disturbing in itself.

Riley Hayes is just a girl, a poor, wretched orphan who my brother's men snatched off the streets. But she's rooted in my head, crawling under my skin, and she seems to have full control over my fucking cock.

Riley Hayes is a curse.

I yearn for her in a way I shouldn't. Even if I took her virginity and broke that spirit of hers, I fear it wouldn't be enough. Her latest test of my patience is only proof that she knows of my new weakness. She knows I care for her well-being, and she's prepared to use that against me. I need to turn the tables.

Knowing Sylvia will have taken Riley her meal at seven, I wait until past eight, giving the girl an hour to make the right choice.

I finish my scotch and leave the library to climb the stairs to her room. With each step I take, I question what would please me the most. The relief of knowing she's finally eaten a decent meal or punishing her for taking advantage of my hospitality.

When I nod my head at the guard standing outside her door, he steps to the side so I can let myself in, and I discover her laid out on her bed, sideways. Her head is resting on her hand as she reads one of the books from my library. Shocked to see me, she quickly scrambles up on the bed and tugs down the bottom of the shirt she's wearing to cover her thighs.

She's looking far too pale. That healthy glow she's been developing over the past few weeks is a little dimmer, and despite it making me furious, I do my best to stay cool.

"Do you have a problem with the food that has been prepared for you?" I ask calmly, closing the door behind me and taking a step toward her. The girl almost looks vulnerable as her icy blue eyes scan me over.

"No." She shakes her head and stares back at me blankly.

"Do you not think I have been kind in my hospitality toward you, Riley?" I question her again. This time she just

shrugs, like an ungrateful little brat, and it nudges me even closer to losing control.

“You will eat,” I demand, weighing down the mattress with the knuckles of both my hands as I lean over her.

“I will not!” she talks back firmly, turning her head sideways and refusing me eye contact. Moving quickly, I grab her jaw and snap her back so her eyes meet with mine again. The urge to strike her tingles my palm, but for some reason I resist it.

“Don’t make me force you, Riley,” I warn, the tension shaking in my fingers. Despite her trying really hard to keep it from me, I can sense her fear.

“What will you do, Rafe? Have one of your men shoot me in the head or bring your blonde whore in here and fuck her right in front of me?” The tone she bites back with is as cold as her eyes.

“Eat.” I give her one last chance to make the right decision.

“Fuck you.” She scowls, but the wobble in her bottom lip contradicts the confidence in her tone.

“Fuck you,” I repeat her word with a snigger. “Fuck you.”

Crawling over her body, I push her back roughly onto the mattress, and she struggles beneath me. I’m far too strong for that to make any difference. Taking her wrists in my hands, I pin them on either side of her head and use all the strength in my thighs to anchor her hips to the bed.

“Do you realize I could have fucked you to death by now?” I whisper into her ear, making sure my lips brush against her skin. “I could have taken you over and over until your pretty little cunt bled raw.”

Riley stops struggling and looks up at me. “So why haven’t you?” she asks daringly.

Her words manage to fuel a frustration in me that makes me murderous. Mainly because I don’t have the answer to her fucking question. It’s one I’ve been asking myself over and over again since she’s been here.

I want to fuck her. I want it so bad that it hurts, but something’s holding me back. Something that I know, when I figure, it out will terrify me.

“You could fuck me right now, like you did your whore.” She continues to taunt me. “Use me, abuse me, cast me away when you tire of me. What difference does it make to you if I eat or not?” she questions, searching my eyes for an answer.

I lower my head to avoid her glare. I haven’t given the smart little bitch enough credit. I should have come in here more prepared. But after a few calming breaths, I lift my head back up to her again.

“Because *I* make the rules here, Riley, and I’m demanding that you eat. Whether you want to or not, you do as you are told.” I stretch my body over her head and reach for the tray that rests on her bedside table. Then selecting a cherry tomato from the side salad, I bring it to her mouth, slowly trailing it, ripe and red, over her lips.

“Open,” I demand, but the defiant little thing shakes her head at me.

“Don’t test me. I will force this to the back of your throat and make you choke on it if I have to. Open your lips for me, Riley.”

I’m almost surprised when she actually does what I ask her, her lips parting slightly but hardly enough to fit the tomato

between. I edge it between them, watching them stretch until it pops inside.

Riley uses the opportunity of her free hand to reach out, wrapping her palm around me and guiding my fingers deeper, holding them inside her mouth. She sucks at me so hard that the tomato explodes. Its juices slip over my fingers and drip from her lips. Her eyes pierce into mine daringly, and I swear I feel the slight rolls of her hips between my thighs. Coaxing me in a way no virgin should know how.

I pull my fingers out of her mouth, my thumb collecting the tomato juice that's spilt onto her chin and swiping it over her lips.

"Why are you doing this to yourself? You'll make yourself sick if you don't eat." I sound weak, and she'll take victory in that. But I need to know the answer.

"What do you care? I'm your prisoner, just a plaything... remember?"

She wants me to break, to feed her confidence by telling her that I do care. She wants me to admit to her that she's different.

But I'm the puppet master here, and she must learn that.

"You will eat the meal on that tray and every meal that comes after it." I pull myself away from her and stand back on my feet.

"You can't make me." She shakes her head slowly, seeming disappointed at the distance I've put between our bodies.

"Liam Hayes," I say the two words that I know will put horror on her face. And it works. Immediately her eyes widen, and the confidence drops from her lips.

“Your brother, yes?” I shove a hand into one of my pockets to stop myself from touching her again. “The boy who is to put a bullet in my skull?”

“I swear if anything has happened to him...” She moves to launch at me, but something makes her stop herself and back away slowly.

“Shhhhhh,” I hush her, stroking my free hand through her shiny red locks. “Don’t worry, nothing has happened to him... Yet.” There’s a threat in my whisper that makes her shudder, and when those wolf eyes look back up at me, I swear they don’t blink.

“My men are just waiting for my call. A call I won’t have to make if you start to show a little more appreciation.”

I watch her shoulders sag with relief, and now that I have her beat, I move over to the seat positioned beside the balcony window and make myself comfortable.

“Go ahead, enjoy your meal.” I wave my finger in the direction of the food-filled tray before lighting up a cigarette and waiting for her next move.

With hate-filled eyes, Riley lifts the tray onto the bed in front of her and starts to eat. I watch every mouthful enter her lips. She must be starving after so long without food, but out of stubbornness, she eats slowly and with a disobedient elegance that makes me want to throttle her.

I wait until the plate is clean before I go to her, taking the tray and placing it back on the side table.

“Good girl. Now thank me for taking care of you so well.” I stroke my thumb over her cheek and tilt my head.

Riley scorns at me, and for a moment, I don’t think she will comply.

“Thank you.” She says the words so quietly, I almost don’t hear them. But she squeals loud enough when I take a fistful of her hair and use it to pull her up off the bed and closer to my mouth.

“Never jeopardize your health to try to fuck with me again,” I warn, throwing her back down onto the mattress and getting the hell away from her before I lose any more of my control.



I hear a gentle tap at the door, followed by clipped and efficient footsteps on the wood floor that I know belongs to Sylvia. When I peel my eyes open, I see her place a fresh tray of food on the table beside my bed before moving over to the window to strip the curtains back and let the light shine into the room.

“Good morning, Miss Riley.” She speaks chirpily, picking up the old tray from last night and placing it by the door, ready to take it away.

“How are you feeling today?” Perching on the end of my bed, she places her hands on her lap and smiles at me warmly.

“I pissed Rafe off again,” I croak, sitting up and examining the tray of food she’s brought up for me this morning. It looks delicious. There are fresh berries, granola, and another bowl beside it with, what I assume, is yogurt.

Resisting the meals she’d brought me the last few days has been challenging, especially since living on the streets taught me never to take food for granted. My hunger strike was a risk, but it got Rafe’s attention. And it also proved I could



make him hurt the same way he'd made me hurt when he fucked that nasty, blonde slut.

I don't know why, but I get a kick out of making Rafe lose his temper. Maybe it's because he only touches me when he's mad and as disgraceful as it is to admit, I like to be touched by him a whole lot.

I should be celebrating the glory of my victory right now, but it turns out Rafe had a trump card.

My brother.

Liam can handle himself. He's been protecting me for as long as I can remember. I've seen him fight men twice his size, despite barely being a man himself. I made threats to Rafe the night he brought me here, but in reality, Liam stands no chance against Rafe and the armed men he has working for him.

"Raphael isn't used to being tested." The old woman moves the breakfast tray onto my lap, encouraging me to eat.

Rafe made that clear himself when he threatened to force-feed me.

"So, is this to be my life now? Wake up, eat, shower. Put on a clean shirt, eat again. Read, eat, sleep." I stare into my yogurt and sulk as I mix it with some granola.

"I can think of worse ways to live." Sylvia sounds as if she knows the details of my past, but I doubt she does.

"He threatened my brother," I add, wondering if the kind old lady is aware of how brutal the man she works for can be. Sylvia looks like the kind of woman who goes to church every Sunday. It's hard to believe she condones kidnap and entrapment.

“Don’t underestimate him, Miss Riley.” Somehow she manages to extract the threat warmly, though her wrinkled face sags in disappointment.

“You should make amends with him. Starving yourself was a silly thing to do.” She’s looking at me judgmentally now, which surprises me. Every time she’d come in and collected one of my full trays, I was convinced she’d been amused.

I have to agree with her, though. I regret what I did now, especially knowing that it’s put Liam at risk.

“Take some air today. You’ve been holed up in this room for far too long. I’d like to see some color back in those cheeks. I think it would please Raphael, too.” She winks as she moves off the bed, picking the old tray from the floor before she leaves.

I think about what she’s said while I finish the rest of my breakfast. Keeping Rafe happy is the only way I can secure Liam’s safety, and maybe I can get my mom’s necklace back in the process.

But how do you please a man like Rafe? I know nothing about him other than the fact people seem to do whatever he asks of them.

I believe he is capable of terrible things. But at the same time, I get the sense he won’t hurt me.

Raphael is as confusing as he is intriguing, and I want to know more.

I want to know everything.

Maybe if I can figure him out a little more, getting him on-side won’t be such a challenge. I just wish being in the same room with him wasn’t so difficult. He seems to suck all the air

from around me when we're together. My mind and mouth forget all rationality, and I always end up pissing him off.

I take a shower and put on a clean shirt that's identical to the one I wore yesterday. I'm still clueless as to why I can't be provided with normal clothes, and I'm sick of the sight of white.

My door knocks around half an hour later, and when Ricardo steps inside, he's looking every bit his usual crabby self.

"I was told you might want to take some fresh air," he growls at me.

"Rafe?" I roll my eyes.

"Sylvia, actually." He takes great pleasure in correcting my mistake. So much, that he actually cracks a smile.

I place my book down and stand up from my chair. Moving to the foot of the bed to slip on my pumps.

"The air is a little stuffy in here." I tilt my head at him sarcastically as I strut past and out to the hall, knowing he'll be following closely behind.

Sylvia was right about this too. It feels good to be outside again. The lawns have recently been cut, and the flowers are all in full bloom. Rafe's gardens are kept immaculately. It's sad that more people don't get to share its beauty. Not even he seems to appreciate them. I've spent hours sitting out on my balcony since I've been here, and not once have I noticed him out here.

I find a spot under a tree and lie on the grass. Ricardo stands guard a few meters away, huffing and folding his arms as I make myself comfortable and check my panties are covered by the shirt.

Lying here with the sunbeams seeping through the leaves, and warmth dancing over my skin, it's hard to believe that I'm a prisoner. I have everything here that I'd longed for while I was sleeping in a cold, damp tent, not knowing where my next meal would be coming from.

I think back to the cells that I never thought I'd leave. Those horrors will never leave me, and I have to shut out thoughts of what would have happened to me if I'd stayed and what the innocents left behind are suffering.

Since all I have is time these days, it's hard not to think, and I've often wondered what brought Rafe to that place the day he came.

I want to believe what he told me is true and that he doesn't hurt children. Seeing how repulsed he'd looked when I'd suggested that he did, was enough to convince me. But Rafe does know about the place and its victims. He chooses to do nothing about it, and I'm not naïve enough to think he's completely innocent. He was there that day for a reason.

That reason is just another one of the many questions I want answering.

I also spend a lot of my time thinking about Liam and wondering what he's doing with himself now. He'll be lonely. I know that because my brother was never very good at making friends. He struggles to trust and never allows anyone close enough to see the real him.

I hate to think of him suffering alone.

I'd spent the majority of my time locked in my cell worrying about how he would react when he found me gone. If he'd blame himself for not being there when I was taken, or worse, think that I'd abandoned him too.

It's hard not to feel guilty for all the luxuries I have here when I think of him still out there on the streets.

I just wish I could somehow let him know that I'm safe. At least, I think I am.

I don't know how long I lie, watching the clouds pass overhead through the branches, but when Ricardo clears his throat impatiently, I open my eyes and lean up on my elbows.

"You don't have to stand there on guard. I'm sure you have something better to do," I snap at him.

"No, Miss Riley." He says the words through his teeth, his wide nostrils flaring in agitation.

"Maybe you should lie down and chill out yourself, enjoy the peace with me," I suggest.

"I don't chill out," he tells me shortly, and I sigh loudly at his response, deciding I've spent far too long with just my own thoughts.

"Do you have family, Ricardo? A life outside of the orders Rafe gives you?" I ask, craving a conversation that I don't have to decipher or worry about fucking up.

"I have a family," he answers, keeping his eyes focused ahead of him.

"A wife, girlfriend... a lover?" I raise my eyebrows suggestively, and he snaps his head to look at me.

"I have no time for women. I find them intolerable." He looks down his nose at me.

"So, you prefer men?" I shrug.

"That's not what I said... stop twisting... Oh, forget it. You've had enough fresh air, *Briga*. I'm taking you back to

your room.” He casts his huge body over mine, blocking my sun, and just as he’s about to reach down and pull me up, I remind him of something.

“I’m free to roam at my leisure. Those were the rules the last time I checked. Unless Raphael has changed them?” I challenge him, watching him snarl as he backs away and retakes his position.

I lie back down, only this time I allow myself to think about Rafe. How, whenever I’m near him, my heart beats a little faster, and a desire so desperate overtakes all my senses.

I wonder if he’s known suffering the way that me and Liam have, I get the sense that something inside him is broken. Power and control seem to be his only weapon of defense, and it almost makes me feel a little sad for him.

I’m ready to go back to my room but purposely hang on a little longer under the tree, purely just to piss off Ricardo. I want to ensure he’s suffered a heavy dose of boredom before I put him out of his misery. Then, making sure we take the rose-lined gravel path back to the house, I decide it’s time Rafe was reminded of the beauty he has in his garden.



Gioele sits awkwardly on the weight bench with his briefcase, balanced on his knees. Usually, we hold our meetings in my office, but lately, the gym on the top floor of my home has become my sanctuary. I need to do something with all the tension constantly building up inside me. So today, we discuss business while I work that tension off.

The gym is positioned in the apex center of the house and looks out on both the garden and the driveway. When I designed the house, I requested that the front and back walls up here were made entirely of glass so I had a decent backdrop while I exercised.

“What’s new, Gioele?” I ask, turning up the resistance on the treadmill and keeping my eyes fixed on the spot where Riley has chosen to lie under a tree.

“You don’t need me to tell you that your finances are secure. But I’ve done the breakdown, anyway.” Gioele, efficient as always, holds up a spreadsheet before placing it on the bench beside him.

I hire Gioele because he’s the best. He was loyal to my father for many years before he died, and now he is loyal to

me. I depend on him to take care of everything, from laundering my money to dealing with all my legal affairs. And he also keeps a solid ear to the ground.

“I’ll take a look later,” I assure him. My attention is currently fixed elsewhere. Ricardo looks pissed as hell, standing a respectful distance away from Riley while she relaxes on her back with the knee of one leg slightly raised. If I weren’t so far away, I’d see her lace panties from the angle she’s positioned herself in. Which makes me aware of the fact that if Ricardo wasn’t looking in the opposite direction, that’s exactly what he would be seeing.

“The female CIA Agent is still investigating your brother. It’s only a matter of time before she closes in on him. My source tells me she’s putting together a list of his clients.” My feet continue to thud against the treadmill as I take in what he’s saying.

“Good.” I may not be able to shut my brother’s organization down myself, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want it done. A good brother would have shared this information with him six months ago when I first learned about the case that Special Agent Helen Scott was building against him. But that would be aiding his crimes, and I want this Agent to get her job done efficiently.

I was fifteen when I discovered how my father made his fortune. He took me to work with him that day at an auction, and he explained to me how the trade worked.

The women would be taken or bought for a pittance and trained to please before being sold to the highest bidder.

Despite the immorality of it all, there was a code.



My father dealt with women but never children. Nothing underaged passed through his training program.

I stick to that code.

I often wonder what my father would think about Adriano if he was still with us. Maybe the business Adriano chooses to trade in was an intentional “fuck you” to our father for taking the younger son to work that day instead of him. But back then, Adriano didn’t have his head screwed on. He was too concerned with establishing a name for himself, making cheap dope slinger deals on street corners, and calling himself a gangster.

My father called him a liability. In my opinion, he still is. Just a very fucking rich one.

“Not all good, Raphael. There’s every chance that a few of your clients’ names could be on that list too. Not everyone works by the same ‘moral code’ as you do.” Gioele air quotes the words moral code because, like myself, he knows there’s nothing moral about the legacy I took over from my father.

I’m really working my legs against the machine now, trying to keep my mind on business while my eyes watch her. She’s twisted her body to face Ricardo and has her head resting in the hand that’s propped up by her elbow. She’s toying with him. I can tell by the way she’s picking at the grass and smiling to herself as she speaks. At least Ricardo is trying his best to remain professional.

“Have you made the donation yet?” I ask Gioele, attempting to focus on anything other than her.

“Not yet.”

“I want you to double it,” I tell him sharply, thinking about Riley and that cell my brother was keeping her in. My heart

thumps fast, and my lungs start to burn as I thrash out all my energy on the moving platform beneath my feet.

“Double? That’s one million dollars!” Gioele almost chokes.

“Can I not afford it?” I bite back sarcastically, and when I take my eyes off her to flick them over to him, I see that he’s already making a note of it in the black book he carries.

“And you’re sure you want to remain anonymous?” He checks the same as he does every year when I make my annual donation to the children in crisis charity. My answer is always the same.

“Yes.”

“I have to ask, Raphael.” He shifts his ass on the bench uncomfortably. “Why do you insist on being so generous and refuse to take any credit?”

“Generosity is a weakness,” I answer simply.

“Weakness?” Gioele shakes his head in disagreement. “Generosity shows empathy, and people love that shit.” He sniggers.

“I have no desire to impress people with empathy, Gio. If you want someone to take credit for it, then take it for yourself.” I lower the resistance to cool off, and I take a drink of water.

“Anything else?” I check, wanting this meeting over with. Riley is far too much of a distraction for me to be discussing anything important.

“There is one other thing.” Gioele has that unnerved look on his face that I fucking hate.

“Speak.” I step off the treadmill and pick up my towel, wiping it over my brow before draping it around my neck.

“Your will. It’s our policy to update it every five years.”

“Your policy, not mine,” I remind the old man, taking more water and catching my breath.

“Yes,” he agrees. “But still a matter we need to discuss.”

“So, renew it.” I shrug, leaning my back against the giant apex beam and staring out at Riley again through the glass. She’s got Ricardo riled up about something, and it makes me grin to myself.

“It’s just that, well...”

“Spit it out, Gio,” I snap impatiently. If there’s one thing I can’t tolerate, it’s dithering. I don’t have time for useless words.

“I just feel that having the old woman as your soul benefice isn’t enough. We should make additions in case she is no longer... with us.” He reels that last part off quickly because he knows of my affection for Sylvia.

I watch Riley stand up from under the tree, her hands brushing any stray blades of grass from her ass, as she follows Ricardo back toward the house.

“Are there any other people you’d like to see taken care of if anything should happen to you?” he asks me, trying his best to be tactful. Gioele’s known me long enough to know that there are few things in this world I care for.

Something hollow scrapes at my chest when I think back to how different my life could have turned out. I doubt I’d have a fortune to worry about leaving behind, but I wouldn’t feel as lonely as I do right this second.

“I’ll think on it,” I tell him, avoiding eye contact with my father’s old best friend and watching Riley walk along the gravel path. She stops to smell the roses as I hear Gioele’s briefcase click shut, signaling that business is done for the day. I’m surprised when he comes and stands beside me, admiring the same view I am.

“Beautiful,” he comments, watching Riley pick the biggest, brightest rose from the bush. I can’t help smiling to myself when I consider punishing her for it.

“I assume she is the young lady you had me look into last week,” he says, keeping his eyes on her as she brings her finger to her lips and sucks it. She must have pricked herself with a thorn, and I bite my own lip when I imagine sucking it for her.

“Do you ever think about getting out of the business, Raphael? You’ve made a fortune ten times over. You could retire very comfortably.”

I wonder if Gioele ever asked my father that question?

“I thought about it once, a long time ago,” I admit, ignoring the sting it puts in my heart.

Riley’s smiling to herself now, and as she disappears inside the house, I move my attention back to Gioele.

“And now?” he asks.

“I’m not as naïve as I was back then.” I leave him to make his own judgment on that comment and head toward the shower room.

When I get out of the shower a little while later, Gio has left, so I get dressed and return to my office to make some calls.

I come to an abrupt halt when I reach my office door and notice something waiting for me on the floor. Crouching down, I lift up the delicate red rose that's been left in front of my door, and when I raise it to my nose, I inhale the same sweet scent that Riley had. I appreciate how the petals are so delicate and fragile. It would be so easy to crush them in my palm and destroy them. But instead, I softly brush my thumb over their velvet texture and decide that some beauties should be preserved.

Opening the door to my office, I take Riley's gift with me and place it on my desk. I can hardly punish the girl for giving me a gift, especially since it's such a rarity for me to receive one.

As I stare at the rose in my hand, I find it ironic that the last thing I was gifted was her. My brother rarely shows kindness toward me or anyone else, for that matter. Maybe he knew how testing she'd be for me and liked the idea of me suffering. He's always been a fan of wicked games.

Attempting to punish Riley seems to feel much more like a punishment for myself. I've broken many women over the years, so why is this one so challenging?

The answer to that question might be because I don't want to break her at all, but I push the thought to the back of my mind. It's stupid.

Just like the thought that keeps suggesting she could be the one to break me.



I'm just getting out of the shower when I hear my bedroom door knock. Quickly grabbing a towel to wrap it around myself, I'm expecting either Sylvia or Ricardo to let themselves in.

A louder, sharper tap follows. Making me wonder if it's a different guard. Whoever it is, seems to have the courtesy of waiting for an invitation, so I hurry from the bathroom to pull it open, still dripping wet.

I almost gasp when I find Rafe standing on the other side. His arms folded, and his index finger brushing over that thick bottom lip of his.

"Good afternoon, Riley," he says politely, his raspy Italian accent making my stomach somersault.

Either he's here to thank me for the gift I left for him by his office door, or he's going to punish me for helping myself to something from his garden. I'm struggling to read the expression on his face.

"Your dinner will be served downstairs this evening with me." His eyes scan over my wet, barely covered body, and it

makes the tiny droplets of water trailing my skin suddenly slice into me like glass.

I hate the way my body reacts to him.

“Is that an order or an invitation?” I ask, ensuring that the towel I’m wearing is secure where I’ve tucked it around my chest and holding it firm.

“On this occasion, it’s an invitation.” His tone suggests that’s a privilege.

Arrogant bastard.

“If you don’t wish to eat with me, I will have Sylvia bring you something up.” He rests his shoulder against the door frame and crosses his feet, his attention falling entirely below eye level now.

“I’ll be there,” I answer far too quickly, and that causes him amusement because the hint of a smirk finds his lips, and it looks really good on him.

“Then I shall see you later.” Rafe nudges himself away from the door frame, rubbing his lips together as he scrutinizes my body one last time.

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I make my way down the stairs at 7pm sharp, although I’ve been sitting ready for ages in my room. It’s not like I’ve had to waste time worrying about what I should wear to this dinner.

Moving barefoot through the hall, I notice the absence of Ricardo, and I wonder if I should knock when I’m standing in front of the dining room door. Deciding it’s the polite thing to do, I tap my knuckles against the wood and wait for a

response. After a few seconds of waiting in silence, I push the door open to peek inside.

The dining room is empty, and the table's not been set. Maybe this is another one of Rafe's cruel taunts. If it is, have I really let myself get so excited about sharing a meal with him that I'd allow myself to feel betrayed by it?

I turn and march toward the kitchen, looking for Sylvia, and my feet draw to a halt when I open the kitchen door. Instead of finding Sylvia, I find him.

The kitchen is much more homely than I expected. Sylvia tells me that she caters for everyone, including the guards, so I was expecting something more industrial. The fact she does it from such a warm, cozy space takes me a little by surprise. Not nearly as much as the shock of seeing Rafe standing over the stove, though. Tonight he's dressed in jeans, and the black t-shirt he's wearing emphasizes every perfect muscle of his upper body as he casually stirs the pan.

"Take a seat," he gestures over to the small table on the other side of the kitchen island that's been set for two, and I still in shock. I move to do as he requests, skimming my fingers over the solid oak worktop and taking in the dark wood cabinets that surround the room.

I try to stop the smile from creeping onto my face as I take a seat and notice the single red rose that I picked for him earlier, sitting on display in a crystal vase in the center of the table.

I sit back and watch Rafe cook. Strangely, he doesn't look as out of place as I thought he would as he moves around the kitchen. He almost looks as if he's enjoying himself.



A few minutes later, he comes toward me carrying two plates, placing one in front of me before taking the seat opposite.

I stare across at him in confusion.

“You don’t like risotto?” He pouts, picking up his fork and looking at me as if all this is perfectly normal, and after realizing how long I’ve been staring at him, I quickly shake myself out of my trance.

“I’ve never eaten risotto before. It looks good, though,” I admit, picking up my own fork and starting to eat.

Rafe pours us both a glass of wine while I swallow down all the questions that are burning my tongue and enjoy the delicious food on my plate.

“I want to know more about you.” Rafe narrows his eyes as if he’s uncomfortable with that fact.

“What do you wanna know?” I shrug, taking a sip of the wine and staring at him over the rim of my glass. Why does he have to be so handsome? All of this would be so much simpler if he didn’t have the jawline of a Greek god and the body of a saint.

“I want to know how you ended up living on the streets.” His comment throws me off. Sure, I knew Rafe must have done some digging into my past to know my brother’s name, but it seems he delved a little deeper than just my family tree.

“You seem to know enough about me to figure that out yourself.” I avoid the question. This is a nice setup, but it’s not going to make me forget what kind of man Rafe is. He’s sure to use whatever I tell him as a weapon against me somewhere down the line.

“I could demand you tell me,” he warns, and although at this moment he doesn’t look very threatening, I’ve already figured that the man in front of me doesn’t make empty threats.

“Fine. Me and my brother went into the system after our mom died. We were lucky enough to stay together, but we got placed in some pretty sketchy foster homes,” I explain, taking another sip of wine. Rafe is watching me so intently it seems he’s genuinely interested.

“Liam figured he could take better care of me himself, so we ran, and we kept on running.” I make it sound so simple when in reality, it was hell. We were constantly looking over our shoulders and waiting for the authorities to find us and drag us back, sleeping in a tent through the winter and struggling to make a fire with frozen hands.

“And did he... take care of you?” Rafe asks. There’s a hint of concern in his tone and a crease in his forehead that I’ve never seen there before.

“Well, I’m alive, and I still have my chastity, so yeah, I guess he did,” I answer back sarcastically.

“He allowed you to be taken by Adriano’s men,” Rafe points out matter-of-factly, noticing my glass is empty and topping it up again.

“He wasn’t there when I was taken. It wouldn’t have happened if he was,” I snap back. I won’t have him suggest that Liam is to blame for the situation I’m in.

Rafe nods back slowly, seeming to accept my answer before continuing to eat his dinner. And I see an opportunity, so I take it.

“Why were you there that day? What link do you have to that place?” I ask, despite fearing the answer.

Rafe looks at me cautiously, and I wonder for a moment if he’s going to ignore my question completely.

“I’m assuming you want an honest answer to that question.” He places down his fork, picks up his glass, and rests back in his chair.

“Always.” I nod.

“Adriano, the man who was keeping you. He is my brother.” His voice comes out bitter, and I feel my eyes stretch wide with shock.

How have I not put that together before? The men may look different, but they both have the same skin tone and the same accent. I can even vaguely recall the vile man calling Rafe brother inside my cell. I just assumed he called people that, like the people on the street did.

“He hurts children.” It’s my turn to point out facts now. How can Rafe sit here and be okay with what his brother does?

“I don’t condone that, and if I could stop him, I would.” His top lip curls into a snarl.

“I find that hard to believe.” My mouth runs before my head can filter.

“That’s not up for discussion.” Rafe moves to pick up our empty plates and takes them away from the table.

“Why haven’t you raped me yet?” Another question blurts from my mouth before I have the ability to stop it, and it causes Rafe to stop dead in his tracks. I feel his anger before he even turns around, and he slams the plates down on the

island so hard it's a miracle that they don't smash. When he turns to face me, his wild, furious eyes focus hard on mine.

“What makes you think I would rape you, Riley?” he asks, with barely any control left in his voice.

“Everything you said to your brother when we were in that cell. You said you wanted to ruin me, to break me, and to fuck me so hard I prayed for God's mercy.” I recite his words back to him as I stand up and step toward him. My confidence seems to build with every step I take closer.

Rafe's Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he looks down my body, and that tick he makes with his jaw when he's irritated causes my insides to throb.

My breath gets caught in my mouth when he moves impulsively, lifting me off my feet and slamming me onto the kitchen island just as harshly as he had the plates.

His hips force my legs apart, and I do nothing to resist him as he stands between them. We're eye level now, and his pupils swirl with threat and desire as he pierces them into mine.

“You take too much pleasure in trying my patience, *Briga*,” he tells me cruelly, ruining another one of his shirts when he tears the front of this one open too.

I suck in more oxygen as his dark eyes follow the index finger he lightly trails along the opening of the shirt, all the way from my collar to my stomach. My heart beats out of my chest, and my pussy weeps for his attention as his touch nears it. I crave this man's touch like a drug, and he's giving it to me in such small doses that I'm close to begging him for more.

But I won't.

His finger reaches the waist of my panties, and his hand makes a diversion as it slides around my hip, taking a firm hold and thrusting me closer to him. I feel him resting between my thighs, stiff beneath his denim and teasing against my lace. And I bite down on my lip to stop myself from moaning, or worse, pleading with him to give me more.

Rafe's free hand moves up my neck, his fingers curling into my hair to cradle my head behind my ear.

"I want so much more from you than that, Riley," he whispers into my ear, and his thumb presses into my hip bone so deep that I feel it bruising.

"When I fuck you, it will be because you've submitted yourself to me. Not because I force you."

I should tell him that he will be waiting for that day to come forever because it won't happen. But I don't have that much faith in myself. Not while he's holding me like this, and my body is screaming out for him.

His low, breathy voice sets off a trigger that has me mercilessly rubbing myself against the front of his jeans, and it drives me insane when he doesn't react to it.

"I'd like you to spend the evening with me," he admits as his hands slip away from me, and when he takes a step back, I instantly miss his contact. "We could take a walk outside together or watch something on television." He shrugs his shoulders, acting like he's suddenly turned shy.

I want to pull him back onto me, wrap my body around his, and sub-fucking-mit my soul. But I've already given this man far too much. I won't give him that too.

"Sure." Sliding off the island, I manage to keep myself composed.

I'm wet between my legs, and my skin feels like it's on fire, but I'll be damned if I'm about to let him know that.

"I'll go get my shoes." I try to walk instead of scurrying as I leave the room and Rafe behind me. And it's not until I'm alone in the hall that I allow myself to breathe out all the frustration I've been holding in.

"Something got you flustered, *Briga?*" Ricardo's voice reaches me just before he steps out of the shadows beneath the staircase. He's got a smug grin on his face that I want to claw off with my fingernails.

"Fuck you, Ricardo." I purposefully don't answer his question, keeping my head held high as I rush past him to go get my shoes.



I could have taken her right there, and she'd have thanked me for it. Riley isn't as good at deception as she thinks she is. Her eyes give her away almost as much as that needy little body of hers.

I'll give her credit for one thing, though. She is the master of distraction. She somehow managed to turn all the conversation on me during dinner, and I've learned very little about her other than the fact she's fiercely protective of her brother.

I wait for her in the hall while she goes upstairs to get her shoes. If I was treating her like any of the girls I've trained in the past, she wouldn't be permitted them. She'd be crawling instead of walking, trained to my heel, and receive lashes if she didn't obey. The thought of Riley on her hands and knees, with her ass up, does nothing to calm down my cock.

She appears a few moments later, her hand sliding along the banister as she races down the stairs like an excited child. I know how much Riley likes the garden. Before her little hunger strike, she'd spend hours outside, roaming the lawns and laying in the sun.

I enjoyed watching her. It's all I seem to be doing these days. Admiring Riley from a distance is the safest option while I learn how to get a hold of myself.

For once, I'm the one who needs to be tamed because being around Riley Hayes reminds me of everything I could have had and everything I lost.

She feels like a second chance, one that I'm determined to get right.

When she reaches the bottom step, I offer her my arm, and the poor girl wears a dreamy smile on her face as I lead her out to the garden through the conservatory. The gravel path is lit up with twinkling lights, and the way they glow around Riley is so painfully beautiful. I want to feel her hair slip between my fingers and kiss her lips until they swell.

"You have a beautiful garden," she tells me as we walk down the path, with the sweet scent of roses filling the cool night air around us.

"I'm glad you take pleasure in it," I admit. She doesn't need to know that ever since she came here, I've been taking so much more pleasure in it myself.

"When I'm out here, I don't feel like I'm a prisoner. This all seems more like a vacation," she admits cheerily, and for some reason, her words hit me straight in the guts.

It doesn't matter how I look at the situation or how hard I try to make her comfortable here—the girl still sees herself as a prisoner.

She has no idea.

"Maybe that's exactly how you should look at it," I tell her when we get to the end of the path. "You may not like the situation you've found yourself in, but it would have been a lot



worse if you were still with Adriano.” I don’t mean for my words to come out so harshly, but it’s a truth that she should be aware of and one I shouldn’t have to explain to her.

“Are you telling me that you saved me?” She looks up at me through her lashes, and I wonder if the innocence she’s penetrating is genuine or a fake lure.

“That’s for you to decide.” I shrug my shoulders. Acting like her opinion doesn’t bother me as I keep us moving onto the lawn toward the small lake. It will be satisfying to admire her from down there. The moon isn’t quite full, but it’s bright enough to reflect off the water.

I show her to the bench positioned at the water’s edge and wait until she’s sitting before taking a seat beside her. Of course, I’m right, the blues and grays from the moonlight, combined with the tiny ripples reflecting from the water, produce the perfect glow on her skin. And those crystal eyes of hers sparkle like she wasn’t made for this world.

Riley stares out at the water, taking in the pretty view in front of us. But to me, it all seems so irrelevant when compared to her.

Is it normal to want something so much that it physically hurts you inside?

Eventually, her head turns toward me, and she smiles awkwardly when she catches me staring. Something’s changed in her since she left the kitchen. She seems to have lost all her sass. Out here she’s giving cute, vulnerable vibes and almost coming across as appreciative.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.” I crease my brow, curious to what thoughts are swirling around inside her head.

“I assume you want an honest answer?” She repeats the response I gave her when she asked me what I was doing at Adriano’s place.

“Always.” I mimic her right back, earning myself another of her bright smiles.

“I’m wondering why you’re so angry at the world when you have everything,”

“I don’t have everything,” I correct her, and she doesn’t argue with me like I expect her to.

“But you *are* angry at the world,” she states, shifting her body slightly, so it angles toward me and shows how interested she is in my response.

“The world is a cruel place.” I stare out at the water, avoiding her eyes. I don’t want Riley to know that I play my own part in making it that way.

“And the world has been cruel to you?” She pushes for more. Always so curious.

“It’s cruel to us all, Riley,” I answer, hoping that she’ll leave it there.

She’ll never know just how cruel the world has been to me. My story isn’t one that should be shared on nights like tonight while surrounded by beautiful things. My past is ugly and tainted. The scars from it may not be visible, but I feel them, and they’ll go to the grave with me.

“You’re right there.” She laughs to herself sadly.

I’ve been asking myself a question for a few days now, trying to reach an answer by analyzing her, but I figure simply asking her would be the best way to settle my own debate.

“Can I trust you?” I ask, staring at her hard. She needs to know how serious I am about this. “If you had the opportunity to run from me, would you take it?”

She looks thoughtful, suggesting I’m about to get an honest answer out of her.

“Where would I run to?” she asks sadly, her eyes fixing on mine again and carving another piece of me away.

“Your brother.” I provide her with the most obvious answer, one I know she would have thought about.

“That would be foolish. You told me yourself you have men on him. If I run to him, I’d make finding me too easy for you.” Her answer at least proves that she believes my threat to her brother is real.

It also proves she’s smart.

“So yes, you can trust me. That, and the fact I know Ricardo would love an opportunity to shoot at my head, keeps me here.”

I let myself laugh with her on that one. The sound of it is addictive. I can’t remember the last time I made someone laugh.

“Rafe?” Her smile quickly fades.

“Yes?” I whisper, suddenly feeling the need to be closer to her.

“If you took me from Adriano to save me. Why haven’t you let me go?”

She flinches when my hand raises up to her neck. Then her eyes look down toward my fingers as if she’s shocked at the softness I touch her with. Her skin is slightly chilled from the evening air and the lack of clothes she’s wearing, and I slide

the arch of my hand to her chin and slowly push my thumb across her plump bottom lip, watching her eyes burn into me curiously.

I could tell her the real reason, but I don't want her to see the vulnerability in me. And I won't lie to her any more than I have to.

"It's getting cold. We should head back inside." I stand up and offer her my hand. Riley looks disappointed at her failure to get an answer, but she takes it regardless and allows me to guide her back into the house.

I walk her all the way to her bedroom door and nod for the guard, Luca, to step away and give us some privacy.

"Thanks for dinner and for taking a walk with me. Who knew you were capable of actually being a gentleman?" She nudges me with her shoulder playfully.

"I'm taking you to a party tomorrow night." The words come out spontaneously, and they must take her by surprise because her pretty blues double in size.

The event I'm attending is much more of a business obligation than a party, but I don't tell her that. Gioele tells me it's important that I show my face at least a few of these functions a year. We have to keep up appearances for the company we launder my cash through.

"A party," Riley checks, trying to dampen the excitement from her voice.

"You don't like parties?" I tease.

"I haven't been to one since I was twelve," she admits awkwardly.

This girl's so damn cute. My cock craves to corrupt her.

“I’ll have Sylvia arrange something appropriate for you to wear.” I gently tug at the front of the shirt she’s wearing. As much as I like her like this, I’m not about to treat the guests at Maria Collin’s party to a full view of what’s mine. My guards getting a look at her is bad enough.

“Why don’t you take that blonde friend of yours?” She crosses her arms defiantly. I was wondering how long it would take the bratty side of her to unleash itself again.

“I don’t care much for blondes.” I lean in toward her and whisper, causing those straight stubborn lips of hers to twitch into a smile.

“And if I try to run?” she tests, so I decide to play her game.

Stepping my body into hers, I overpower her tiny frame. My lips are so close to her mouth that kissing her would be easy. God, I want to kiss her.

“Where you gonna run to, Riley?” I threaten her with her own words, and it makes her take a step away from me.

The way she stares back at me with her head slightly tilted somehow makes those lips of hers even more irresistible. I want to taste them, to fuck them, and to feel them all over my skin.

“Goodnight, Raphael,” she whispers, stretching up on her toes so her lips touch my bristly jaw. It takes all of my composure not to push her into the wall and devour her. But I fear that once I do. I’ll never want to stop, and that would be fatal.

For her and for me.



It's early afternoon when Sylvia bursts into my bedroom with a garment bag draped over her arm. She smiles at me as she hangs it on the front of the wardrobe, then stands beside it like she's expecting me to say something.

Of course, I'm excited about tonight. I have been ever since Rafe told me we were leaving the house. But I'm also nervous as hell. I've never been to an adult party before, and I'm finding this whole situation really confusing. Especially since I have no idea what Rafe's expectations are of me.

"Come on, put me out of my misery. I want to see it." Sylvia shuffles on her feet excitedly. I'm sure last night Rafe told me that she would be the one arranging what I'd be wearing. Or maybe I was just too focused on wanting his fucking lips on me that I wasn't listening properly.

I pull the zip down the center of the bag and gasp out loud when I see what's inside. The dress is gorgeous, electric blue, and made of lace. The neckline, shoulders, and long sleeves are all see-through, and it looks far too grand for me to wear.

"Mmmm, a little short in my personal opinion, but I'm sure your legs will carry it off, dear." Sylvia looks

disapprovingly at where the dress cuts off. She's right— it is very on the short side. It will barely cover my thighs once it's on, but at the same time, it's classy and elegant.

“Raphael says to be ready for seven.” Sylvia goes to leave, but I reach out for her hand and pull her back.

“Please stay. I've never had to get ready for a party before,” I admit, feeling my cheeks flush when I hear how pathetic that sounds.

“I don't think I'll be much use to you.” The old woman chuckles to herself.

“Just keep me company while I'm getting ready. It'll help calm my nerves,” I beg, and thankfully she decides to take pity on me, blowing out a breath before sitting herself on the stool beside my vanity station.

“Do you think I should wear my hair up or down?” I stand in front of the full-length mirror, scrunching my hair in my hand and testing how it looks piled on top of my head.

“Raphael likes it when you wear it in that braid, the one you do when it falls over your shoulder.” She waves her finger at me while her other hand helps itself to a strawberry bon bon from the sweet bowl beside her.

“He told you that?” I ask, surprised. I can't imagine Rafe talking to Sylvia or anyone else about me unless it's giving them an order.

“Don't be silly. Raphael doesn't admit to having weaknesses.” She chuckles. “I know because I've known him for a long time. He does this weird thing with his mouth when you wear your hair that way.” She tries to copy one of Rafe's expressions, attempting to tense her wrinkly jaw and making her bottom lip disappear into her mouth. It makes me giggle.

“Trust me...” She stands up from the stool and steps up behind me, taking my hair in her hand and twisting it together as she hangs it over my shoulder. “...You have an effect on him that I’ve never seen before.”

“You really care about him, don’t you?” I study the warmth on her face through the mirror.

“With my whole heart,” she answers sincerely. “Raphael is the closest to a son I’ll ever have.” She smiles fondly back at me through our reflection.

It gives me a little hope. Surely, Rafe can’t be that bad a person if he has the affection of someone like Sylvia.

A knock at the door startles us both, and Sylvia rushes off to answer it. When I peek over my shoulder, I notice Ricardo handing over a shoe box and a small brown paper bag. The frown doesn’t budge from his face, even when Sylvia thanks him.

“Shoes and makeup,” she explains, placing the shoes on the bed and then starting to empty the contents of the bag onto the vanity.

“Let’s get you ready.” Armed with a brand-new makeup brush, she comes at me.

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It’s almost time to leave, and I’ve been ready for over an hour. Sylvia had to go and prepare dinner for Rafe’s staff. So I’ve been alone, pacing the floor in my room and growing more anxious by the second. I’ve checked and reapplied my lip gloss twice, I’ve practiced walking in these far too high-heeled shoes that match the color of the dress I’m wearing, and now



I'm watching the clock tick through the final few minutes before it's time to leave.

I check myself in the mirror one last time. The dress Rafe provided fits like it was made for me, and I tug it down over my thighs for what has to be the twentieth time since I put it on before stepping out into the corridor. The guard at my door does a double take when he sees me. Up to now, he's only ever seen me wearing a white shirt, and I nod him a polite smile as I proceed toward the stairs. I hear the door behind me click open and quickly spin around. My tummy flips when I take in the sight of Raphael stepping out of his room, setting the cuffs of his tuxedo jacket in place. He stops when he sees me, his eyes absorbing me as they make a path from my shoes to my thighs and then over the lace that covers my body.

He looks so handsome in a suit that it steals all the breath from my lungs. And when he smiles that wicked smile from beneath his hooded eyes, I have to stop myself from running at him and climbing him.

"You look beautiful." He steps toward me, his finger reaching up to touch one of the loose strands of hair that settle around my face, then looking between us, he admires my dress.

"Sylvia has exceptional taste." His smirk confirms my suspicions that Sylvia had absolutely nothing to do with what I'm wearing. I watch his hand move around my body, gently resting on my ass and turning me around to guide me toward the stairs.

He keeps it there as we move through the house, and by the time we get to the car, my skin is prickling for more of his touch.

Ricardo stands waiting by the car, and he opens the back door as soon as he sees us. I thank him sarcastically as I get inside, then shuffle over the seat to make room for Rafe beside me.

“Thank you,” I feel an urge to show Rafe my gratitude as the car pulls out of the huge iron gates.

“For what?” He looks back at me, furrowing his brow as if I’ve confused him.

“The dress, the shoes, no one’s ever given me gifts like these before,” I explain, running my fingers over the expensive dress I’m wearing. None of what’s happening to me feels real. Of all the things I thought I’d be feeling when I was taken by this man, privileged wasn’t one of them.

“You’re welcome.” He lifts his chin at me, but it’s clear that my appreciation has disturbed him.

“So what kind of party is this?” I attempt to make more conversation while keeping the excitement in my voice to a minimum.

“A boring one,” Rafe tells me flatly, his fingers tapping impatiently at the door handle and his eyes now avoiding contact with mine.

“Is there such a thing as a boring party?” I laugh awkwardly. Despite how strange this all is, I want to have a good time tonight. Rafe is such a serious person I struggle to imagine him having fun.

“Maria Collins is a very renowned interior designer. She likes to invite people into her home to admire her things and tell her how wonderful she is,” Rafe explains.

“And you use her?” I ask.

“No!” He turns his head and shakes it at me defensively. This man is far too easy to offend.

“You said that you buy, you improve, and then you sell. I assumed an interior designer would play a fundamental role in that,” I point out, facing away from him to look out the window. I have no idea what’s gotten into him since I took the courtesy of thanking him. Silly me for thinking some gratitude would be well received.

His heavy sigh is followed by his hand sliding onto my knee, and his bare flesh against mine instantly sets a tingle over my skin.

“I didn’t mean to snap,” he rasps quietly, though he doesn’t sound apologetic at all.

“Why are you so tense?” I throw him a side glance, trying to ignore the heat flushing under my skin where he’s touching me.

“I don’t like parties. I only go to them out of obligation.” His hand slowly slips up the inside of my thigh, stopping just before his fingertips disappear under my dress. I hold my breath, anticipating how they might feel, skimming the front of my panties. But he closes his eyes like he’s disappointed in himself and moves his hand away.

“Why are you scared of me?” I blurt out, curious but mostly frustrated. Which, given the scenario, I’m in, is really screwed up. Maybe my chat with Sylvia earlier has given me too much confidence. Or perhaps I just want to provoke a reaction from him. Rafe can play games and make as many threats as he likes, but something holds him back from taking what he wants from me.

“Scared of you?” he sniggers cruelly. “I think you give yourself too much credit.” His eyes look down his nose at me.

“Yes, scared of me.” I stand strong, despite my stomach being in knots. “I think that you fear losing control.” I put my prediction to him bluntly. “And I think you’re scared you’ll hurt me.”

“I’m not scared of you, Riley, and believe me, I wouldn’t worry about hurting you.” Rafe is close to losing his temper. I can feel that thin cord of restraint stretching to its limit.

“Well then, why don’t you take what you want?” I make sure I look him in the eyes and try to keep the tremble from my voice.

“You’re very confident tonight, Riley Hayes.” Hearing him say my full name for the first time makes my pulse quicken. It’s distracting enough for me to be startled when he grabs my arm and roughly drags me onto the floor in front of him. He stretches his legs open, and I manage to balance myself on my knees as he positions me between his thighs.

“Let’s put that confidence to the test, shall we?” He licks his lip and watches my reaction as he unzips the front of his tuxedo pants. His palm slides under the waistband of his boxer shorts and rubs over his cock while he watches my reaction. He gets a good one when he pulls himself free, holding his cock in his fist and displaying it to me. My mouth dries, and I swallow thickly because Rafe is huge... The thing must reach past his belly button, and I watch in wonderment as his fist makes long, forceful strokes up and down his thick, lengthy shaft. I’d struggle to wrap my hand around that, let alone take it inside me.

Rafe watches me, watching him. His teeth sunk deep into his bottom lip as his eyes penetrate mine, and though my

stomach flutters with nerves, my fingers long to reach out and touch him. My mouth craves the taste of the glistening tip that pushes through the tight fist he's made, and I glance over my shoulder at the partition between us and the front of the car, wondering if Ricardo or the driver has any idea what's going on here.

"They can't hear us," Rafe says, grabbing my braid in the hand that isn't working his cock and forcing my attention back onto him.

"Who's looking scared now, Riley?" He smiles at me wickedly, swiping his thumb over my bottom lip before using my braid to tug me closer. Close enough that my lips are almost on it, and it takes all my willpower not to reach out my tongue and touch him with it.

"Do you want it?" He looks down at himself and slides his thumb over the tip of his cock, gathering what's leaked and smearing it over my lips.

I find myself nodding as my tongue automatically slips through them to get a taste of him.

This satisfies him. He smiles at me again before returning his hand to his cock.

"Where do you want it, Riley?" His fist pumps faster, the long hard strokes making his cock look even more intimidating.

"My mouth," I admit, closing my eyes shamefully. I can still taste him on my tongue. My lips are sticky, and I want more of it. Rafe's hand grips into my hair tighter, nearing the point of pain, but I like the shiver it sends down my spine.

"And inside me," I add because, despite his size and how intimidating it looks, my insides suddenly feel hollow.

“Is that an invitation or a demand?” he toys with me, again using my words from yesterday back at me in the glory of his defeat.

I scowl at him, refusing an answer.

“I think you’d like me to lose control with you, Riley.” Rafe’s voice comes out strained. “I think you want me to make you hurt. You want me to fuck the innocence out of your pretty little body until you scream for me to stop.”

I feel myself nodding back at him involuntarily.

“And that is exactly why I won’t.” His words come out of nowhere, spearing into me like an icicle.

“You forget too easily who holds the power between us.” He continues to jack himself so hard that I see the tension in his knuckles. “I may keep you well and ensure you’re fed and comfortable, but I starve you of what you really need, Riley.” His eyes narrow at me.

“Show me your tongue,” he orders, his accent heavy through his breaths.

I hate myself for automatically complying with his demands.

“I’m going to paint that pretty little tongue of yours.” He thrusts his ass in the seat and forces my head down so his cock is even closer to my mouth, and like his pathetic puppet, I keep my mouth wide open and my tongue on display to him.

“You, Riley Hayes, are going to taste me in your mouth all fucking night,” he tells me, all the muscles in his neck straining as his cock presses against my tongue.

“Fuck!” He loses control, tugging at my hair and forcing himself right to the back of my throat. I can’t take him all, and

I gag and choke around his pulsing cock as it spills against my tongue. I gag as I try to swallow him down the best I can. My mouth is so full of him that it makes the task difficult. But hearing him moan and watching him lose a little of his restraint encourages me to please him.

My eyes sting with tears, and my throat is raw as he pulls himself away from me, and his hand wraps under my chin, forcing my lips together. His dark eyes stare harshly into mine as his thumb rolls over them, and I almost tumble backward when he carelessly releases me.

And as he casually tucks himself back into his suit, I try to think of something clever to say. Something that will get under his skin and irritate him the same way he has me.

But on this occasion, I'm speechless.



When the car pulls to a stop outside Maria Collin's house, I don't have the patience to wait for Ricardo or my driver, Lucian, to open the door for me. I let myself out, allowing myself a few moments to breathe before I offer my hand to Riley.

As if being confined in a tight space with her looking like she does wasn't provoking enough, the girl's smart little mouth just had to run away with itself and get her in trouble.

Riley seems to know exactly how to push all my buttons. She tests me in a way no one else has ever dared. And it makes me want to pound her little pussy so hard that she feels me inside her for a lifetime.

It doesn't matter how much she irritates me, I can't get enough, and I can't remember a time when I've ever obsessed over something the way I do her.

It's unhealthy but also unavoidable.

Riley takes my hand and forces a smile as she steps out of the car. She's fixed her hair and reapplied her lip gloss since I fed her my cum, but she still looks flustered as fuck.



She hasn't spoken to me since, and I'd got to thinking during that silence. The fact that having her lips wrapped around my cock has only made me want her more has drawn me to the conclusion that this whole thing is a bad idea.

"Raphael." Maria greets me with two air kisses at the door, managing to find space for a shocked smile on her overly made-up face when she notices Riley.

"And I see you brought a friend."

"Riley." Riley holds out her hand, introducing herself confidently, and Maria takes it, greeting her warmly.

"Please help yourself to drinks. Gioele is in there somewhere." She waves us on through, and I check over my shoulder for Ricardo, who nods at me before heading off to scout. I never drop my guard when I'm in public. The armed guards that patrol my property aren't just there for keeping Riley in.

Finding a waiter, I take two champagne flutes from his tray, handing one to Riley and making a quick scan of the room myself. I spot Gioele brown nosing some high-class middle-aged women who he no doubt intends to make his latest investment, and when I raise my glass to him, concern instantly masks his well-rehearsed smile.

"I want you to stay close to me," I whisper, tucking my arm around Riley's waist and tugging her closer. Something is wrong, I can sense it. "No tricks or smart moves here. Understood?" I warn.

"Or you'll do what? Choke me with your monster cock again," she swipes at me harshly, and I spit the mouthful of champagne I've just taken back into my glass to stop it from going up my nose.

When I look back at her, she's smiling, and I don't know if I want to laugh or throttle her for it.

I turn us away from the people in the room, making sure my body is flush with hers as I lower my eyes between us.

"I'll do much worse than choke you with it," I threaten, watching that devilish little smirk drop from her face. I drill deadly serious eyes into hers until the intensity gets too much, and she has to look away from me.

When I turn back around, Gioele has abandoned his conversation and is working as fast as he can through the people gathered between us to get to me.

"Raphael, you actually came. And you brought a guest." He looks at Riley nervously, keeping a smile fixed on his face.

"Of course, I came. You told me it was important, did you not?" I take another sip from my glass, doing my best to remain composed.

"Boss, we got a problem," Ricardo's voice speaks into my ear as he approaches from behind.

I turn my back on Riley to shield her from the conversation.

"What is this problem?" I ask him quietly, nodding politely to the friend of Maria's, who's running for senator, when he passes.

"Samuele is here," he informs me with the same worried look on his face as Gioele.

Samuele Benetti claims to be my competitor, but that's him talking shit. I'll give him his credit, though, the guy's picked himself up over the past few years. He has a few houses and

many women, but he runs a far less classy enterprise than I do. He's much more of a pimp than an entrepreneur.

My brother must fear him and his family because he shows him far too much respect. Samuele makes the mistake of expecting the same treatment from me.

He's still young, immature, and relies too much on his family name. The Benetti's used to make their money out of narcotics. I've always stayed out of their affairs, and they've stayed out of mine. Until their youngest hotshot decided he wanted to expand into my field of business.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" I throw the question between Ricardo and Gioele.

"Hell knows, but I will warn you, the last thing I heard was he was purchasing firearms," Gioele speaks up.

"Russians?" I maintain a low voice so Riley doesn't hear, although when I check, she's far too distracted by one of Maria's obscure paintings.

"Not directly. The Russians run their supply through a motorcycle gang based east of here." He tells me that as if I should care. I have no interest in fake motorcycle enthusiasts dealing weapons to make a quick buck. What I do have an interest in is Samuele being at the same party as me. A very legitimate party, with very legitimate guests. And one I've chosen to bring Riley to.

"Does he have men here?" I check, relieved when Ricardo shakes his head.

"We'll have no trouble from him here, boss." He shifts his suit jacket slightly, allowing Gioele to see that he's carrying.

"Looks like baby Benetti is trying to build himself an empire." I snigger, looking over my shoulder to check Riley

again. I should never have brought her here, but in my defense, how could I have predicted that my two very different business worlds would cross paths at one of Maria's cocktail parties? The woman's so straight she doesn't even offer out blow to her guests.

"I can't leave now—he'll let it go to his head," I think out loud, and Gioele nods his agreement.

"Maybe he's here because he wishes to talk on neutral ground," he suggests. "You remember what happened last time you two talked?" He raises one of his bushy eyebrows at me.

I remember it well. Samuele lost two of his men that day. You'd think the boy would have learned his lesson.

"What's the plan, boss?" Ricardo asks.

"We act normal, and you keep your eye on the girl at all times without being obvious," I instruct. I don't have to explain to him what the consequences of having Riley here are now.

"And if he approaches you?" Ricardo checks.

"Then let him approach. Maybe he will have something interesting to say." I shrug before making my way over to where Riley has drifted too far from me.

She's tilting her head sideways now, still trying to make something out of the so-called modern art in front of her.

"Everything okay? That guy was kind of intense." Either she's forgotten she's mad at me, or she's decided to drop her pretentious little act.

"That's Gioele. He's always intense," I explain, trying to maintain calm. The last thing I want is her picking up on the atmosphere.

“You have any idea what it is?” she nods toward the canvas full of odd shapes and colors that clash.

“I don’t think it’s supposed to be anything. You’re supposed to make your own judgment.” I keep my eye on the room as I talk.

“Okay, so what do you think it is?” she asks curiously, and when I look back at her, I have to give myself credit. When I picked this dress for her, I chose it well. The electric blue makes her sapphire irises pop while complimenting her hair color and skin tone. The cut makes her body look even more fuckable than it does in one of my shirts.

A little too fuckable, in my opinion.

Every man in the room is thinking the same thing as I am, and what I find most intriguing is that Riley is oblivious to it.

“I think it’s overrated and that whoever purchased it clearly has too much money.” I give her my honesty, placing my hand into the arch of her back and guiding her away. Perhaps I’m being paranoid, but I can feel eyes on us.

I lead her into one of the quieter rooms of the house. Maria has once again excelled herself, creating privacy for her guests by hanging expensive deep-colored fabrics from the ceiling to separate the large room into smaller, more intimate sections. Taking two fresh glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, I move us toward a secluded corner and take a seat on one of the leather couches, while Ricardo takes his position beside the draped fabric so he has a good view of the room. I hope to get some alone time with Riley before someone bothers me with mindless property investment conversation.

We’re sheltered enough from the rest of the party in this corner that I’m tempted to explore her again. The same way

I'd started to in the car before my conscience stopped me. When she called me out about being scared, I wanted to hurt her for her accusations, mostly because she was right. The girl seems to have me all figured out, and it unnerves me.

I rest my glass on the table in front of us and shift myself a little closer to her.

"I like stealing your firsts, Riley," I admit, allowing my hand to find a path up her thigh again. She flinches slightly, but it's out of thrill, not fear. I have more than enough experience to know the difference.

"What do you mean?" she whispers, her eyes staring into the back of Ricardo's head like she's nervous he'll turn around. His huge frame and Maria's multiple layers of sheer fabric are the only things shielding us from the rest of the room.

"This is your first party, is it not? And I'm assuming from that sloppy attempt to take my cock in your mouth in the car that it was the first to make it past your lips." My hand travels higher, and this time I don't back down. The tip of my index finger touches her lace panties and draws a line through the center of them, making her hum for me.

"Am I the first to touch you here?" I whisper, and Riley shivers as her pretty little head nods to confirm what I already know.

"So now that we've established what you want from my monster cock, why don't you tell me what you want from these?" I apply just enough pressure with my finger to make her tense before Ricardo clears his throat and prompts me to pull away from her.

The tip of my finger is slightly damp, and I smile at Riley as I bring it to my mouth and suck her arousal from the tip.

Sweet as sin, just like I expected.

“Raphael Verretti.” Samuele makes himself sound surprised to see me, and Ricardo steps aside to let him pass. It barely gives Riley the chance to gather her composure, and the flustered look on her face makes me even madder at the intrusion.

“Samuele.” I nod to greet him, making sure he’s aware that his presence displeases me.

“I was hoping I’d see you here. Maria boasts that you have remodeled some of the finest properties in the state.” He helps himself to the seat opposite us.

“Are you looking to invest in some property?” I ask sarcastically, and suddenly cautious of my body language toward Riley, I put some space between us.

“No, Raphael, much like yourself, I’m very comfortable.”

It’s a warning that he intends to keep his business local to mine, and I don’t like his tone.

“You forget your manners, my friend,” he smiles. “You are yet to introduce me to the beautiful lady who accompanies you.” His attention flicks to Riley, and every part of me turns rigid with rage as he looks at her like a starved animal.

“Tell me your name, pretty girl.” He raises his eyebrows at her, and I have to stop myself from snarling at him like a wolf.

“Her name is irrelevant,” I cut in before Riley has the chance to give him an answer. “The girl is one of my whores.”

I don’t look for Riley’s reaction to that comment, and I hold on to the hope that just this once, she won’t let her mouth

run.

“It’s unlike you to bring a plaything to a party, Raphael. I hope she isn’t making your shadow jealous.” He sniggers over his shoulder at Ricardo, who looks just about ready to stamp on his face.

Samuele is right. I rarely require female company at events like these. The fact he knows that proves he’s had eyes on me for a while.

“I’ve been to one of Maria’s parties before. I find it best to bring my own entertainment,” I explain matter-of-factly, taking a side glance at Riley while Samuele sips from his glass. I’m not greeted with the anger I expect. Instead, I’m struck by hurt.

“Well, perhaps when you are finished with your whore...” His eyes, once again, roll over what belongs to me, tempting me to put a bullet in both their sockets. “...maybe you will permit me the pleasure.” He’s testing me now. I can tell by the way he’s studying me for a reaction. Samuele isn’t buying my bullshit. So I need to sell it a little better.

“Of course,” I nod, faking him a smile and acting unbothered. What I really want to do is smash the glass in my hand, slit the mother fucker’s throat and make him bleed out all over Maria’s well-polished marble floor.

“Samuele, if you wish to discuss business with me, I’d much prefer to do it during office hours,” I tell him curtly, willing him to politely fuck off while I still have some restraint left.

“My apologies, Raphael,” he holds up both his hands defensively. “I assumed all hours were office hours in your line of work.”



Before he moves away, he leans toward Riley, testing me further when his lips stop just an inch from her skin.

“I’ll look forward to seeing you again,” he whispers, and when his hand touches her leg, she shoves him away so harshly that he almost topples on top of her.

“A wild one, Verretti,” he smirks, making a quick recovery. “I see now why you keep her so close.” Backing away slowly, he takes the time to nod at Ricardo as he passes him and rejoins the party.

After he’s disappeared out of sight, I turn my body toward Riley, ready to try and explain.

“Don’t!” She uses the palm of her hand as a barrier between us. “I want to leave,” she tells me, her eyes filling with tears and refusing to look at me.

“Riley, I...” I have no words. She wouldn’t understand the darkness of my world or the threat of the people in it, and I’m not ready to tell her the real reason I told Samuele that she was my whore. I’m not even ready to admit that to myself yet.

“Raphael, I want to leave,” she repeats, keeping her jaw tight and her eyes focused forward. Just her thinking she has the right to speak to me like that makes my cock restless and my palm twitchy.

“We just got here. I can’t leave yet.” I take her wrist in my hand and press my fingers deep into her skin. I hope they bruise. She needs a reminder that her lack of respect won’t be tolerated.

“There are still people I need to speak to before I can leave,” I whisper harshly.

“Then go speak to your people, but if it’s okay with you, this whore would prefer to wait in the car.” She stands up and

somehow tugs herself free from me. She doesn't even make a step clear of me before I rip her back, twisting her body and wrapping my arms tight around her waist. I hold her firm, pinning her head to my chest with my chin.

She struggles against me, but she's not strong enough to create a scene, and the position I'm holding her in looks much more like an embrace than a restrictive hold.

"You do as I say, Riley. I didn't bring you here to sit in the car."

"Then why did you bring me here?" She uses all her strength to shove me in the chest and pull her head back up. "To humiliate me, to treat me like a whore in front of your friends?" Her hurt-filled eyes sink right into the cavity of my chest.

There's only one version of me. I've never attempted to be a good man, and I have no idea how to deal with the feelings that Riley puts inside me.

But I do know how to break a woman's spirit, and every time she opens her damn mouth, she pushes me closer to crushing hers.

"I brought you here because I thought it would be nice for you to leave the house," I hiss through my teeth. She'll get no more weakness out of me.

"Well, do me a favor, Raphael Verretti..." She says my name in such a condescending voice that I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from sinking my teeth into her. "Never do anything nice for me again." She struggles to move away, but I refuse to let go, keeping her stomach pressed into mine.

“You know what...” The sadness in her eyes quickly sings to hate. “I think I preferred you when you were raping my throat,” she tells me bitterly.

Her words spark something animalistic inside me, and it causes me to grasp that delicate little throat in the arch of my hand and use it to throw her back onto the couch. I don't even give a shit if anyone sees as I lean my body over hers.

Finally, I see it. That fear I've been wondering if she possesses. Her body cowers beneath mine, and her pretty eyes blink nervously. Strangely, I get no pleasure out of seeing her like it, but I'm not about to let her know that.

“I should beat you black and blue for that accusation,” I speak to her through my teeth. “You forget that you asked for my cock in your mouth, Riley. What I gave you was nothing that you didn't beg for.” I curl my lip at her, furious that she'd suggest I forced anything on her.

“Now, are you going to be a good little girl and do as I tell you, or do I have to drag you back into that hall, rip this dress from your body and fuck you in the other hole you begged me to take, in front of everyone here?”

The hateful look and her silence are all the answers I need, and I tap my fingers against her cheek before I stand up and find some composure. Riley, looking a little shaken, eventually rises to her feet and pushes her dress down her legs to hide the tops of her thighs.

On the inside, I'm feeling like a cunt, but on the outside, I show her no emotion. I take her hand in mine and lead her back toward the party, where I'll parade her like a pretty little doll. One that's to be seen and not heard.

Riley plays the role perfectly. I've scared her enough to make sure of it, and I can only think of one time in my life when I've ever felt worse than I do right now.



**I**t's official. I hate Raphael Verretti.

I smile sweetly beside him as he charms the people in the room. He doesn't even show me the courtesy of an introduction when he talks among his friends and colleagues, which is rude but better than being presented as a whore.

I don't know at what point I let myself believe that whatever this is, was becoming something. I was kidnapped by a pedophile and gifted like a toy. Rafe had made me feel cared for, and now I just feel foolish and degraded.

Despite all my hate for him, I do as I'm told, staying quiet until Rafe decides he's had enough and it's time for us to leave. Ricardo smirks at me as he opens the car door for us. It's the same cocky smirk he'd given me when Raphael called me a whore in front of his friend. I don't give him the satisfaction of a reaction as I duck my head into the car and sit in silence.

The journey back to the house seems so much longer than it did on the way to the party, and I sit as far away from Rafe as I can get. It's hard to believe that the last time we were sharing this space, I was on my knees in front of him,

watching him pleasure himself. The son of a bitch had been right about something, I've been able to taste him in my mouth and the back of my throat for the entire party, even after the two glasses of champagne he so generously permitted me.

Rafe makes no attempt to speak to me, and the atmosphere between us is so tense the air feels stuffy. I stare at his hand through the reflection of the car window, recalling the way it had touched me before we were interrupted. It felt every bit as good as I'd imagined it would. I just wish I could stop craving it again.

He pulls out his phone when it vibrates, and I watch him smirk as he looks at the screen. I wonder if it's the woman whose party we've just left. She blatantly wants to fuck him, that's if he hasn't had her already.

He quickly fires a text back to whoever it is, making a quick glance at me before sliding the phone back into the inside pocket of his tux.

When we arrive at the house, Raphael opens the car door to get out, and I refuse the hand he offers me. He shrugs as if he's not bothered and heads inside, but I don't follow him. Instead, I march around the side of the house and toward the lake. I need fresh air and space to get my head around the actual situation I'm in because tonight has proved I can't even trust my own instincts.

If I'm Raphael's whore, why hasn't he fucked me? Why does it feel like he's constantly holding back with me? When we were living on the streets, Liam would pull magazines out of people's trash for me to read. The problem pages were always my favorite. I'd laugh at what some people considered a problem while I was starving and sleeping in the cold. But through those pages, I'd learned that a man's cock can fuck a

lot more than a woman's pussy. That it can make women feel things that aren't there and make them obsessive.

I'm not in a relationship with Rafe. I haven't even had sex with him, but I already know that I wouldn't want him to share me with his friends. The man could fuck with me mentally and torture me physically, and I probably still wouldn't have enough of him.

In my opinion, that makes me mentally unstable.

"I got it." I hear his voice come from behind me. No doubt he's talking to Ricardo, who's about to bolt after me. Despite wanting to be as far away from Rafe as possible, I feel a small triumph in the fact he wants to come after me himself, and I sense him lingering behind me, clearly allowing me my space.

I sit on the bench that looks out at the water, trying to ignore the cold bite of the evening air that's attacking my skin. I can just make out Rafe in my peripheral vision, pacing over a small amount of lawn with his hands in his pockets and his head down. I try to blank him out and pretend he's not there, but a presence like his is impossible to ignore.

"You're cold." He eventually comes toward me, sliding out of his jacket.

Is he kidding me? Tonight he's insulted me, assaulted me, and now he wants to be a fucking gentleman.

"I don't want your fucking jacket," I snap at him before he has the chance to drape it over my shoulders.

"I said, you're cold," he repeats, impatiently throwing the jacket at my lap.

"What's the matter, Rafe? You prefer your whores warm?"

“What I’d prefer is for you to stop being so fucking stubborn and come inside.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Make me, drag me inside. I’m your puppet, aren’t I?” I point out, knowing that I’m making him tick by the way he runs his hands through his hair like he doesn’t know what to do with them. It sets little sparks all over my body while I wait for his reaction.

“Stop it,” he warns.

“Stop what?” I stare back at him and shrug confidently.

“Being so fucking testing all the time. You’re cold, and I want you to come inside so you don’t get sick.” He’s frustrated. I don’t think it’s often he has to give an explanation.

I stand up from the bench, letting his jacket slide off my knees and fall to the ground before stepping into his space.

“I’m already fucking sick,” I tell him spitefully, moving past him and marching toward the gravel path that leads inside the house.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” He quickly catches up with me. His hand grabs my wrist in the exact same place where he’d hurt me earlier as he forces me to turn around and face him.

“Tell me what you mean, Riley. Do you need to see a doctor?” His eyes scan me over in confusion like he’s trying to make a diagnosis himself.

“No, I need to get the fuck away from you.” I snap my wrist from his grip, only for him to grab it again.

“Well, that isn’t gonna fucking happen.” The determination in his eyes cuts into me like glass.



“Not until you’re done with me, right? And then what will you do, Rafe? Whore me out to your friends, let Ricardo take a turn as a little employment benefit.” I laugh at myself for being so sucked into his bullshit.

“No one will ever touch you except for me.” His nostrils flare as he inhales through them.

“Is that right? Because last time I checked, Raphael, whores actually got fucked.”

That comment pushes him over the edge, and his fist crushes into my hair, tilting my head sideways and exposing my neck to his mouth.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it? You’re too stubborn to beg, so you try to get me angry enough to take it from you.” His breath touches my skin, and his words speak straight to my clit.

I don’t know how to answer him because I think he might be right.

“I’ll tell you why I called you a whore tonight, Riley.” His hand clasps my throat, and I feel the strain in his fingers.

“Because the man who asked you your name is an even worse man than I am, and he’d love to see me hurt.”

I’d picked up on a little animosity between them, but nothing to that extent.

“If he knew what you are to me, it would make you a target. I called you a whore to protect you,” he growls in frustration, quickly releasing me and turning his back on me.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” he talks under his breath as both his hands slide through his hair again.

I stand, rooted to the ground, willing for him to turn around and explain what all this means and what I am to him.

“Go to your room, Riley,” he orders without turning around.

“Rafe...”

“I said go to your fucking room.” He spins around, his hand risen and his palm outstretched. I flinch, preparing for its impact, then watch the frustration on his face turn sad as he curls his open hand into a fist and presses it to his mouth.

“Just go to your room,” he tries again, his voice strained and his eyes closed.

This time I do as he says, turning around and running as fast as these pathetic heels will carry me. I almost crash into Sylvia when she comes out of the kitchen, and she steadies me with her hands, forcing me to stop.

“Are you okay?” she asks, looking concerned and confused all at the same time.

“Why does he want to hurt me?” I blurt through my tears.

“Whatever happened?” Wrapping her arm around my shoulder, Sylvia guides me into the kitchen, sitting me down at the table where me and Rafe had eaten dinner the night before. She pours me a glass of water, and my hands shake as I take it from her and down the whole glass in one swallow. I hadn’t realized how thirsty I was.

“There was someone at the party, and Rafe told him I was his whore,” I explain, sniffing back my tears because they are for such a pathetic cause.

“Oh,” Sylvia rolls her eyes, looking disappointed.

“One minute, he’s calling me that, and then he’s offering me his jacket because he’s worried I’m cold. I can’t do it anymore, Sylvia. I can’t keep trying to figure him out. It hurts too much.”

“And why do you think that is?” She’s got that look on her face, the one she gets when she tells you something smart.

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “I don’t understand any of it.”

“Come with me.” She takes my hand and leads me to the kitchen window. Through the glass, I can just make out the silhouette of Rafe standing with his hands in his pockets, staring out at the lake.

“I don’t know why Raphael brought you here, Riley, and I don’t know what his intentions are, but I do know that he’s hurting just as much as you are,” she tells me softly.

“He scares me,” I admit for the first time to anyone, ever, including myself.

“I think you scare him too,” Sylvia laughs, with a huge inappropriate smile on her face.

“Raphael hasn’t had an easy life. He’s lost people that he cares about.”

“So have I, but I don’t keep people imprisoned and fuck with their heads,” I point out, and to that, she nods her head in agreement. Guess she can’t really argue that point.

“Let him calm down, and then try to talk to him. Be honest with him and let him know how you feel instead of trying to overpower him. Trust me. No one will ever win a power war with that man.” She rolls her eyes again, surprising me when she places a tiny kiss on my temple and quietly leaves me.

I stand alone for a while, watching him through the window, desperate to know what's going on in his head.

Somewhere between me climbing the stairs and changing out of the dress into another white shirt, Rafe must have decided to come inside because when I look out of my balcony window, there's no sign of him.

Sleep is evading me. My mind keeps asking the same questions over and over. I try to read, but just end up going over the same sentence. I check the clock on the wall expecting hours to have ticked by and realize it's only been one.

There's no way I'm getting any sleep tonight, not until I make things okay between us and get some answers to my questions. So, placing down my book, I head out the door.

"Where you heading, Miss Riley?" the guard, whose name I don't know, checks.

"To find your boss," I answer, continuing toward the door that leads to Rafe's bedroom.

"You won't find him in there, Miss. He hasn't come up yet."

"Then where might he be?" I ask, trying my best to be polite.

"This time of night..." He frowns while he tries to think. "You could try his office or the games room," he suggests, and when I go to move toward the stairs, I notice how he sticks close behind me.

I knock on Rafe's office door but get no answer, and when I brave a quick check, I'm surprised to find the door unlocked. The room is empty, so I ask the guard to show me where the

games room is. He might as well make himself useful if he's going to follow me.

The door to the room is slightly ajar, and I can see a dim light coming from inside. There's music playing too. It's a song I've never heard before, one without lyrics that sounds classical and beautiful.

"I can take it from here," I dismiss the guard, feeling a little power trip when he actually does as I ordered. Then, taking a long breath, I remind myself to stay calm and hold back any urges I have to get a rise from Rafe. I have questions, and if I want answers, I'll have to try Sylvia's suggested method to get them.

When I open the door and step inside, I find him sitting in the center of a long black couch— his arms stretched out over the back. His shirt is open, and there's a bottle of something that looks strong hanging in his left hand. And suddenly, all the questions I have seem to tumble out of my head, and all I can focus on is not running to him.



“What are you doing here?” I do everything I can to hide the shock from my face when she steps into the room.

She’s changed out of her dress into one of my white shirts. But her hair is still exactly how I like it, in that loose braid that hangs over her shoulder, and I like it even better now it’s been ruined by my fingers.

I find it hard looking at Riley sometimes. The girl’s so fucking stunning that she puts a suffering in my chest, and the pain gets so bad that it makes me want to hurt her back for it.

“I... I was looking for you,” she whispers timidly, all the confidence she barged in here with suddenly lost as her eyes roam around the room to avoid making contact with mine.

“Well, you’ve found me, so what do you want?” I knock back another mouthful of single malt while I wait for her answer.

She’s nervous. I can tell from the way her shaky fingers are fidgeting with the hem of her shirt.

“I have questions.” She speaks so quietly that I can barely hear her over the Chopin record I have playing. Lucky for her,

I've drunk enough to simmer my mood rather than aggravate it. And seeing her like this, vulnerable and a little fearful, almost makes me want to take pity on her.

"I'll make you a deal," I offer, knowing that I'm giving her an advantage that I might regret. She looks at me properly for the first time since she entered the room, and when I see that her eyes are red around their rims from crying, I can't decide if I love or detest knowing that I've been the cause of her tears.

"Come closer." I hook my finger to her, and without argument, she complies, moving toward me and then stepping around the coffee table to stand in front of me. Our feet are so close they almost touch, and looking up at her, I want so badly to slide my hands up her milky thighs and touch her pussy again.

"I'll permit you one question." I try not to get distracted by the sheer beauty of her. "I'll even answer it honestly," I promise, keeping my tone soft for her.

"And what must I give in return?" she asks wearily.

"I will ask you a question and expect the same courtesy," I explain.

"I have more than one question." She stares down at me, trying so hard to find her confidence again.

"Then you must choose which one you ask wisely." I take another sip of my drink. "I get to go first, though."

Leaning forward, I curve around her body to place the bottle in my hand on the table behind her. Then, looking up at her body, I make sure my nose slightly brushes her skin as I pull away and rest back on the couch. My cock strains tight in my pants as I take in the way she looks standing in front of me, and if she was brave enough to look, she'd see it for

herself. Despite clearly being nervous, Riley nods her head back at me and prepares herself for my question.

There are plenty of things I want to learn about Riley Hayes, all the small intimate details that Gioele would never be able to find out because they exist only in her head.

But there's one question that I'm burning to know the answer to, even if I have to sacrifice a little piece of myself to get it.

I slide my tongue over my lips and watch a breath rise in her chest while she waits anxiously.

“Do you want me to be your first, Riley?” I ask, furious at myself for needing her answer to be yes so badly. Sure, she said in the car earlier that she wanted my cock inside her, but she was caught in a moment, distracted by lust. I need to know if she meant it.

Riley's eyes shut, and when she nods back at me like she's ashamed of her answer, my cocky smirk doesn't make it all the way to my lips.

“Lose the shirt.” My voice comes out husky, and Riley takes me by surprise when she obediently does what I've asked. Her shaky fingers loosen the buttons before she slips the fabric off her shoulders and lets it fall to the ground around her feet.

She stands in front of me in a pair of white lace panties that I've made sure she has a good supply of. I decided the first time I saw her pussy that it should only ever be dressed in white lace and that it would only ever be for me.

The waistline of them sits high on her hips and dips low in the middle, creating an arch that I trace with my index finger.



“Those too,” I command, watching as her fingers slowly slip under the fabric to slide them down her thighs.

I haven't seen Riley's pussy since she was in my brother's cell and looking at it now, it's every bit as enticing as it was then. Strangely, even more so now I know for sure she wants to give it to me.

Riley's eyes focus on my hands as I unbuckle my belt, and I lift my hips slightly from the couch to push my pants off my legs. Then it's my cock that's getting all of her attention as I run my fist over it.

“Take it,” I dare her, gesturing my eyes between my legs toward the huge erection I have for her. She doesn't say anything at first, but it gives me great satisfaction to watch her throat strain as she swallows down her fear.

“I don't know how.” She blushes like she's embarrassed, and the purity of it all only adds to her appeal.

My free hand reaches out to her hip, bringing her toward me until the front of her legs touches the couch, and her knees bend. She's straddling my thighs now, my cock resting readily between us, and I follow her eyeline down to where she's focusing intently on it.

“I'll show you how,” I whisper, taking her wrist and guiding her hand toward me. Her fingertips feel soft and shaky as they make their first contact, and I feel the walls of my defense against her start to crumble.

“Sit up on your knees and guide me into you,” I instruct her softly. I should prepare her a little first. Teasing her pussy and stretching her with my fingers would be the kind thing to do. But I'm not a kind man. I'm selfish, and I want to feel her at her tightest.

Riley does as I tell her. Her eyes remain fixed on mine as painfully, slowly, she lines me up with her unexplored entrance and dampens the tip of my cock.

I'm fully aware I should be thinking about protection. But that's a deprivation I'm not willing to suffer. Feeling the inside of Riley's virgin pussy with nothing between us is the only way I want her to give her innocence to me.

It takes every restraint I have not to thrust up inside her, but I manage to refrain, knowing that I'll regret not savoring her.

"Now sit yourself on to me," I tell her, taking a deep breath and preparing myself as my fingertips dig deep into where I'm holding her hip. "Slowly, Riley," I rasp. "I want to feel every inch inside you stretch for me."

She nods her head, then using her free hand to steady herself on my chest, she slowly slides herself onto the thick head of my cock. I groan out loud because her pussy feels even more fucking incredible than I'd let myself imagine it would. I expected her to be tight, but not like this.

She takes a breath before accepting a little more of me, and her whole body stiffens, her thighs twitching and eyes screwing shut to deny me her suffering.

"Open your eyes. Tell me how it feels," I command, and she immediately does as I request, revealing her beautiful blue eyes that are now magnified with unshed tears.

"It hurts, but it also feels kinda like it belongs there," she admits, and she's right about that. Because Riley Hayes' pussy feels like it was fucking made for me.

"How bad does it hurt?" I ask, not sure what answer will satisfy me the most.

“It feels... It stings.” Her nails dig into my chest as her tight little channel crushes around me and she edges a little more of me inside her. I wonder if she knows that there’s still so much of me left to take, and I want so badly to watch her pussy slowly swallow my cock, but the expressions she’s making as I fill the unexplored space inside her are far too pretty to miss.

I could use my other hand to play with her clit, and distract her a little from the pain. But I get off on Riley’s torture far too much... I’ve never claimed to be a merciful man. In fact, I decide this little temptress has had far too much control for one night, and it’s time I took some back.

I make sure her eyes are fixed on mine when I slide my other hand up her thigh and arch it around her hip. Getting a good grip on both sides of her body before I force it down onto me, ensuring she takes the rest of my cock in one hard thrust. She cries out in pain, and I growl through my teeth when I feel all traces of her innocence fracture.

Holding myself still, I allow myself the satisfaction of her adjusting to me, and when she collapses onto my chest, my cock finds a new angle inside her. With her heart thumping against me, I vow to myself that I won’t just be Riley Hayes’ first. I’ll be her damn last. Whether she likes that or not.

No other man will have what’s mine, not as long as I’m breathing.

I’ve never experienced anything like this before. It’s a desire so strong that I’d give up anything to feed it, and breaking this girl feels like the best accomplishment I’ve ever achieved. I want to appreciate every last shred of it.

Wrapping both my arms around her middle, I change our position, pulling my cock from her and flipping her onto her

back.

“I need to taste you.” I position myself between her legs and move down her body. Gripping the back of her thighs and hooking them over my shoulders to spread her open, I admire her broken hole and the red-streaked pleasure that glistens around it. Then, with my pupils rooted deep into Riley’s, I press my tongue over her aching pussy and slide my tongue right through her center. Swiping away the last traces of her virtue and swallowing it up for myself.

The sweetness in her pleasure counteracts the metallic tinge of her purity as I soothe her with my tongue, my fingertips indenting her thigh while my other arm presses over her stomach and keeps her pinned to the couch.

I hear her moan and feel her fingers when they slide into my hair and pull at my scalp. “Rafe,” she breathes out my name, and when I pull away from her, she suddenly looks scared.

“Don’t stop,” she shakes her head frantically, her chest rising and falling and her pretty eyes pleading.

I should remind her that she has no right to give me orders. I should drag myself away from her as a punishment for her forgetting her place. But the thought of her coming on my tongue is far too tempting. So I do as she requests. Licking, sucking, and eating her pussy until she screams out my name again and comes all over my lips. My arm pushes tighter into her stomach as her hips thrash, and she rides my mouth. Drowning me with her pleasure and making me desperate to be inside her again.

Shifting back up her body and without offering her any warning, I find my position back inside her. My cock thrusts deep into her swollen pussy before she has a chance to come

down from her high. Then with her thighs trembling against my hips, I roll my body into her over and over again, my fingers clawing at her skin when I feel myself losing all control and fucking her delicate little pussy harder than any virgin should ever have to endure.

She cries out so loud the guards must hear her, and I don't know if it's out of pleasure or pain until her fingers scratch at my torso and her eyes widen in panic.

"I... Raph..." She tries to talk, but Riley doesn't have to speak. I can feel what's happening to her body. She couldn't hide it from me even if she wanted to.

The room feels like it's spinning as she clamps around my cock, constricting me even tighter. I grip my hands around her throat to try to ground myself when I feel my own release coming. Then with Riley's tight walls sucking at my cock as she comes, I press my forehead tight into hers and fuck my cum as deep inside her as I can get it.

My lips smash onto hers, forcing her to taste herself off my tongue when I thrust it into her mouth and swallow up all the cute little moans she makes for me. Every single part of her shivers— her legs, her arms, even her lips tremble against mine. And if I could live in one moment for the rest of my life, it would be this one, with Riley Hayes shattered beneath me and my cum dripping from her body.

"Ask me?" I rasp, the arch of my hand sliding up her neck to grip her jaw.

She looks a little confused at first. Her cheeks are flustered, and tiny tears seep from her eyes as her teeth sink into her swollen bottom lip.

It's without any doubt the most beautiful thing I've ever fucking seen.

"Your question. Ask me," I remind her of the deal we struck while trying to catch my breath.

Riley does the same, desperately sucking in air while she thinks hard about what she wants the answer to most.

"You said you saved me from your brother," she manages, her hands still pressing to my chest, gripping at my open shirt like she's scared I might run away.

"Yes." I nod, never more sure of a decision I've made until right this second.

"So why haven't you let me go?" she asks, swallowing nervously. She's asked me this before, last night by the lake. I'd avoided it because I didn't like the answer to it.

I still don't like the fucking answer.

"Raphael, why haven't you let me go?" she asks again, her eyes full of curiosity and her swollen bottom lip shaking while she nervously waits for my answer.

"Because I can't," I admit, no longer afraid to show her how weak she makes me because I've figured out that when it comes to her... I'm already broken.



Hearing how Rafe struggled to give up the words to me is how I know he meant them.

And I'm in real trouble.

My whole body feels crushed, the pain between my legs still throbs despite him no longer being inside me, and I can't stop myself from trembling. What just happened between us was beyond anything I could have predicted. The way he'd let me be in control to begin with and then snatched it back just at the right moment. It turns out Rafe was right when he told me he knew what was good for me because despite feeling shattered, I also feel like a huge burden has been taken away from me. It's a fulfillment so strong I think I could sleep for a week.

Rafe picks up his jacket from the arm of the sofa and drapes it over my shoulders, and as I watch him pull his pants back on, I wonder how things will be between us now.

Did he just prove to me that I am a whore? Because it didn't feel that way to me. Is he still going to be angry with me?

He surprises me when he leans over my body and scoops me into his arms. The look on his face is unreadable and when I smile a small, grateful smile, he offers me nothing in return. So, I snuggle into his chest and remain silent as he carries me up the stairs and back to my room.

“Take the night off,” Rafe barks at the guard who’s resumed his position outside my bedroom door. My room is dark when he carries me inside, but the moonlight shining through the window guides him toward my bed and he somehow manages to draw back the covers before laying me down. My eyes feel heavy, my limbs are sore, and when I connect with the mattress, I feel like I’ve landed on a cloud.

“Sleep,” he orders, shocking the hell out of me when he rounds the bed and starts to take off his pants.

At first, I think he’s gonna fuck me again, and I panic because I don’t think my body could take him again so soon, and just when I think he can’t shock me anymore, he pulls back the covers on the opposite side of the bed and slips in beside me.

I can’t help staring as I watch him act like this behavior is perfectly normal, laying back on the pillow with both his hands resting behind his head.

“You’re sleeping in here?” I check I’m not imagining this.

“I told you to go to sleep,” he replies sternly, his jaw tight as he stares up at the ceiling and his chest breathing heavily like he’s mad about something.

So without further question, I do as he tells me, closing my eyes and allowing myself to drift into an exhausted sleep with my captor lying beside me.



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When I stir the next morning, I feel so much warmer than usual, and there's something sturdy against me that isn't budging. Opening my eyes, I realize that something sturdy is him. My hand is resting on his chest, and my leg is hooked over his hips, and I pull myself up to get a better look at him, taking some time to appreciate how peaceful he looks.

Raphael Verretti may be a total head fuck, but he's beautiful to look at. His olive-colored skin and his long, dark lashes would have any woman desperate to be lying beside him. I slide my finger down his straight nose, then onto his lips. I like how the bottom one is so much thicker than the top one, and I want it to kiss me all over again. My hand strokes over his chest, following my eyes as they travel down his body. Rafe must work out every day because it's perfect, and as my fingers trail over his bumpy abs, I risk a peek under the covers.

Yep, every bit as big as I remember...

I leave him there and head for the shower, wincing as I step toward the bathroom. The sting between my legs is a reminder of last night and how it felt to have him inside me. I've never known a pain like it. One that is craved for after it's over. But nothing about this makes any sense. Last night felt special. Rafe was so intense, and the way he looked at me while he was inside me made me feel... treasured.

Something must have changed between us for him to want to spend the night with me. But I won't allow myself to assume. Rafe is a complicated man. I'm sure there will be a good reason for it.

I shower and brush my teeth before wrapping up in a towel and heading back to the bedroom. Rafe is still in my bed, only now he's sitting up against the headboard with his dark eyes assessing me.

"Morning." I try not to smile too wildly. I can't read his mood just yet but I like how he looks, waiting for me in my bed.

"How are you feeling?" His eyes drop between my legs, and I feel them there like a laser.

"Sore," I answer, a little too bluntly. And he must get a sick kick out of that fact because he smiles back at me.

"Come here," Rafe raises his chin at me, and I secure the towel around my chest before I do as he requests. Climbing onto the bottom of the bed and slowly crawling up his body.

His lips rub together as I rest my thighs on either side of his waist, and slowly he peels open my towel and exposes my body. He studies me intently while both his hands gently push up my thighs, diverting from my bare pussy to move over my hips. His fingertips heat up my skin as they travel up over my stomach and rest over my tits so he can squeeze me in his palms.

I moan because his touch makes my lips desperate for him, and my pussy—despite feeling sensitive—craves his attention.

"What am I to do with you, Riley Hayes?" he asks, tilting his head as one hand shifts up over my neck to caress my face. While his other hand continues to knead at my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers and making me ache inside.

I wait for him to reveal the answer to his own question, but instead of his voice, I hear the sound of the door clicking open.

“Oh, lord have mercy,” Sylvia screeches, and I quickly dive off Rafe’s body and pull the covers over myself.

Somehow, the old woman manages to keep hold of the tray she’s carrying. And while I blush and fluster, gathering more covers, Rafe doesn’t seem at all phased by the intrusion.

“I didn’t realize you would be taking your breakfast up here too,” Sylvia pulls herself together as she places the tray on my bedside table.

“I’m not. I have a meeting with Gioele in...” Rafe looks over his left shoulder to check the bedside clock. “Twenty minutes.”

I freeze when he then leans across my body and helps himself to one of the pastries from my tray and when he smacks a kiss on my cheek before popping it in his mouth, both me and Sylvia drop our jaws in shock.

Rafe gets out of bed, still unfazed by Sylvia’s presence, as he walks ass-naked into the bathroom, almost causing the old woman’s eyes to fall out of her head.

She looks at me as if she expects me to say something, but all I manage is an awkward shrug.

“I take it your conversation went well last night.” She clears her throat and smiles while I dig into the delicious bagel she’s made for me.

“There wasn’t much of a conversation,” I admit honestly. Then regret the words instantly when her whole face stretches. “I didn’t mean... it’s still complicated.” I sigh because I’m pretty sure everything I ever read about on that problem page was right.

“I’m sure things will become clearer.” Sylvia smiles, emptying my washing basket before she leaves.

I finish my breakfast and wait for Rafe to come out of the shower. When he does, he looks incredibly sexy, his hair is wet and unruly, and his body is covered in tiny droplets of water. I watch his arm muscles flex as he uses a smaller towel to rub his hair dry. It's far too easy to forget the fuck up of a situation I'm in when the view is this good.

"It's rude to stare," he informs me, tossing the wet towel in his hand at the bed and coming to stand beside me. Dragging the covers off my body, he pulls me up so I'm standing on my knees, and my eyes are level with his.

"I have to get dressed and meet with Gioele, but when I'm finished, we have to talk."

Instantly, I'm intrigued.

"Talk about what?"

"I have a proposition for you." He trails his thumb over my lips, his eyes staring at it like he wants to assault it.

"Get some more rest. I'll have Sylvia serve us lunch on the lawn at noon."

"You're not gonna...?" I swallow nervously and look between our bodies. His lower half is still wrapped in a towel, but I can see that he's hard beneath it.

"Ten minutes wouldn't be enough time for the things I want to do to you," he tells me, his finger drawing a line over my jaw that trails under my chin and down to my neck. When it drops lower, the circle he draws around my nipple makes my pussy jump to life.

"Noon, don't be late," he warns, a firm hand coming from nowhere and scrunching my hair. He tugs me closer to his mouth, and his lips are hard and commanding against mine

before his teeth sink into my tongue, then pulls away, leaving my room in just the towel.



“So what’s this important thing you just have to tell me?” Gioele sits in the chair opposite mine in my office, looking really pissed at me.

After Riley fell asleep last night, I spent hours and hours lying awake, thinking about my next move. When I figured out what it was going to be, I messaged Gioele and told him to get here as early this morning as he could. I want to set things in motion immediately.

I have a strong feeling Gioele is going to have something to say about it, and usually, the man’s opinions matter to me. Not on this occasion.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said to me the other day, about who I’d leave all this to,” I admit, holding Riley’s cross tight in my palm as I speak.

“Good, I’m glad you’re taking it seriously,” Gioele nods back at me.

“I need a legacy like my father had. An heir,” I explain, watching him nod his agreement.

“Well, that takes time, but yes, that would be logical.” He chuckles to himself.

“What if I told you that I’ve already started working on it?” I wait for the old man’s reaction, and it doesn’t take long for his lips to straighten out with concern.

“The girl?” he asks, already looking displeased, just like I imagined he would.

“The girl,” I confirm, nodding my head confidently so he knows how serious I am.

“Is this a joke, Raphael? Because I should be on a plane to New York right now.”

“No joke,” I shake my head.

“But you hardly know the girl,” he points out. “Yes, of course, I see the appeal. Any man would. But do you really think you know her well enough to have decided that she should mother you a child?”

Leaning forward over my desk, he lowers his tone at me.

“I don’t have to tell you how much you’re worth. And well... she’s just a girl off the street, Raphael.”

I lean forward too.

“Talk about her like that again, old man, and you’ll be eating through a tube for the rest of your life,” I warn him as the anger pulses through my veins.

Gioele stares back at me, and I don’t know if it’s shock or fear that’s on his face. The man’s seen me do enough things to know I don’t make empty threats, but I’ve never threatened him before.

I don't give a shit where Riley came from. All I care about is her never ever going back there.

I take a calming breath before attempting to explain this better to him.

"I know myself, Gioele, and I know that there's not been anyone since..." I stop myself when I remember that Gioele knows nothing of that part of my past, and for very good reason. No one knows except Adriano.

That part of me is buried.

"It's time." I control myself a little better as I continue. "Riley is perfect. She's young and healthy. You even said yourself that she is good stock. Did you not?" I remind him.

"Well, yes, that's all obvious, Raphael, but with all due respect, your father didn't marry your mother because she was good stock. He was in love with her," Gioele points out.

The man has no idea.

"And that's what got her killed," I bite back at him, regretting my harshness when I see the hurt in Gioele's eyes. I was only five years old when one of my father's rivals shot my mother. She was running errands, and Gioele was the one accompanying her. I know he's never forgiven himself for not being able to protect her. Since then, Gioele has suffered his own misfortunes. The man knows loss better than anyone.

What happened to my mother wasn't his fault, but it is one of the many reasons I lied to Samuele last night. As much as I know it hurt Riley to be treated like a whore, I couldn't risk a man like him knowing she's important to me.

"So that's your plan? Knock the girl up. Have an heir and then keep her like a whore." Gio puts it bluntly. He really is in a bad mood today.



“That will depend on how my conversation goes with her.” I raise my shoulders before relaxing back into my chair.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” he asks, almost looking concerned.

“It means she can either comply, or I’ll have to take measures,” I explain simply. Hopefully, it doesn’t come to that. Of course, I’d much rather Riley be on board with what I have planned for her future.

“What sort of measures?” He frowns because he knows the things I’m capable of. I wasn’t born with a conscience.

“She’s the one I’ve chosen, Gioele, and I’m used to getting what I want.” I let him be the judge.

“You realize this girl is a missing person?” he points out. “You took a huge risk taking her to Maria’s place. Who knows who else is looking for her? If the authorities found out you have her, it would raise questions and maybe even warrant an investigation. Not only would they take her away, but you and your brother risk getting locked up, too. You could lose everything.”

“No one’s taking her from me.” I slam my fist hard onto my desk, angry at myself for being so foolish. Gioele holds his hands up defensively, sensing the switch in my mood.

“I don’t need council on my decision, Gio. The reason I’m talking to you is because I need to know that if anything happens to me, she’ll be taken care of.”

“You want me to make her a benefactor?” he asks, sounding even more shocked.

“The child she bears me will be the benefactor,” I explain. “But Riley must be provided for. I want an account set up

under a fake name. She'll need a passport and a new identity, of course."

Gioele nods his head in understanding.

"But she can't know about it, not unless something happens to me. This isn't her escape. It will be a reward for her loyalty if I can no longer be with her."

"Okay, but you should know, I think you're crazy." The old man shakes his head as he pulls out his notebook and jots down everything I've asked him to do.

"And the brother? You could have him taken care of. The fewer people out there looking for her, the less chance anyone will find her. People soon become forgotten about," he sighs helplessly. Unfortunately, Gioele knows from experience that his last statement is true.

I shake my head and focus back on what's important now.

Riley loves her brother. Even if she never found out that I was the one who had him killed, I don't think I could live with knowing I'd taken someone special from her. It takes real hatred to do something like that, or some might argue real love.

Either way, her brother won't pay the price for my decision. Not unless he decides to interfere with it.

"Well, if that is all. I should try to get myself on another flight." Gioele closes his briefcase and stands up. "I'll have this taken care of in the next couple of days," he assures me, nodding his head to me before he exits my office and leaves me in peace.

The air seems a little lighter once he's gone, and I look at the clock above the door and realize I still have two whole hours before I sit down with Riley and offer her a new life. I

hope she's sensible enough to take me up on it. Because the more I sit and think about it, the more I realize I want Riley's happiness a damn sight more than I do her suffering.



I make sure I'm a few minutes early when I step out onto the lawn. There's a table set up for two people by the edge of the lake, and I smile to myself when I step toward it and see the vase of roses in the center of it.

The side to Rafe I saw this morning has made my heart skip and my head giddy. And of all the things I expected him to be capable of, playful wasn't one of them. I'm really hoping that he'll be in the same mood for our lunch date.

I take a seat and wait for him. All the food Sylvia has laid out looks delicious, and there's far too much here for only two people.

When I hear the gravel behind me start to crunch, I peer over my shoulder and see Rafe making his way toward me. He's dressed in gray suit trousers, and the black shirt that's unbuttoned to his chest makes him look irresistible.

"Afternoon." The kiss he places on my cheek before he sits down causes my stomach to flip.

"How was your meeting?" I ask, taking my napkin from the table and laying it across my lap.

“Productive,” he answers, focusing his attention on the items he’s started to add to my plate with the tongs. He stops when he notices me staring at him.

“I can serve myself you know,” I inform him, just in case he’s forgotten.

“Yes, I’m sure you can, but these are the things I want you to eat,” he tells me before setting back to work.

When he’s done, I pick up my fork while he concentrates on selecting things for his own plate.

“So, are you going to tell me what this is all about?” I ask, desperate to know what it is he wants to discuss with me.

“I’d prefer it if you ate first.” His eyes fall to my plate as if prompting me.

“Well, I’m nervous,” I admit, “and I can’t eat when I’m nervous.”

“What are you nervous about?” He smiles a wicked smile over the rim of his glass when he takes a sip of water. I don’t want to answer him because I don’t want to spoil his mood.

“I don’t know. Sometimes you just make me nervous,” I take a piece of thin-cut steak into my mouth to satisfy him.

“Do you like it here, Riley?” Rafe asks cryptically. His eyes narrow as they wait for my response.

“Well, it’s better than the last place I stayed.” I try to inject a little humor into the suddenly tense conversation, but Rafe’s sad smile is evidence of my failure.

“Yes, I like it here,” I answer.

“And you find me tolerable?” he asks further, causing me to almost choke on the meat I’m swallowing.

“Well, I suppose when you’re not calling me a whore, or threatening to kill my brother, you can be tolerable,” I agree, knowing that I’m pushing my luck with him. He doesn’t seem to be getting mad, though, not yet, anyway.

“I’m a lonely man, Riley.” He sighs heavily, dropping his fork onto his plate. Resting his elbows on the table, he crosses his hands in front of him. “I don’t trust people. I actually don’t like people very much at all.” He confesses, and I nod my head, absorbing what he says and wondering where he’s going with it.

“There is something about you that I like.” His pointer finger brushes over his bottom lip and his eyes hood as he watches my reaction.

I try to stop myself from smiling, but it’s impossible.

“I want more from this life than what I have, Riley, and I want you to be the person who gives it to me.”

I have to try to stop myself from laughing because he seems to be serious.

“What more could you possibly want?” I stare at him, confused, before taking a look around me; These grounds, his huge house. Raphael is the richest man I’ve ever met. He has everything.

“Someone to share all this with. Someone who I can take care of...”

“You mean control?” I cut him off.

“Sometimes... mostly. Yes.” He nods unapologetically, and I have to admire his honesty.

“I want a family, Riley,” he adds, and I quickly take a drink of water before I choke again.

“A what now?” I have to check I’m hearing him right.

“A family, sons, daughters. I want this house to become a home. Somewhere that I don’t feel lonely anymore.”

“And you want me to be a part of that?” This has to be a joke. Maybe it’s one of his cruel games. I’m surprised Ricardo isn’t around to enjoy it.

“Riley, I want you to be all of that.” He smiles back at me hopefully, and I have to remind myself to breathe when I realize that this is no joke. The man is deadly serious.

“But you don’t know me,” I point out. “How can you possibly know that you want all these things with me? I might be a complete bitch.”

“Oh, you are one. But that doesn’t change anything.” His voice is so soft and calm it almost makes what he’s saying sound normal.

“Rafe, do you understand what you’re asking of me? I’m only nineteen. I haven’t even thought about having children yet. And I have a life beyond all this. I have a brother who cares about me.”

“Why have you never thought about having children?” He looks at me curiously.

“Ummm, maybe because I’m practically a child myself,” I answer him back sarcastically. “And because I have nothing to offer a child, no home, no stability.”

“Well, you have all of that now.” He pouts as if he sees no problem. “And you’re certainly not a child. In fact, you’re proving to be the strongest woman I’ve ever met.” His eyes remain narrow like he doesn’t understand any of my logic.

“I have a life, Rafe, it may not be a lavish one like yours, but I like who I am. I miss my brother, and I don’t want to be a prisoner here.”

“I understand that you’d be giving up your freedom to me, and for that, I am willing to compensate.” He’s talking to me like we’re about to shake hands on a business deal.

“What could you possibly offer me that would make me want to give up my freedom?” I stare back at him.

He pauses for a while, taking air through his nostrils and turning his head to look out onto the lake for a few seconds before his attention comes back to me.

“Everything.” His eyes burn into mine, and there’s a desperation in his tone that indicates just how much he wants this. He’s hoping that ‘everything’ will be enough.

“Raphael, have you seen yourself? You’re beautiful. Women would line up for miles to give you what you want.”

“None of them would be you.” He pouts again and shrugs his shoulders at the same time.

“This is madness.” I stand up from the table, needing space from him so I can breathe.

“You should take some time to think,” he tells me, surprising me when he does nothing to physically stop me from leaving. “I’ll give you twenty-four hours. In that time, I’ll leave you alone. I won’t pressure you. You need to make the right decision because once you say yes to me, Riley, you’re signing your life to me. You will be mine.”

“And if I say no?” I ask, hearing the shake in my voice.

He stands up from the table, casually stepping closer to me until his arm touches mine.



“You’ll be mine, anyway,” he warns with his lips tight to my ear before he walks away.

I sit back down on the chair and stare at the table— trying to take in everything he’s just said. He made it sound like a choice when in reality, my freedom was never a part of the negotiation. Rafe will keep me here regardless, and then what am I supposed to do? Be his whore? Watch him raise a family with someone else while he uses me. The thought makes me shudder.

I will always be Raphael’s prisoner, regardless of the offer he’s just put on the table.

I have to wonder what it is that makes me so special, why it’s me that he wants to be part of this so-called family he wants to create. And then I think of Liam. He’s my family, and if I take Raphael up on his offer, I’ll be abandoning all hope of ever finding him again.

Tears start to fill my eyes, and I turn my back on the house, staring out to the lake and looking for answers that I know I’m not gonna find.

“If you’re thinking about running, *Briga*, you should re-evaluate.” I know without turning around that the deep voice behind me belongs to Ricardo. He’s a man of few words, but I recognize his voice because he has an even stronger Italian accent than Rafe.

“Maybe I should try my chances. I reckon I could outrun you.” I look down my nose at him when he stands beside me, despite him being a foot and a half taller than me and standing up.

“And you think Raphael would let you go so easily.” He laughs to himself, helping himself to one of the sandwiches

Sylvia has cut into neat little triangles.

“What would you do if you were me?” I ask him, and my question seems to take him by surprise. I wonder if he even knows about Rafe’s offer.

“I’d let myself be his weakness. The man has very few of them.” He offers me no more words and takes full advantage of the leftover food on the table.

I spend the rest of my day in my room, tossing and turning on my bed, then sitting out on the balcony and trying to get a glimpse of him. Sylvia brings me up some dinner, but I can’t bring myself to eat it. All I can think about is what Rafe has asked of me.

Is it so crazy that I would consider saying yes to him? Is it wrong that I’m tempted by the lifestyle he wants to give me? And am I really starting to fall for a man who keeps me as a prisoner?

It can’t be right to consider bringing a family into this toxic situation.

Leaving my tray still full, I decide I’m done with Rafe’s terms and conditions. Storming out of my room, I head off to search for him.

The guard outside my room tells me Rafe will be upstairs, in a gym that I never even knew existed, and so I climb the hidden staircase that he shows me and prepare to confront him.

Rafe looks shocked to see me and immediately stops punching the kickback that’s hanging from the rafters. Ripping the velcro of the gloves off with his teeth, he slides out of them and wastes no time stepping toward me. The shorts and black vest he’s wearing, and the fact all his visible muscles are

shimmering with sweat, almost make me forget that I came up here to yell at him.

Almost.

“How fucking dare you?” I call out to him, watching him study me in confusion. “How dare you make out like you’re giving me a choice? My freedom isn’t what’s at stake here, Rafe—you already fucking own that, don’t you? What I really stand to lose is my fucking sanity.”

I tap my finger to my temple and notice his fists clench into balls at his sides.

“You’re right. There is no offer of freedom. Unfortunately, I can’t give you that, Riley.” When he starts stepping closer to me, I back away. If I let him too close, my body will give in to him, and I can’t let that happen.

“Why? Do you know how fucked up that is?” I shake my head, wishing he could find some kind of reason.

“You and I are from different worlds. In mine, it’s not so fucked up.” He raises his shoulders, not even attempting to explain, and the space between us becomes even tighter.

“In what world, Raphael? In what world is any of this okay?”

My back hits one of the thick oak beams that hold the roof up, and he uses it to his advantage. His hands rest above my head, and his body cages me in.

“Say yes to me,” he growls through his teeth. His forehead creasing, and a pain I’ve never seen before adorning his beautiful face.

“Why?” I ask weakly

“Because I want to take care of you.” His nose slides along my cheek and makes my breath catch.

“Because as adorable as you look when you cry, I don’t think I want to hurt you.” He speaks softly against my ear as his hips roll slightly into me. His thick, hard shaft presses into my stomach, and it makes me throb for him.

“You said you wouldn’t pressure me,” I remind him.

“You came to find me,” he points out. His hand moves under the white shirt I’m wearing, and his fingertips spreading over my skin.

Oh my god.

“Say yes,” he whispers again. This time with his lips just a millimeter away from mine. The sincerity in his voice, the touch of his hands on my body, and the fact that I’ve been falling for him since he brought me here force me to defeat.

“Yes,” I whisper back, helplessly making a deal with the devil, and his mouth slams so hard over mine that the back of my skull impacts with the wood behind me. His tongue rolls around mine, and as he tears at my shirt and grabs at my tits, he growls a predatory sound of relief into my mouth.

His hands move down my body, lifting under my thighs and taking me off my feet. Then, pinning me to the pillar with his abs, he tugs his shorts off his hips and releases himself. I feel the tip of his cock slide between my legs and anchor myself tighter to his body, desperate to feel him inside me again. And when his fingers tug at my lace to clear a path for him to enter me, my stomach flutters with anticipation.

“This is gonna be quick,” he warns. “I’ve been wanting to take you since you got out of that damn shower this morning.” He pushes inside me, and the force and size of him combined

make me yelp. But my legs cling to him tighter as his hips thrust into me fast and hard, making my back scrape up and down the beam.

He seems like he's lost control as his hands move over my skin as if he doesn't know which part of me he wants to touch. His lips suck at my neck, and his teeth nip at my collarbone as he fills me deeper and deeper.

I want so badly to touch him back, but I'm too scared to let go of the grip I have around his neck. I can feel myself slipping over the edge. There's something building in my stomach that's screaming for release, just like the night before, and all of a sudden, he feels so much bigger inside me.

His hand reaches up over my chest, and he grabs at my throat, his eyes fierce and forcing me to pay attention to him.

“You're mine, Riley Hayes. Only death will part us now.” His words send a shiver of fear down my spine, but it also triggers the dam that's been building up inside me to break... and I call out his name as I flood his cock and rock myself mercilessly against his solid body.

Rafe's body suddenly stills, and when he presses his forehead tight against mine, I feel his cock spasm inside me, filling me with the seed he wants me to nurture. And his dark stare is daring me like he's waiting for me to argue.

But I don't.

“Good girl,” he whispers, looking down at my lips before he rewards them with a kiss. Then, keeping me tight to his body, he pulls me away from the beam I'm propped against and carefully lays me on the floor.

“Again?” My eyes widen in shock. I'm really gonna have to build up some stamina because my body feels shattered.

“No,” Rafe shakes his head and laughs to himself. “You’re gonna lie there and wait for me to finish my workout,” he tells me with a crooked smile.

“And why would I want to do that?” I ask, letting a little laugh escape from my lips.

I must look ridiculous, sprawled out half-naked on his gym floor.

“Because...” He focuses between our bodies as he pulls his cock out of me and snaps my white panties back into place. I follow the trail of his finger when it slides between my legs, and the heel of his palm cups my pussy. “...I don’t want a single drop of that spilling out of you,” he lowers his head and whispers into my ear. Then planting a kiss on my cheek, he lifts himself off my body, leaving me on the floor, worn out and feeling completely over my head.



“W hen you said you wanted to impregnate me, I didn’t expect you to want to get started straight away,” Riley muffles sleepily into her pillow. It was 5am when I decided that I’d been lying and watching her sleeping for far too long. It had been a whole six hours since I’d last filled her tight little pussy with my cum, and I feel satisfied now that I’ve topped it up again.

“What is there to wait for?” I slide out of her and roll onto my back so I can catch my breath. Riley angles her body so she’s facing me, and she looks sweet as fuck when she slides both her hands under her cheek and smiles me a dreamy smile.

“Most people spend time getting to know each other before they decide to have kids together, Rafe,” her eyes close like she might drift back off to sleep.

“And some know what they want from the moment they see it.” I place a kiss on her forehead before dragging myself out of bed.

It’s only been three weeks since Riley accepted my proposition, and I’m already getting impatient. I know these things can take time, and I don’t want to put any pressure on

her, but that doesn't mean I won't do everything I can to speed up the process.

"Your period should be due soon— you haven't bled since I started fucking you," I point out as I pull on my jeans. The way she blushes back at me only makes my cock desperate to be inside her again.

"I don't know when it's due. I've never kept track of it before." She suddenly looks a lot more awake. We haven't had a detailed conversation about conception. I've been far too distracted by taking pleasure from her body.

"Well, start keeping track." I slip my t-shirt over my head before climbing back on top of her. Then, taking a fist of her hair, I make sure I have all that pretty blue-eyed attention.

"That's if I haven't knocked you up already."

I'm surprised when she smiles back at me. I know the thought terrifies her and that she's doing this purely for me. It's one of the reasons I haven't left her side in three weeks. I'm scared that if she has time to think this all through, she might try to back out.

"I have to leave town for a few days." I've known for a while that I have shit to deal with in Chicago, and I've been putting it off to spend time with her, but now it's become unavoidable. The look of disappointment that I'm seeing on Riley's face has me desperate to stay.

"You're leaving me?" Her bottom lip sticks out as she sulks, and I can't resist reaching down and clamping it between my teeth.

"I have a business to run. Sometimes it takes me out of town," I explain when I pull away just far enough to be able to see her face again.



“I could always come with you,” she suggests, pulling her eyes away from me and staring out toward the balcony. Riley suffers terribly with pride. I love how she always tries to hide her emotions from me and fails at it.

“You know that’s not possible.” I feel a bitter stab of disappointment about that myself. But Gioele was right. The circumstances she was obtained by means I can’t flaunt her around. Even if I could, I decided from the day I bought her home that she should be sheltered from the way I make my money.

I wanted her to fear me in the beginning, but I’ve quickly learned that I much prefer her to see the good in me. I never want her to think of me as a monster, like Adriano.

“I could keep a low profile.” Her fingers tease with the hem of my t-shirt. “Who’s gonna take care of me while you’re away?” The little temptress flattens her palm against my stomach and slowly slides it under the waistband of my jeans. When her fingers glide over my shaft, I drop my head and close my eyes to try to distract myself from her.

“You have to stay here,” I speak through my tense jaw. “And don’t think that there won’t be strict rules while I’m gone.” After finding enough strength to look back at her, I reach between us and grab her wrist. Then slowly pulling her hand out of my jeans, I kiss her fingertips and pin her arm to the mattress above her head.

“Rules that you will abide by,” I warn, knowing how much she likes to test me.

“Let’s hear them then.” Riley lets out a long sigh and rolls her eyes defiantly. I swear if there wasn’t the slightest chance that she might already have my child growing inside her, I’d

twist her little body back onto its front and thrash her ass cheeks until they matched the color of her hair.

“Ricardo’s staying behind to keep an eye on you.”

She snarls at the idea.

“And you’re to do as he says,” I warn.

Much to Ricardo’s displeasure, I’ve reassigned him. He is Riley’s personal protection now instead of mine. Of course, I had to offer him a substantial increase in his salary, but I know he’s worth the money. He is the best. And you can’t put a price on loyalty.

“Ricardo hates me,” Riley huffs out her words like a spoiled brat.

“Ricardo doesn’t hate you.”

“Okay then, I hate him. He’s boring, and he’s rude.”

“I’m sorry my staff doesn’t live up to your entertainment standards, Miss Hayes, but I pay them to protect.”

“And to stop me from running,” she adds, trying to be smart.

“You could run all you want.” I shake my head at her. “But be assured that I will find you.” It’s not a threat, it’s a promise, and the seductive smile she gives me back suggests that it pleases her.

I’m not about to give her all my trust just yet, though.

“You are also to eat everything Sylvia makes for you, no meal skipping,” I add, and after another over-exaggerated eye roll, Riley nods back at me.

“Anything else?” she asks sarcastically.

“Yes. You are not, under any circumstances, to play with my pussy. I want it desperate and needy for me when I get back.” I press my lips onto hers before she can argue and push myself off the bed. It’s already her fault that I have less than an hour to pack and get to the airfield.

“I’ll have someone pick you up some tests from the pharmacy.” I grab my cell phone off the nightstand.

“No!” she snaps.

“What do you mean, no?” I frown at her. It isn’t a word I hear very often, and I certainly don’t want to be hearing it from her.

“I mean, it’s too personal. I don’t want people knowing things like that about us.” Her cheeks flush red.

“Fine, I shall grab them myself. We can do one together when I get back.” I agree to her terms, but only because she looks fucking beautiful when she’s embarrassed.

Riley smiles back at me victoriously, and if I had the time, I’d be tempted to wipe the smugness off her face by slamming my cock into the back of her throat.

“Best behavior,” I remind her, pointing a finger at her before I kiss her one last time.

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I land in Chicago a few hours later. Riley’s already sent two very teasing photos of herself to me from Ricardo’s phone, and I hope for his sake she remembered to erase them before she gave him it back to him. I’d hate for my best man to lose his fucking eyeballs due to her carelessness.

There seems to be something about the girl that puts a permanent smile on my face whenever I think about her, even on days like today when I have to deal with this shit.

I'm mad at Enzo for betraying me.

I'm even madder at him for thinking he can get away with it.

And I'm fucking murderous that his actions have brought me all the way out here when I could be at home with Riley.

I nod at Luca when my car pulls up outside the training house I own, and we both step out of the car. The guard on the front door raises his eyebrows when he sees me, and I wonder if he's in on Enzo's little enterprise, too.

"Sir." He nods his head at me nervously, and I ignore him as I step past to enter.

"Mr Verretti." Even the maid looks shocked, her feet stopping dead on her path toward Enzo's office. I lick my finger before I dab it into the mound of white powder that's on the silver tray she's carrying, and when I place it on my tongue, it's just what I suspected...

Cheap, over-cut shit.

"Allow me?" I take the tray from her hands and watch her mouth fall open as I proceed through the office door.

Enzo is too distracted getting his cock sucked to notice my presence. The other two men in the room are in various states of undress and outnumbered by the girls pleasuring them. They watch in horror as I place the tray down on the desk, then pulling my semi-automatic from the shoulder holster under my jacket, I round the desk and push the barrel against Enzo's head.

“Everyone out,” I yell, watching the men rapidly abandon the women attached to their bodies and gather up their clothes.

“Not you, you keep going,” I speak down to the wired little blonde bitch whose Botox-filled lips are attached to the base of Enzo’s cock.

Luca gathers the naked girls that are littered all over the floor and escorts them to the door, before he steps back inside and closes it behind him.

“I wasn’t aware that I was running a low-budget brothel here these days.” I keep my gun pressed into Enzo’s temple. The girl does the best she can to keep his now flaccid cock in her mouth, continuing to suck him like I commanded.

“They were some potential clients,” he assures me, his voice quivering with fear.

“And if I were to send Luca upstairs to search the training rooms, would I find any other ‘potential clients’?” I ask, keeping my voice calm.

Like my father before me, I have a very strict client screening process. I protect myself by only supplying to the people who I know have everything to lose in the event of a scandal.

What I supply to them in return is unique and exclusive, and it seems that there is truth in the word that got back to me about Enzo destroying that reputation.

“I’m sorry, Raphael.” He gives up trying to deny it. He knows he’s been caught out, and he’s also known me long enough to know what the consequences will be. “I only whored the ones who were already broken,” he adds like that makes him stealing from me okay.

The blonde girl looks up at me— her eyes scared as she continues to work.

“Keep going.” I lift my chin at her. I’ve never seen this one before, and I wonder if Enzo has been supplying his own women, too. Offering the comforts and luxuries I supply here to cheap hookers from the streets for his slice of their profit.

“I don’t lease out. I sell,” I remind him, and his head nods dramatically against my gun.

“You have taken advantage of my trust.”

“It won’t happen again, sir,” he promises. “Please, Raphael.” The poor bastard’s begging now, and only desperate men do that.

“Luca, get Demetri in here,” I call over to the other side of the room. Demetri is Enzo’s cousin. He’s also the one who made me aware of the little side business Enzo has been running under my roof.

When he steps inside the room a few minutes later, he looks nervous as hell when he sees the position his cousin’s in.

“You will be running things around here from now on,” I inform him before I empty my chamber into Enzo’s skull. The bitch on her knees in front of him screams as his blood decorates her face and stains her bleached blonde hair. Even in her spacey, drug-induced state, she becomes hysterical, screaming so loud that I have to instruct Luca to gag her and drag her from the room.

I slide my finger across my jaw to wipe off Enzo’s blood, and I dust off my jacket before addressing a still-stunned Demetri.

“Let’s try to keep things a little more professional around here in the future,” I suggest, tucking my gun back into its

holster.

“I had your living quarters prepared. Would you like me to send someone up to keep you company, sir?” He tries his best not to appear disturbed.

What he really means is, would I like a woman to fuck.

“That won’t be necessary. I have a business dinner scheduled for this evening, and I don’t want to be disturbed by anyone until then.”

Moving past him, I make my way up to the master bedroom, and I wait until I’ve showered before I grab my phone and face time Ricardo. When he answers, he looks about as cheerful as Ebola.

“Where is she?” I ask, smiling just at the thought of seeing her face again.

“I’ll just get her... *Briga...*” He shouts out the name my brother had given her. It means trouble in Italian.

“You know she hates it when you call her that,” I scoff a laugh at him.

“Good,” he snarls back. I like to think the pair of them will develop an annoying little sister, big brother type of relationship, which is why I allow him a little hostility toward her now and again.

“Hey you,” Riley’s face suddenly fills the screen with her eyes sparkling and her smile wide.

“What are you doing?” I ask, stretching out on my bed and enjoying the view of her.

“You know, the usual, just trying to piss Ricardo off enough to make a vein pop.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me playfully. “How’s business?”

“Boring.” It’s not really a lie— it’s just not the truth.

“And do you miss me?” she asks. The cute little twitch of her nose makes me want to charter my plane back to her right the fuck now.

“Yes,” I admit, because it’s true, and the way she’s been behaving for me just lately makes me think she deserves to know that.

“I’ll bet you’re a bastard in the boardroom.” She laughs to herself as she holds me at arm’s length and lays out on the grass.

“I’ve been known to be ruthless when I need to be.” My eyes glance over to the blood-stained suit that’s now lying creased on the floor.

“When will you be home?” she asks, her teeth gripping her bottom lip, trying to hold back on me again.

“Sounds like you are missing me?” I point out, with a shit-eating grin that I know will make her regret her question.

“Yes, I am.” She surprises me when she doesn’t hold back.

“Then I’ll be home as soon as I can,” I promise.





48 HOURS LATER

The mattress dips beside me, and I feel a slight chill as my bedsheets slowly slip away from my body. When I realize I'm not dreaming, I gasp for breath.

"Sshhhh." Rafe's warm breath caresses my cheek and soothes me.

"You're home." My voice comes out groggy, and I'm still half asleep, but I manage a smile.

I can't believe how much I've actually missed him.

Rafe's fingers work the buttons of my shirt all the way down to the bottom, clearing a path of exposed skin for his palm to slide back up through before it reaches my throat.

"Have you been a good girl for me?" he whispers just before his mouth touches my neck. It sends a shiver through my veins.

Something soft and velvety touches my cheek, and I recognize the scent of it straight away. It's one of the roses from Rafe's garden, and it makes my tummy flip that he's taken the time to pick one for me.

I reach over to my nightstand and flick on the light because I want to see him. I've missed his face, and when the dim light slowly illuminates the space around us, I see those dark, beautiful eyes, intense and fixed on mine.

He teases me by guiding the petals over my neck, moving the rose down the center of my body, and making my skin tingle in its trail. I'm desperate to feel Rafe's hands on me in its place.

“I have to tell you something.” I force the words out and hope he won’t be mad at me.

“Speak,” he permits as he nips my earlobe with his teeth and causes me to moan.

“My period came... This morning, I’m sorry.” He stops the rose’s journey just before it reaches the waistline of my panties.

“Do you know why roses have thorns, Riley?” he whispers, ignoring the thing I just told him. I can’t see his face because it’s buried in my neck, and I wish I could gauge how angry he is.

“No, I don’t.” I swallow thickly.

The rose petals feel like the tip of a feather as he glides them back up my body.

“It’s nature’s way of preserving beauty,” he explains, raising his head and watching my reaction as his palm crushes tight around the rose stem. I’ve been pricked by one of the thorns before. I know how painful they can be, and I don’t understand why he would inflict it on himself.

“Precious things should always be protected, Riley.” His voice sounds strained and a little uncontrolled.

I look down between us and notice trickles of blood seeping from his tightly closed fist.

“Rafe, you’re bleeding!” I stare in shock, wondering why he isn’t flinching.

“Sometimes you find rare beauties that are worth the hurt,” he tells me in a calm whisper, and when his dark eyes penetrate mine, I see it... I see the pain that’s embedded so deep inside his soul that I want to take it away for him.

“I’m sorry.” Those seem to be the only words I can speak.

Rafe shakes his head at me.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Riley. Perhaps nature is trying to protect you from me.” He laughs to himself cruelly before placing the rose on the bed beside me. His palm slides up over my stomach, leaving a bloody smear in its trail as it moves to my chest, and he squeezes around my breast. I cry out with a combination of pleasure and pain as his warm sticky blood coats my skin, and I feel myself bruising under his fingertips.

Something dark is radiating from him, and it is so much more intense than anger. This is sadness.

“Sometimes I wonder if I should just let you go,” he admits in a low, deep tone that has me panicking. Why does that thought suddenly put a feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach?

“What happened, Rafe?” I ask, wondering how deep this goes. I knew he’d be disappointed, but this feels like so much more than that.

“You hurt me,” he confesses, in a voice so weak that it makes my heart ache.

“What did I do?” I shake my head, trying so hard to understand.

“Nothing. You did nothing, Riley.” His hand continues to knead at my flesh, and his lips skim against my jaw. “Being around you makes me hurt. Not being around you makes me hurt,” he admits. “The sight of you, the thought of losing you. Everything fucking hurts.”

“You must have really missed me, huh?” I try a little sarcasm in an attempt to lighten the mood, but it doesn’t

work.

“Promise me you’ll never leave.” His bloody hand travels up to my neck.

“We covered this, Rafe,” I remind him.

“I need to hear it again. Promise me that no matter what, you’ll never leave. Even if you don’t like the man I am sometimes. I need that promise.”

“I promise.” I say the words without hesitation, and what scares me is that I really mean them. This isn’t about survival anymore. Rafe may be intense. He sometimes scares me, but now, I can’t imagine my life without him. Maybe that’s the reason I cried when I saw the blood in my panties this morning. Maybe it’s why I’ve felt like a part of me has been missing the past few days.

I’m in love with him.

He shifts his body so he’s kneeling between my legs, and I watch him pull off his tie, admiring the mess he’s made of my body as he unbuttons his shirt and strips it from his shoulders.

“You like marking me.” I’m not sure if I’m asking a question or making a statement, but Rafe nods his head back at me, unashamed, as he slowly pulls open his belt and pulls it free.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he tells me, carefully wrapping the leather around my throat and fastening the buckle. My eyes widen, and a spark of fear laced with thrill makes my heart beat a little faster. When his hand moves to the waistline of my panties, I quickly slam my hand over the top of it to stop him. His other hand comes fast and out of nowhere, slapping hard at mine before he rips it away.

“Never deny me what’s mine. Not ever,” he warns harshly.

“But I told you, I have my—”

“If I want to fuck your bleeding cunt, Riley. I will fuck it,” he tells me bluntly, and both shock and desire prevent me from arguing with him. Instead, I watch in humiliation as he raises both my legs over one of his shoulders, slowly peeling my panties up my thighs and off my ankles. Closing my eyes, I cringe as his finger slips through my pussy lips and skims around my opening. Then I feel it wrap around my tampon string and tug at it teasingly while his thumb works my clit.

I cry out when he pulls it free because somehow, Raphael Verretti just made the removal of a tampon fucking pleasurable.

Are there any ends to his talents?

Taking his cock in his hand, he guides it toward me, biting on his thick bottom lip as he slides himself between my pussy lips, teasing at my flesh and making my tight hole throb for his cock.

That slight pain he gives me when he first enters me is addictive, and the deep emptiness I’ve been carrying around with me for the past few days is desperate to be full of him again.

Rafe’s eyes burrow into mine, his hand reaching forward to grip the belt around my neck so he can use it to lift my head from the pillow and draw me closer to him.

“You’re soaked for me.” The tip of his nose slides along the length of mine, and all I can do is nod my head in agreement.

“Ask me to fuck you, Riley,” he orders. His jaw is almost as tense as the grip he’s got on his belt.

“Fuck me,” I dare him.

“I want to hurt you. I want to make you hurt for the pain you make me suffer and the way you make me doubt myself,” he confesses.

I want to know what he doubts about himself, but even I know that now isn't the time to ask that question.

It makes nerves stir in my stomach with the thought that I want his pain.

“Then hurt me.” Wrapping my palm around the wrist of the hand he's holding his belt with— I brace myself. “I'll take your hurt,” I assure him bravely, coaxing his hand away from the collar he's made of his belt and guiding it to my mouth. Holding his hand in mine, I stretch out his fingers and slide my tongue through his thorn-scratched palm, tasting his pain on my tongue.

The night he took me for the first time, I'd wondered why he had to taste between my legs. I get it now. I want to feel what he feels for me. That way, I'll know that it really exists.

These cuts prove that Rafe doesn't fear pain, and I need him to know that I don't fear him.

He gives me a satisfied smile when I'm done. Then, snatching my jaw, he purses my lips together and kisses me hard as he thrusts himself inside me. His mouth steals all my cries as he fills me up in one swift motion.

My toes curl, and my nipples pinch as he slams his hips into me over and over again. I struggle for breath when the belt tightens around my neck, and Rafe snarls at me. His hand gripping my jaw so tight I fear he might break it as he pounds my pussy mercilessly.

He's been rough with me before, but never like this. This is feral, and I can feel all the hurt inside him releasing.

He's using me like a human punchbag to eliminate his pain. And call it sick, call it twisted, but my body responds to his treatment by climaxing for him.

I squeeze my legs around his hips when something deep inside me clenches, and my pussy contracts around his thick, punishing cock.

"Jesus Christ, Riley, I'm gonna come," he growls me a warning, which is something he's never done before, and I like the sound of him falling apart.

His whole body stiffens, and I feel the powerful throbbing of his release when it explodes inside me. Then, after his exhausted, sweaty body collapses on top of mine, I wrap my arms around him and hold him tight.

"There's nothing in this world that can protect you from me, Riley," he warns me breathlessly.

"Not even nature."





5 WEEKS LATER

“You don’t like your eggs that way?” I watch Riley push them around her plate to avoid eating them.

“You know I do. I’m just not hungry this morning.” When she pouts her pretty little lips at me, I look across the dining room to where Ricardo is standing beside the door and gesture my head for him to leave us.

“You haven’t eaten properly in two days,” I point out, feeling the creases in my forehead deepen. If she hadn’t just had another period, I’d be assuming all that cum I’ve been fucking inside her had taken hold.

“Rafe, you can’t expect me to eat everything you have put in front of me. I’m just not used to eating this well.” She’s feeding me bullshit, and frustration has me slamming my hand at the table before gripping its edge.

“Have I done something to upset you?” I keep my eyes focused on my hand, trying to hold my temper. Riley knows exactly how to push all my buttons, and I’ve been lenient with her lately. These last few days, she’s been off with me, and if something’s on her mind, I want to know what it is.

“Jeez, I just don’t feel hungry,” she snaps, scraping back her chair and standing up.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I stare at her in shock.

“Back to my room. I want to take a shower.”

“I never gave you permission to leave the table,” I remind her, narrowing my eyes in warning. I’ve come to look forward to the times during and just after her period. I know I can be

rough with her. Perhaps that's what she's coaxing me for this morning.

Sliding my own chair back, I step toward her, but the scornful look she's hitting back at me is anything but seductive.

"Sit and eat." I point my finger at her chair.

"Fuck. Off," she bites back, acting like a spoiled little brat, making my eyes widen and my palm twitch. I breathe in through my nose, letting all my anger heat the blood under my skin. And then, before I do something I know I'll regret, I storm out of my own dining room.

When I slam open the doors, it startles Ricardo, and he immediately moves into the dining room to stand guard. I clench my fists and seethe as I cross the hall and push through the swinging door into the kitchen.

"Is everything okay?" Sylvia immediately stops kneading the dough on her chopping board, her eyes full of concern as she wipes the flour from her hands onto her apron.

"The girl infuriates me!" I pace the wood floor in front of her, trying to calm my breathing as I run my hands through my hair.

"I give her everything. And she repays me with punishment." I'm talking more to myself than Sylvia, but it doesn't take long for her hands to be on the back of my shirt, soothing me.

"You mustn't take everything so personally. Maybe the girl is unwell," she suggests. "The way you two go at it, I wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't..."

"She's not," I interrupt, wishing that was the case.

Riley is making me pay for something, and I have to figure out what it is.

“Go and offer her something else, Sylvia. See if you can talk some sense into her. If she needs to see a doctor, I can arrange it. I’ll be in the gym.”

Sylvia smiles at me warmly.

“What’s that pathetic look for?” I ask her, trying not to sound pissed.

“It’s nice to see you caring about someone,” she tells me with a dopey look still on her face. “Even if you do have a very overbearing manner.”

“Just see to the girl, Sylvia.” I shake my head and walk out, heading straight to the gym so I can work off all the anger Riley puts inside me.

A two-hour workout does nothing to simmer my mood, and after a long, cold shower, I get dressed and head down to my office. I make calls to all my houses and check things are running smoothly. I have an auction taking place in Chicago next week that I should attend, but I’d much rather be here than in Chicago. Being away from Riley last time really fucked with my head, and I’ve convinced myself that staying home will give Demetri the opportunity to prove his worth.

I try to focus on work, but I can’t get Riley and her latest stunt off my mind. Maybe Sylvia’s right, and she is actually sick. If she’s not eaten anything by tomorrow, I’ll call my doctor and have him take a look at her.

It’s just past noon when I hear a knock on my office door, and when I call out for whoever it is to enter, I’m pleasantly surprised to see that it’s Riley.

She looks like she's been crying, and as she steps inside, she offers me a submissive little smile that makes my cock hard and ready for her.

“What do you want, Riley?” I shut my laptop and try not to be distracted by how beautiful she looks.

“I wanted to say I'm sorry.” She steps closer, stopping when she gets to the edge of my desk like she's nervous to come too close.

“Are you sick?” I ask, and when she shrugs her shoulders, it infuriates me.

“Do you want to see a doctor?”

Her head shakes back at me.

“So what's the matter with you? Talk to me.” I slouch back in my chair and look up at her, expecting an explanation.

“Rafe, I just don't feel like I can stomach anything right now, and I have this weird taste in my mouth that won't go away.” She fiddles with the last button on her shirt nervously.

I know what the early signs of pregnancy are, and Riley is showing them. But she can't be, not so soon after her period.

“Come here.” I shift my laptop and clear a space for her to sit in front of me, and she offers me that cutesy little smile again before she rests her ass on my desk. “I did wonder if I might be... you know?” she whispers, like her being pregnant with my child would be a sin. “But I can't be, not yet.”

“Why haven't you spoken to me about this?” I question, my hand sliding up between her thighs to spread them apart.

“I didn't want you to get excited over nothing,” she tells me with her teeth gripping at her bottom lip.

She exhales sharply when I rip the shirt she's wearing apart, and the buttons scatter all over my desk, but she automatically leans back and settles against the oak surface. Her tight little body is exposed and willing for me to take it, and when I slide my hands over her ribs and push them under the cups of her bra, squeezing her round tits in my hands makes her hips lift off my desk.

"Do these hurt?" I ask. She shakes her head at me. "They don't hurt, but when you touch them..." Her eyes squeeze shut when I lean my head forward and roll my tongue over her skin, tasting her from her tummy button all the way to her chest.

"When I touch them...?" I urge her to continue.

"When you touch them, I feel like your hands are everywhere else," she whispers shamefully. I can't help smiling to myself at the thought of that.

"Do you feel me here?" I pull one hand away from her to press it between her legs, and I'm a little surprised at how wet she is through her panties.

"Yes," she nods, licking her lips. Her eyes are still shut tight, allowing me to watch all of her reactions without her being embarrassed. My cock is even harder for her now that I have a strong suspicion of what's happening inside her perfect little body.

"Please, Rafe," she begs, her hands reaching between my legs to try to free me from my pants.

"Na-ah." When I shake my head, her eyes fly open in shock and frustration.

"Not until you do something for me." I grin at her, sliding open the top drawer of my desk and pulling out the box that

I've had in there since the night I came back from Chicago.



“You’re not helping.” I look across the bathroom to where Rafe has his ass resting on the sink unit, his arms are folded, and he’s staring at me way too intensely.

“Can’t you wait outside or something?” Sitting on a toilet with one hand between my legs, clutching at a white stick while trying to pee, isn’t easy with him watching.

He shakes his head back at me sternly, rubbing his finger across his lip the way he always does when he’s thinking about something. “Seriously, Rafe. I can’t go with you watching me like that.”

“I think you’re scared.” He starts walking toward me.

Oh shit.

“Scared?” I try acting brave by staring back at him like I have no idea what he’s talking about, and when he crouches down in front of me so we’re at eye level, I know he isn’t buying it.

“Yes, scared.” His palms rest on my thighs to stop them from trembling. “But you have nothing to be scared of.” He keeps his voice calm and soothing.



“I’m not scared, Rafe.” I try my best to sound convincing, but inside I feel like I’m falling apart.

“Ssshhhh.” He moves one of his hands to cup my face, and he soothes my cheek with his thumb. Then, taking over, holding the stick between my legs with his other, he steadily nods his head at me. It seems to relax me enough to release. And I do my best to aim for the testing part of the stick while he watches me.

“That’s a good girl.” Rafe kisses my forehead when I’m finished, and he stretches himself back up to full height, taking the test with him when he moves to stand back by the sink. He keeps his eyes on the floor to allow me at least some privacy while I sort myself out. Then when I’m done, I join him at the sink unit.

I feel a different kind of sick to the one I’ve woken up with the past couple of days. This is nerves, gut-churning nerves. Rafe frames my face with both his hands and gently kisses my lips, then pressing his forehead into mine, he lets out a long breath.

“How long?” I ask, trying to steady my own breathing.

“Three minutes, it’s already been two,” he whispers.

“You know it’s gonna be negative, right?” I warn him not to get his hopes up. I don’t want him to be mad or upset. I know how much he wants this. Over the past couple of days, I’ve even found myself feeling a little hopeful, but it can’t be. Despite never keeping track of my periods before, I got one around the time I’d expected it last week. It’s far too soon for me to be pregnant already.

Rafe switches our bodies so I’m the one resting against the sink unit, then grabbing at my ass cheeks, he lifts me to rest on

it. He guides my legs around his waist and kisses me while we wait the final sixty seconds. I swear I feel him trembling too, as his hand slides up my back and tangles itself in my hair.

After some time, he reaches around me for the stick and pulls his lips away from mine to check the result over my shoulder.

“Riley...” When he whispers my name, it makes me close my eyes and hold my breath

“It’s positive.” His gravelly voice speaks into my ear, and I gasp in shock, placing my palm on his chest so I can push him back and see the look on his face.

His eyes are wide as they roll over me, and there’s a hint of a smile on his lips.

“You’re sure?” I check.

“Two pink lines,” he confirms, and I snatch the instructions leaflet from beside me and scroll over it, checking it against the stick he’s still holding in his hand.

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt out. Saying the words out loud makes it suddenly seem so real.

“You are,” Rafe nods, and he’s really grinning back at me now.

“But... I just.”

Rafe shakes his head at me.

“You’re pregnant, Riley,” he says again, and I swear the room starts to spin because this is all so much to take in. I touch my hand to the place where I have a little person growing inside me.

A baby.

Our baby.

“Tell me you’re happy.” Rafe grabs my face in his hands, his eyes suddenly looking concerned.

“I am.” I nod my head against his grip and it’s not a lie because seeing him like this, and knowing that I’m the cause of it makes me feel really happy. I realize this is exactly what I want. To give Raphael Verretti what he wants most from this world. Something that all his money can’t buy him.

Our child.

“I’m just feeling a little overwhelmed,” I admit, trying to wrap my head around it all.

Rafe scoops me up in his arms and carries me through to the bedroom, taking care when he places me down on the mattress. When he starts backing away toward the door. I suddenly panic. I don’t want to be alone now, not after just finding out that we’re having a baby together.

“Where are you going?” I ask, sitting up on my elbows. Rafe shakes his head at me like I’ve just said something crazy.

“I’m going nowhere,” he promises, opening the door and calling out loudly for Ricardo.

Ricardo arrives not long after, looking concerned and slightly out of breath.

“Go down to Sylvia and have her make Riley something to eat. Something light, fresh fruit, and some of those pastry things she likes,” he orders, and Ricardo nods back at him, looking more confused now than worried.

“And call Viktor.” I notice how Ricardo’s eyes swell in shock when he gives him another order.

“Viktor?” he repeats, looking over Rafe’s shoulder at me.

“Yeah, Viktor. Tell him I need him here today.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Ricardo looks unnerved when he walks away, but Rafe doesn’t seem at all bothered when he closes the door and comes to sit beside me on the bed.

“Who’s Viktor?” I ask, suddenly feeling nervous. The mercury taste in my mouth seems to have gotten stronger since Rafe told me the test was positive.

“Viktor is a physician. He specializes in women’s health. We can trust him.”

“Do you think I need a doctor?” I’m really starting to feel worried now.

“Riley, you’re carrying my child. I need to know you’re both okay. I can’t get you checked out at the hospital because...” He stops himself from finishing that sentence, and I don’t miss the tiny snarl on his lips.

“You do know that I would never run from you, don’t you?” I tell him, shifting my hand to rest over his. “I want us to be a family, too,” I assure him.

“I want to believe that, Riley.” He keeps his eyes focused on where our hands touch. “But when it comes to you, I’ll never take any risks.”

He slides his fingers between mine and lifts my hand up to his mouth so he can gently kiss my knuckles.

“You need to let me take care of you now. No more being stubborn and no playing games.”

“I am scared.” The words come out of nowhere, and I shock myself at how honest I’m being. “More scared than I was before we found out. But I’m happy. I promise you I’m

happy, Rafe.” I grip his hand a little tighter, needing him to know that.

His other hand slides up my thigh and settles on my stomach, causing butterflies to flutter inside me.

“I’m scared too.” His confession knocks me speechless. “But I swear, nothing’s gonna happen to either of you.” His eyes burn deep into mine with determination. I nod back at him and smile, and it takes him a while, but eventually, he smiles back at me. His hand is still resting on my stomach when Sylvia bursts into the room carrying another tray of food.

She quickly diverts her eyes away from us to focus on putting the tray on the bedside table. “I chopped up some fruit and thought you might like some yogurt. I didn’t have any pastries, but I can order you some from the bakery for tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Sylvia, this looks great.” I stare at the plate deflated. I already know I won’t be able to eat anything, not right now. Everything feels too surreal for me to focus on eating. Sylvia leaves us with a suspicious look on her face. And Rafe places the tray on my lap.

“You make a start on that,” he tells me, standing up and lifting his suit jacket from the chair in the corner of the room. He checks in his pockets and then pulls out a set of keys, keeping them in his hand.

Car keys? Since when did Rafe carry car keys? I haven’t seen him drive once since I’ve been here.

“Where are you going?” I watch him head toward the door.

“The bakery, to get you those things you like.” He makes it sound like the simplest thing in the world.

“You don’t have to do that,” I shake my head.

“It’s only a twenty-minute drive. I’ll take the Ferrari. I haven’t driven it in a while.”

“You’re gonna drive?” I laugh.

“I can drive. I’m a great driver.”

“Then maybe you could take me for a drive sometime, just the two of us?” I raise an eyebrow seductively. He smiles at me before coming back and leaning over the bed to kiss my cheek.

“Eat,” he orders, walking out the door and leaving me staring at the tray of fruit.

My stomach feels empty, but I just can’t seem to face what’s in front of me. But when I think about the tiny life inside me that relies on me eating, guilt has me picking up the fork and stabbing into a strawberry.



I grip the steering wheel tight in my fists as I drive through the winding roads into town.

There are too many emotions brewing inside me, and I have to keep reminding myself to focus on the road.

I'm happy. Fuck, I can't remember a time when I've been happier. This is what I've wanted for years, and the second I saw the girl, I knew she was the person who I wanted to give it to me. But at the same time, I'm feeling pretty fucking selfish.

Riley's having my baby, and I can't even take her to a doctor's office. Sure, Viktor is good at what he does, an expert in fact. I've had him on my payroll for years. All the women who pass through my doors are well taken care of. It's essential that they are all clean of sexual diseases and well maintained. And, of course, there has been the odd time when trainers have forgotten themselves and mistakes have been made for Viktor to rectify.

I have faith in Viktor, but I wish I could do better for Riley. This is a scary time for her, and Viktor's bedside manner isn't exactly what he's renowned for.

I grab five of the pastries that she likes, in hope that it will encourage her to eat something, and then speed home to get back to her. Finding out that Riley is pregnant has brought with it a whole new burden. The animalistic urge to protect her and our child is overwhelming, and I'm wondering how I'm not going to drive myself crazy over the coming months. There's so much I have to think about and I want this to be perfect. No mistakes. No hitches. I can't let Riley stress about any of it. This is all on me, and I have to do whatever it takes to keep them safe.

I realize now that I haven't fully thought this through. I've been too distracted screwing her pretty little pussy to come up with a plan for when this happened. And now my head is working in overdrive with plans that need to be put into action.

When I arrive back at the house, Ricardo is waiting for me in the hall, and he's still looking as anxious as he did when I left.

"Why are you down here and not up there with Riley?" I ask, clutching the paper bag in my hands. My frustration quickly eases off when I realize I might be ruining Riley's food.

"She's sleeping. Why do you need Viktor?" he asks, looking like he's angry with me.

"Because Riley's pregnant," I inform him unashamedly, and more of that newly found concern spreads across his face.

"And you're getting Viktor here to take care of it." He shakes his head at me like he thinks he's got a right to be disappointed in me.

"No, Ric, I'm getting Viktor here to take care of her. I planned the child. We're happy about it."



His anger quickly flips to shock, but I choose to ignore it.

“Did he say when he’d be getting here?” I ask.

“Next couple of hours, he’s doing a something-a-sound on some A-lister.”

It doesn’t surprise me. There are a lot of celebrities who use Viktor for his discretion. I move past Ricardo toward the stairs, but his voice stops me.

“Raphael, I hope you know what you’re getting into with all this. A child is a lifelong commitment.” He’s speaking bravely today, and when I turn around and move back toward him, I let him know that his comments insulted me.

“I’m fully aware of that. Thank you for your concern.” I keep my jaw tight. Then with a look that warns him to stay out of my business, I leave him in the hall to go find Riley.

The bowl of fruit is at least half eaten on the table beside her, and she’s lying on the bed, sleeping. She looks so peaceful and pretty. I don’t want to disturb her, so after placing the bag on the tray beside her, I head back down to my office.

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“Raphael, it’s good to see you.” Viktor leans across my desk to shake my hand when he arrives, as promised, a few hours later.

“Good to see you too.” I gesture for him to sit down.

“So I assume since this is a personal problem since you have called me here so urgently.” He smiles, probably adding a few thousand on, to the bill he’s keeping tallied in his head.

“Not a problem at all.” I shake my head. “My... girlfriend found out she’s pregnant this morning. I wish for you to give her a check-up.”

“Certainly.” He looks taken back a little but recovers well. “And I wish for you to continue to be her physician for the entirety of the pregnancy,” I explain, watching his eyebrows lift.

“Ongoing private health care,” he nods greedily.

“No hospitals, no paperwork. I don’t need to go into details as to why it needs to be that way. But her and the child’s safety is of absolute priority. Do you understand?”

“You know that will be costly, Raphael. Toward the end of the pregnancy, I will need to be on call twenty-four-seven. I’ll have to find local accommodation.”

“Invoice me for it. Money isn’t an issue.” The man already knows that. I pay him very generously for the services he provides.

“Do you know how far along she is?” he asks.

“Early, very early. She finished a period a few days ago.” I don’t like the look he gets on his face after I’ve said that.

“I’ve just done an ultrasound for a couple in Denver. A-lister. I couldn’t possibly say who, for confidentiality purposes,” he adds unnecessarily.

I couldn’t possibly give a fuck, to be honest.

“I have my equipment in the car. I could perform an internal examination and provide you with some more information,” he suggests.

“That would be great.” I smile back at him curtly before standing up. I’m not liking the sound of an internal

examination one bit, but I don't have many options.

“Viktor, Riley is unaware of the business I run. I'd very much like it to stay that way.”

“Of course, Raphael, my discretion is always guaranteed,” he assures me.

“Then I'll show you to her room.” I nod gratefully before leading him out of the office and waiting for him to get his equipment from the car. Then, taking him up the stairs, I tap on Riley's door.

She answers the door a few moments later, still looking irresistibly sleepy.

“This is Viktor. He's come to give you a consultation,” I explain, and she nods her head, opening the door and letting us both inside. It's strange how already I see her so differently. I want to keep her trapped in this room, away from all the dangers of the outside world. I even wish I could shelter her from the danger in me. She seems like some kind of mythical creature now I know she's got my child growing inside her.

“Will here do?” She perches on the end of the bed, looking nervous.

“Sure.” Viktor nods, pulling up a chair from the other side of the room and placing it beside her.

“Rafe tells me you had a period not very long ago.” His brow furrows, the same way it did downstairs.

“I did, but we took a test because of how I was feeling.” She presents him with the stick and bites down on her lips nervously.

“A positive. A strong positive.” He checks it out and looks over his shoulder at me.

“And was it a light bleed or a heavy one?” he proceeds to ask Riley as he opens the metal briefcase he’s carrying and places it on the bed beside her.

“My periods are always light,” she shrugs, and Viktor nods his understanding.

“This is a probe, Riley.” He holds up a long, thin object from his case in front of her. “I’m going to put it inside you, and then we should be able to see what’s going in there on this screen here.” He points to the computer that’s inside his case.

I’m about to step forward, pin him to the wall and ram his probe to the back of his throat, but when I see the slight shake her head makes toward me, I stop.

“Sure,” she nods, swallowing nervously, and her eyes double when he takes out a condom and places it over the end of the fucking probe he intends to put inside my girl’s pussy.

“Raphael, could you get us a sheet or a towel? I’m sure Riley here would like to maintain her dignity.” Viktor looks over his shoulder at me again, and I head straight for the bathroom to grab that towel.

Viktor respectfully turns his back when I hand it to Riley, who drapes it over her knees and then pulls her panties off from underneath. She tells him she’s ready before looking up at me anxiously. Viktor comes back to the bed and picks up his instrument, and I grab Riley’s hand and squeeze it to distract myself from what he’s doing down there.

The thought of another man touching her, even for medical reasons, makes me murderous, and if I sense a trace of satisfaction from the man, I swear I’ll throw the fucker off the balcony.

Riley's fingers dig deep into mine as he moves around inside her, but staying professional as his eyes remain fixed on the screen.

"There," he points to a tiny bean shape among all the fuzz.

"That's it?" I ask, looking at the screen intently. I don't know what I was expecting: arms, legs, a fucking smile. It's only more evidence that I should know more about this.

"Yes, that's the embryo. Judging by measurements, I would say you're around six weeks along," he tells Riley as he studies the screen. "See that tiny movement there, the flickering? That's a heartbeat. I wouldn't be able to detect that if you were any less." Riley looks up at me, and her blue eyes shimmer with shock.

"Six weeks. I had a period just the other day." She checks back to him.

Viktor shakes his head. "Light bleeding in early pregnancy can be common. It happens when the embryo embeds itself into the womb. Nothing more than implantation bleeding is my guess. But if it happens again and you feel uncomfortable, you can call me." He pulls the probe out from between Riley's legs and snaps the condom off the end. "I'll email you the photo, Raphael. I'm afraid this isn't like the newer models; it doesn't print out pictures." He taps his hand on the machine.

I nod at what he says, but I'm still in shock myself. Six weeks, Riley's been pregnant for six weeks. How could I not know? I've been so rough with her. The day we thought she'd got her period, I'd fucked her so hard she had to have a day's break from me because she was sore.

"Raphael," Viktor says my name, and I quickly shake myself out of my thoughts.

“Would you like me to email you the picture? It’s what most expectant parents require.”

“Yes, and buy a new computer, the latest one, the best on the market. Bill it to me,” I tell him, dropping Riley’s hand from mine and suddenly feeling sick myself. I move to the balcony to get some air while Riley gets herself sorted and Viktor packs his stuff away.

“I’ll come and see you for another check-up in a few weeks.” I hear him talking to Riley, but all I can think about is how I slammed her against the wall of my office yesterday. She’d been so brave when I stretched her to her limit, and she took four of my fingers deep inside her. I took her from behind in the shower this morning before we went down to breakfast and crushed the front of her delicate little body into the tiles.

I’ve been so merciless with her because I had no idea.

“You will need some prenatal vitamins. They can be picked up from the shelf at any pharmacy.” I turn my head and watch him write out a note and hand it over to her.

Riley still looks completely overwhelmed as she takes it. She’s scared, and I should be there for her, putting her at ease and letting her know this is going to be okay.

“And there are also some foods that are recommended that you should avoid,” he adds.

“Make a list, and I’ll give it to my housekeeper,” I call over to them, starting to pull myself back together.

“Of course.” Viktor nods back at me, taking his metal case and lifting it off the bed.

“Congratulations,” he tells us both before seeing himself out, and as soon as the door closes, I slump in the chair.

“Rafe?” Riley jumps off the bed and comes toward me, curling herself onto my lap and wrapping her arms around my neck. “What’s wrong? You seem unhappy.”

“No.” I shake my head and tighten my arms around her. Not too tight, though. I don’t want to crush her.

“I just had no idea.”

“I’m sorry for not eating. I didn’t know about the baby. I’m gonna try really hard, okay? And I’ll listen to everything you tell me from now on,” she promises. Making me feel even more guilty.

I slide my hand up through the bottom of her shirt and rest my palm on her flat stomach. “I’m gonna take better care of you, of both of you,” I assure her. I want to be inside her so much right now. The sense of ownership I’m feeling knowing that there’s a piece of me growing inside her is overpowering. But seeing it on the screen for real, that tiny flicker of a heartbeat had only cemented how much I want this. I need her and my baby to be okay. I can’t let anything jeopardize this. I can’t lose them.

“We’re gonna be fine. All of us. A family, just like you wanted,” Riley assures me, sliding her hand over mine.

I block out all the dark thoughts in my head and focus on what I have in my arms. I can’t let myself think back to my past because I’ll feel even more guilt. Then I’ll get angry. And anger isn’t an option around Riley anymore. I promised I’d protect her, and that means from me too.

This is a gift. Our gift and karma wouldn’t have allowed it to happen if I didn’t deserve it.

We’re having a baby. Me and Riley are gonna be parents, and I am gonna give my family everything. Nothing is gonna

prevent that from happening.

*Not even the horrors of my past.*





3 MONTHS LATER

“**W**hose genius idea was this again?” I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and climb up from where I’m kneeling over the toilet. Being sick has become part of my morning routine. The only good thing about it is feeling half-human again afterward. Rafe’s just got out of the shower and looks incredible, as always, with just a towel wrapped around his hips.

“You said it would stop after the first trimester.” I snatch the toothbrush that he’s already loaded with toothpaste for me out of his hand and start to brush.

“It will pass soon.” He rests his chin on my shoulder and wraps his arms around me, staring at our reflection.

“How about I get Sophia back here today? You can get your hair done. She could give you some spa treatments around the pool this afternoon.”

“Do you think I need my hair done?” I muffle through a mouthful of foam. Even though he’s got a point, my stray ends could use a trim. The last time Ricardo’s sister set up her salon here, I felt so much better after seeing her.

“Riley, I just want you to feel better.” He presses his lips against my cheek, and I scowl at him before leaning forward, spitting in the basin and swilling my mouth out with some more water.

“I’m getting fat,” I pout, looking down at the bump that seems to have popped out of nowhere over the past couple of days.

“I fucking love it.” Rafe smooths his palms over my stomach and treats me to a wide grin. He’s refused to have sex with me since we found out I was pregnant, and these past few weeks have been getting increasingly frustrating for me. Everything he does seems to make me want to jump him.

Reaching down, I slide my fingers between his and slowly guide his hand a little lower. When his fingertips dip just below the waistline of my panties, my insides hum, and my pussy weeps at the sensation of having him so close. I need his contact. My clit aches for his attention, and my entrance throbs to feel him again.

“What are you doing?” he whispers into my ear, keeping his eyes fixed cautiously on mine through the mirror.

“I need it, Rafe, please,” I beg because that’s how desperate I’ve become.

“Riley, we spoke about this.” He shakes his head at me disappointingly, and it makes me feel bad because I know this isn’t easy on him, either. Almost every night, he waits until he thinks I’m asleep and then leaves to spend time in his gym. There have been lots of late-night cold showers, and I often catch him looking at me like he wants to devour me. Yet he insists on holding back.

“You read the book— it’s totally safe.” I urge his hands to creep lower, but he holds firm.

“Not the way I do it.” Nipping my ear lobe with his teeth. He pulls away from me, and I let out a heavy sigh.

“Rafe, please.” I follow him through to the bedroom. I’m not prepared to give up on this. It’s ridiculous.

“You’re not gonna hurt me or the baby. Viktor told you that when I asked him.” The warning look he shoots back at

me reminds me of how unimpressed he was when I brought it up at last week's appointment.

"It's not going to happen, Riley," he tells me firmly, starting to head toward the door.

"Why?" I manage to beat him to it, placing my body in front of his and blocking him from exiting. Rafe stares at me with narrow, angry eyes.

"Because I can't go gentle, and I don't want to hurt you." He sighs helplessly, and I hate the sad look on his face.

"I think you could be gentle. I trust you." I flatten both my palms onto his chest and smile at him, but he remains so serious.

"I don't trust myself. I'm trying to do what's right. Why do you have to make that so hard?" He sounds like he's begging me now, and when he places his lips on my forehead with the same tenderness he's been treating me with these past few months, I decide to back down and step out of his path.

He returns to my room not long after, dressed in a suit and looking sharp as hell. Just lately, Rafe has been taking a much more casual approach to how he dresses. He hasn't really left the house since I've been pregnant, other than to go on mercy runs for the foods I've craved.

"Are you going somewhere today?" I ask, still pissed off by the lack of sexual attention he's given me.

"I have to leave town on business. I should be back this evening."

"On business or to avoid me?" Rafe laughs when I cross my arms and huff.

“Do you have any idea how much I enjoy seeing you like this?” he admits, stepping closer to where I’m lying on the bed. “So wound up and needy for me.”

I automatically spread my legs to make space for him between them, and he holds all his weight on his arms as he climbs up my body and lowers his head to mine.

“You promised me you wouldn’t question me,” he reminds me, touching his lips to mine. It’s a cruel taunt because it only makes me crave him more. “Don’t think that I’m not suffering the same way you do, Riley.”

He keeps his eyes on mine as he lowers himself down my body. Pausing at my stomach, his lips press against the cotton shirt covering my bump, and my stomach flutters as he shimmies lower. I grip at the sheets when he smiles at me like the devil and slides his tongue over the lace strip between my legs.

I feel high from his touch. I need more of it, and my hips desperately reach up to his mouth to seek out more contact.

Rafe shakes his head, rolling his tongue over his lips and making me ache in frustration.

“Behave while I’m away, and tonight I might fuck your needy little pussy with my tongue,” he teases as he pushes himself off the bed and straightens out his suit jacket.

“You’re an asshole, Raphael Verretti.” I launch a pillow at him, but he dodges it and smiles.

“I’ve never claimed to be anything else.” He shrugs, and because my body is already missing his touch, I quickly launch at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist.

“My asshole, though, right?” I check when it dawns on me that he might be going to get what he needs from someone else. That thought makes me want to throw up again.

“Of course.” He pulls back his head, looking at me like I’ve offended him. “Listen to me.” He suddenly turns very serious. “I’ve taken a few extra precautions around here. I have more security staff. If you spend any time in the garden, Ricardo is to be with you at all times. Do you understand?”

I nod back, and he carefully places me back down against the mattress.

“Don’t over-exert yourself.” He makes me promise, and I roll my eyes at him. The man treats me like glass these days, and as nice as it is that he cares, it can be overpowering. “I’ve called Sophia. She’ll be here at four.”

“And what time will you be home?” I check because I already know I’m gonna miss him the minute he walks out the door. I could blame that on pregnancy hormones, but I know it’s not. I’ve fallen completely head over heels in love with the man.

“As soon as I can.” he kisses me one more time before pulling himself away. “Take your vitamins.” His eyes move to the tablets and glass of water on the bedside table. He’s laid them out for me the same way he does every morning.

“And behave,” he warns.

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“This was a sweet thought,” I mention to Ricardo, as I curl my legs up on the picnic blanket Rafe arranged for Sylvia to prepare my lunch on today. “You want some?” I hold up the

plate of the mini bruschetta she's made, knowing he won't be able to resist.

"Why not?" he shrugs, laying himself out on the blanket beside me and helping himself. Since I became pregnant, he and I seem to have found a mutual respect for each other.

"The baby stopped making you sick?" he asks, gesturing his head toward my stomach.

"Nope, I'm still throwing up every morning." I stroke my hand over it and smile. "I do feel much better than I did a few weeks ago."

"Rafe was worried about you for a while," he chuckles to himself. I was worried about myself too. This didn't exactly get off to a great start. It wasn't long after we found out about the baby that the sickness started. It would last for most of the day, and I could hardly keep anything down. I was so exhausted that Rafe insisted Viktor hook me up to an IV to rehydrate me.

"He's been really sweet," I tell him, thinking about how tentative Rafe's been toward me. He's barely left my side.

"I don't know what you've done to him, but... Oh shit!" I watch Ricardo's face turn white when he notices something behind me, and when he immediately jumps to his feet and places his hand on his gun, I start to panic. I look over my shoulder to see what he's seeing, and my body freezes when I realize why he's looking so worried.

"How the fuck did he get past the gate?" Ricardo speaks into the mouthpiece that's pinned to his shirt while holding his hand out to help me up from the floor.

"Stay fucking close," he whispers.

“You can stand down, Ricardo. I’m not here to do the girl any harm. I’ve come to see my brother.” Adriano speaks so politely as his eyes roll over me, and I hate the snigger he makes when he notices the slight swell of my stomach.

“You look well, *Briga*. A little too well if you ask me.” He smirks wickedly.

Ricardo moves to stand in front of me, wrapping one of his strong arms back around me protectively. “You should leave. Rafe isn’t here. I can get him to call you once he’s home.”

“So this was his punishment to you. To taint you with his child.” Adriano ignores Ricardo and talks to me directly. I want to speak up, but I’m too terrified. Seeing him suddenly reminds me of the place where he kept me and the horrors that could have been. It gives me a protective instinct to clutch my stomach and protect my baby.

“Leave now,” Ricardo warns again, and I notice that a few more guards have gathered on the other side of the lawn, all of them armed.

“You must tell Raphael that I am pleased for him.” Adriano continues to address me. “He deserves happiness. Guilt very often destroys a man, though it appears my brother lives with his well.”

I try to make sense of his words, but I can’t focus on anything other than the pounding of my heart and the shiver that’s come over my skin. I grab hold of Ricardo’s jacket when I start to feel light-headed and need something to ground me.

“I came here to warn Raphael about something. I didn’t come here to cause trouble. My clients have been compromised. I merely wanted to warn him that he might experience the same inconvenience.” Adriano holds his arms



up defensively. “Have him call me when he gets home.” He starts to back away with a smug smirk still on his lips.

“Congratulations, *Briga*. I look forward to meeting my niece or nephew.” Suddenly the space around me spins so fast, not even holding on to Ricardo’s large trunk of a body feels like it will steady me. I close my eyes to try to make it stop, then the last thing I hear is Ricardo calling my name and the thump of me hitting the floor.



“Rafe.” When Ricardo greets me at the door, he’s looking pale and scared shitless.

“Where is she?” I march straight past him.

“She’s upstairs in bed, she’s awake, and Sylvia’s with her.” He tries to assure me but sounds panicked.

“I’m going to check on her and get her what she needs, then you are gonna explain to me how the *fuck* my brother managed to get close to her,” I tell him, racing up the stairs and barging my way into her room. Sylvia is sitting on the bed, holding my girl in her arms and soothing her hair, and the second Riley sees me, she bursts into tears.

“Are you okay?” I race toward her, grabbing her face in both my hands while my eyes assess her all over for damage.

“I’m fine,” she snorts, wiping her tears and trying to reassure me. But I can see that she isn’t. She’s shaken up really bad. I should never have left her. “Viktor came and checked the baby. We’re both fine.” She fakes me a smile, but I can see her lips trembling like she wants to break again.

“Adriano said some really strange things, Rafe.” Her blue eyes brim with tears, and I feel each one of them trickle cold inside my chest as they fall onto her cheek.

“Forget what he said.” I pull her into my chest and kiss the top of her head. I’m thankful that she’s okay, but so fucking furious I can feel my heart thumping in my chest and fury cursing the blood in my veins.

I want to cause pain. I want to make Adriano, and anyone who allowed him to get close to her, hurt.

“I was scared he’d take me away from you,” she admits, forcing me to cling to her a little tighter. “That would never happen,” I promise, and it feels like a betrayal because it came far too close to happening today. Whether my brother claimed his intentions of being here were good or not. I know what he really wanted. He was showing me how easily he could take her from me.

I give Sylvia a nod to leave us, and she offers me a sad smile before stepping out the door and closing it behind her.

“He’s so cruel, Rafe. I don’t want him to ever be near our child,” she sobs.

“I’d never allow him to be. I made an error today, one that won’t happen again.” I try my best to put her mind at rest, but I’ve failed her, and I know I won’t forgive myself for that.

“We’re bringing a child into the world. A world where men like him do what they do,” she says as if it’s dawning on her for the first time. And hearing it out loud actually makes my stomach turn cold.

“Don’t think about that stuff, Riley.” I stroke my hand through her hair, trying to soothe her the way Sylvia did.

“How can I not, Rafe?” She forces me away. “How can you live knowing what he’s doing and do nothing about it?” She’s looking up at me like I’m the one who’s hurting her now.

“Stop stressing. It’s not good for you,” I warn.

“Answer my question. How can you let him continue doing what he does? When he said you lived with your guilt well, he meant it, didn’t he?” Hearing what he said to her only builds up my aggression. The kind of aggression I have to keep a fucking lid on around her. She shakes her head at me before shifting off the bed and heading toward the bathroom.

“Get back into bed,” I order her, praying she isn’t about to test my patience, not now.

“Your brother runs a pedophile ring, Raphael. He hurts children. Innocent little children like the one I’m carrying inside me right now.” As if her words aren’t aggravating enough, she speaks them to me slowly like I’m stupid.

“I’m aware of that, Riley.” I run my palm over my face, attempting to calm myself. I came in here to comfort her, to try to make her feel better, and now she is blaming me for the way my sick brother chooses to live his life.

“So why don’t you stop him? You could call the police and have him shut down.” She makes it all sound so simple, and the hope in her red-rimmed eyes shatters me. As if it could ever be that easy.

“I can’t do that,” I speak through my teeth, fighting so hard to swallow my rage.

“Because of family loyalty, right?” She laughs at me, a cruel, nasty laugh that makes me want to pin her to the bed and fuck her sore.

“You wouldn’t understand, Riley, and I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“But you could try to make me understand. You should want to explain yourself to me because I’m the mother of your child. Does that not mean anything at all?” she’s crying now, the tears streaming down her face and her body rigid with frustration. It’s not good for her, and I’m not risking her passing out again.

“Riley, you need to calm down.” I step toward her and place my hands on her shoulders. “Take your hands off me, Rafe.” She stares her eyes into mine, injecting them with venom, and I shake my head to let her know that’s not gonna happen.

“I mean it. Take your fucking hands off me. I wish I’d never met you or your sick brother. I hate that I’m bringing this baby into a world where either of you exists.” She pulls away from me roughly, and I let her words sink into my chest like a jagged knife.

“I think I preferred living on the streets with my brother than I do in your luxuries. At least there, I knew I meant something to someone.” I’m so wound up that I allow her to storm into the bathroom and lock herself away from me for her own safety. Right now, I don’t trust myself to be around her, and I march straight out of the bedroom, down the stairs to where Ricardo is waiting for his punishment.

“Who was on the gate? Who let him in?” I ask, trying my best to stay calm, at least until I have the answers I need.

“It was the new guard. He knew Adriano was your brother, so he trusted him and permitted him entry.”

“Fuck.” I throw my head up and look at the ceiling.

“Do you understand what could have happened to her?” I lower my voice in case there’s any chance Riley can hear me. “You know what Adriano’s capable of?” I seethe, unable to even think about what he might have done to her if he’d taken her.

“Do you honestly think I’d have let anything happen to her, Rafe?” Ricardo shocks me with the tone he takes back at me. “I’d die before I let anything happen to her.” He stands tall in front of me, looking almost as angry as I am. Ricardo is a proud man, and I have to respect him for his loyalty.

“He said some shit about his clients being compromised and that maybe yours would be too. I don’t know how much of it she took in because she was so scared,” he admits, suddenly looking too exhausted to fight me on this.

“I know about what’s happening. Gioele gave me the heads-up a few weeks ago. That motorcycle gang Samuele deals with is fucking shit up. We suspect they were working with the CIA agent who was trying to take Adriano down.”

“You think Adriano is their end game?” Ricardo asks, sounding concerned. I shake my head and shrug because the truth is I have no idea what the Dirty Souls’, or whatever it is that they call themselves, game is. I don’t care, as long as they don’t try to fuck up my shit.

“I’m gonna kill him, Ric,” I promise, thinking about everything Riley just said to me. “Maybe he should pray those biker fuckers get to him before I do. Because I’m done. I want him out of my life and out of business for good. No more threats. It’s time I put an end to something I should have done a long time ago.”

I storm toward the front door, and Ricardo shouts after me.

“Where you going, boss?”

“To deal with our staffing problem,” I call back over my shoulder, heading out toward the gate and taking my 45 out of the harness I’m wearing beneath my suit jacket.

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I leave Luca and Ricardo to deal with the mess I made in the gatehouse, and I shower at the gym before I attempt to talk to Riley again. Watching the brains of the guard, who let Adriano through my gates, splatter the windows of his station seems to have provided me with just enough calm to face her again. So, I pull on some sweatpants, take a deep, calming breath and go to find her.

She’s sleeping on the bed when I get to her room. And I move as stealthily as I can to lie beside her. It’s been so hard refraining from taking her these past few months. She’s gotten even more beautiful since she’s been carrying my child, and now that she’s starting to show, I’m finding it impossible to stop myself from touching her. Riley doesn’t make it any easier on me, not when I know how much her body craves me. But I made a vow to myself to not compromise anything to do with this. I can’t risk anything going wrong because of me.

I slide my hand over her hip, lifting up her shirt and exposing her stomach. I hate that everything she said earlier was right. How can I think it’s okay to bring our child into a world where men like Adriano roam free and where men like me accept it? It only makes me more determined to end him as I stroke my palm over the curve of her stomach and take relief in the fact they’re both okay.

Gradually I shuffle my body closer to hers, and when my bare chest touches her back, I manage to get my arm under her head without disturbing her. Then with all that seems to matter settled in my arms, I close my eyes and allow myself to catch up on some sleep.

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It's the middle of the night when Riley disturbs me by rolling her body over and snuggling into mine. Since I've been sleeping in here with her, I've been sleeping light. I feel every movement she makes, and I'm sure I hear her every breath, too.

"I'm still mad at you," she croaks sleepily into my chest as her leg slides over my thigh, and she makes herself comfortable against me.

"You don't have to be anymore. You were right, and I'm gonna stop Adriano. He needs to be shut down," I promise, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

"You mean it?" She bolts upright and turns to look at me.

"I mean it." I nod back. "I wish I could tell you why I've let him get away with it for all these years. But I can't," I whisper resentfully.

"You could tell me anything, Raphael." She's looking so hurt I hate myself for not being able to fix it.

"I can tell you that nothing in this world is more important to me than you and our child." I stroke her delicate cheek with my thumb.

"Why do you hide yourself away from me?" She moves her body, so it's straddling mine, and it's impossible not to get



hard beneath her. But she's so determined for an answer that she ignores it.

"I'm scared you won't like the man I am," I tell her honestly.

"That's not possible. I really like you, Rafe." She smiles a seductive little smile as she unbuttons her shirt and slides it off her shoulders. When she shuffles her body down the bed, and her hands pull at the waistline of my sweatpants with her, I allow my stiff, aching cock to bounce free. Riley watches me like a temptress as she rolls her tongue around the head of it and then takes me between her lips. I grip at the sheets and look up at the ceiling, reminding myself that I can't fucking give in to her, no matter how badly I want to.

Her tongue starts at the base, traveling painfully slowly along my shaft before she flicks it over my tip, and she takes me inside her mouth. Her warm breath engulfs me, and she takes as much of me as she can, allowing me to feel the back of her throat. It's been months since I've allowed her to touch me this way due to my lack of willpower. This is a reminder of why.

I could easily blow my load all over her tongue, and it's taking all my concentration not to as she sucks me deep and slightly scrapes me with her teeth.

"You need to stop, Riley," I warn her, taking a firm grip on her hair and pulling her back. I need more, and I've held myself back from her for far too long.

"Make me," she teases, fluttering her lashes at me before she takes me into her mouth again.

"Don't." I pull her off again, my eyes threatening her with the consequences. But it's not going to work. The

consequences are what she's been craving.

"Rafe, you can be gentle." She slides back up my body, making sure my cock slips between those perfectly rounded tits of hers on her journey back up, and I shake my head because it's a really bad idea.

"How about you let me control it, the same way you did the night you made me yours?" she whispers seductively in my ear before her tongue tastes my skin and makes my spine shiver. I'm starving for her. My cock's aching from the strain of holding off, so I slide my hand up her body and rest it around her throat.

"Slowly," I warn before nodding her permission.

Riley nods back at me and smiles victoriously before reaching between us and taking my cock in her hand. I slide my other hand into her panties and let my fingers slip between her soaked pussy lips, teasing her desperate little hole a little before I hook the lace to one side and make a clear path for my cock. She guides me closer to her, teasing herself with its thick tip before she slips it inside her, and we both moan at the relief of coming together again.

I want to kiss her lips, but I also want to watch her take what she needs from me. So that's what I do. I watch, completely in awe, as thrill and satisfaction control all her senses, and she takes what she needs from me.

Riley's right. I do hide myself away from her. I do it to protect her, but when it comes to this, I'll always let her have every single part of me. I can't hold anything back. That's what scares me. That's what I have to control because I can't risk hurting them.

“You’re not hurting us,” Riley whispers like she just read my fucking mind. Taking my hand, she places it on one of her swollen tits. She forces me to squeeze it in my palm as she gently rocks her body into mine. She holds me deep inside her, letting me know she can take it and fuck, I want nothing more than to give it to her.

I lean forward to kiss her neck, allowing myself to explore her body the way I’ve wanted to for so long. Riley Hayes is like ecstasy. She makes my head spin, and she’s the high I never want to come down from. After all, she’s been through today, the upset, the fear, and her anger, this is what she needs. Me. It terrifies me to admit it, but I need her too. I’ve come to the conclusion that I really would give this woman everything. Riley is my path to becoming a better man. She’s the end to my sinful past and the start of a new one.

I suddenly feel the need to let her know that. Sitting myself up straighter, I curl her legs so they cross around my back, and with my hands on her ass, I control the thrusts she makes against me. Keeping them steady and slow as I cover every inch of her that my lips can reach. Our bodies are tight, and we’re so connected that I feel her steal a little piece of my soul from me.

She can take it— she can take all of it. I want her to have it because my life is for her now. And home is wherever she is.

Riley comes apart for me. Her body shudders against mine as her fingers embed into my skin, and she whimpers into my shoulder. It’s at this very moment that I realize that for her, I won’t just kill Adriano. I’ll walk away from everything my family worked to build.

Because she is the best part of me now.

Riley deserves a man that can fuck her without having to hurt her, a man who doesn't have to lie to her about how he makes his money.

She deserves the best version of me that I can offer her.

I lean over her and lay her on her back, keeping her legs wrapped tightly around me and making sure not to hurt her as I gently slide in and out of her precious body. "I'm gonna change your life, Riley Hayes." I look deep into her blue eyes and make her a promise.

"You already did," she whispers.



“**Y**ou feeling good today?” Rafe asks when I step out to join him on the balcony. He’s sitting at the bistro table, drinking his coffee and reading the paper.

“Yes, much better.” I smile to prove it, taking the seat opposite him and enjoying the warmth of the sun on my face.

“Good. I rescheduled for Sophia to come today.” He informs me without bothering to raise his eyes from the article he’s reading.

“Is that to distract me from the fact you’re avoiding me?” I risk asking him.

Rafe folds down the top of the paper and shoots me a look over the top. “I am not avoiding you.” His eyes narrow, confirming that he’s in one of his serious, solitary moods again.

After Adriano’s unexpected visit last week, Rafe promised me that he’d shut down his brother’s organization. I haven’t asked him what he’s done since because I don’t want to push him, but I know it’s weighing heavily on his mind. He’s been

spending more and more time alone in his room during the day, locking himself away from me and the rest of the world.

“I thought you might appreciate some female company, that is all.” He shrugs, folding up the paper and placing it on the table before he stands up.

“I’d appreciate your company,” I point out, past caring that it sounds needy. “You’re hiding yourself away from me, and I don’t like it.” The pout on my lips will make me come across as bratty, and deep down, I know Rafe likes it.

“Not at all.” He shakes his head. “You’re hormonal at the moment, Riley. You shouldn’t look for things to stress over.” He leans down to place a kiss on my cheek.

“Sophia will be here at eleven. I’ll have Sylvia organize lunch for you both.” He squeezes my shoulder gently before he leaves.

I know that Rafe keeps secrets from me, ones I’m unlikely to ever learn. I’m curious by nature, so that eats me up inside. But these past months I’ve spent living with Raphael, I’ve learned that he can’t be pushed. I also know that the more time he spends alone in his room, the more time he’ll spend thinking over whatever it is that’s been preventing him from bringing down his brother before.

I just hope he hasn’t changed his mind. I can’t have whatever haunts him come between us.

I need to trust Rafe, but over the past few days, the temptation to barge into that room and demand to know what he’s thinking has been hard to ignore. I’ve never been inside Rafe’s bedroom before. I get the impression he needs to have a space that’s just for him where he can be undisturbed.

He's slept beside me every night since the first time we had sex. He even keeps some of his clothes in the wardrobe now, but I still don't feel like it's our room.

Sophia arrives as scheduled at eleven. She's a bundle of energy with bouncy, black, curly hair and a tan that I would kill for. Her bubbly nature makes me question how she could be related to Ricardo.

Last time I saw her, I'd learned that she owns a salon in the town not far from here. It's a building that, unsurprisingly, Rafe owns. For her to be trusted enough to be here, I knew Raphael would have had some kind of hold over her. She's never questioned me about my old life or how I came to be here, which suggests to me that she's been told not to. Regardless of that, Sophia is fun, and as much as I like Sylvia, I have to admit I enjoy the company of a female closer to my age. It almost feels as if Rafe is gifting me a friendship.

Sophia trims my hair for me, and when she's done, she suggests we head down to the pool and have some R and R. I'm quick to agree. I need a distraction to stop me from worrying about what's going on in Rafe's head. And I'm sure Sophia was briefed by him or her brother to do exactly that with our time together.

I run upstairs to make a quick change into the bikini Rafe brought me for use around the pool, noticing how the top is much tighter than it had been a few weeks ago when I last put it on. Still, I'm pleasantly surprised to learn that I've put no weight on my ass before I wrap up in a robe and head back to the pool.

I feel a sad dig in my chest when we leave my room and pass Rafe's bedroom door. I hate the thought of him alone in there, hurting, especially when I'm about to go and enjoy

myself. But I close my eyes and push past the inclination I have to check on him. If he needs his space, I have to respect that.

I smile when we get down to the pool room because, despite Rafe's distant mood, he's proven that he's still thinking about me. There's a table set up that's bursting with treats. There is even a selection of made-up cocktails. All non-alcoholic, obviously. Sophia squeals with excitement as she lays out on one of the loungers that has been made up with towels around the pool.

"You do realize you have the best boyfriend in the world, don't you?" She doesn't rest for long, moving over to the table and filing her face. "No wonder you let him knock you up so quickly. He's a real keeper." she giggles. Then suddenly looks awkward when she realizes what she's said.

"Oh shit, Hunny, I didn't mean that you would..." she closes her eyes and sucks in an exasperated breath. "I'm always putting my foot in my mouth. Ignore me... Cocktail?" She holds up the pitcher with an apologetic smile.

I pass off her comment and nod my head. Though, it makes me wonder what Ricardo or Rafe have told her about my situation. Sophia seems like a good, honest person. I'm sure she would tell me if she thought what was happening between me and Rafe was wrong. But then, I know nothing of this world that I've suddenly become a part of. What I do know is that Rafe has people in his pocket, and Sophia is likely one of his puppets.

We spend a few hours lounging around the pool. Sophia even makes us a face mask with some of the fresh fruit from the table, and after we both take a swim, she gives me a



pedicure. In the true spirit of our “friendship”, I offer to give her one too, and I’m actually impressed with what I manage.

I’ve never really spent time with other girls before. Liam always told me that making friends was a pointless exercise. This made sense, as we were constantly on the move, dodging the authorities. Neither one of us wanted to go back into the system. The risk of us being separated was too great. Turns out all that running got us nowhere. We’re separated now, and I often find myself wondering what’s become of him.

“So, you and Raphael?” Sophia interrupts my trail of thought, rolling over in her sun lounger to look at me. “Do you think he’s gonna make an honest woman of you?”

Sophia has never asked any questions about us before. I always assumed that was part of her deal with him. I’m tempted to talk to her, to hear someone else’s thoughts on my situation. But at the same time, I don’t think Rafe would like it.

“Maybe,” I shrug casually, taking another sip of the delicious cocktail Sylvia must have made.

“Ricardo’s worked for Rafe’s family since he was a teenager. He’s never known him to be with a woman the way he is with you,” she tells me with an encouraging smile on her face.

“Ricardo told you that?” I laugh. I can’t imagine the sour-faced brute gossiping.

“Believe it or not, my brother is very fond of you.” She picks up a nail file and starts filing off her already perfectly manicured nails.

“I always thought he hated me,” I giggle again.

“Ricardo takes his job very seriously. He looks at Rafe like a brother. I think he worried in the beginning that he would get hurt.”

“Hurt by me?” Now I’m really laughing. As if I could ever hurt a man like Raphael Verretti.

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.” Sophia smirks before lying back down and closing her eyes.

It’s mid-afternoon before Sophia packs up her things and leaves. Promising that she will come back to see me in a few weeks’ time. I head back upstairs and dress in my usual attire. A plain white shirt that I’m getting sick at the sight of. I thought me being pregnant might make Rafe slacken the rules on how I dress for him. I must approach the whole clothing issue when I sense he’s in a better mood.

It’s past seven when we eat dinner together in the dining hall. Rafe remains quiet, only asking polite, mundane questions. I’m starting to worry that I’ve done something to upset him until he finishes up his plate, wipes his mouth with his napkin, and then stands to hold out his hand to me.

Taking it, I let him lead me upstairs to my room and through to the en-suite. He says nothing as he turns on the faucet of the huge tub and pours some bath soak through the hot water. Then stepping back across the room to me, he takes the hair band wrapped around my wrist and moves behind me to gather up my hair, tying it into a loose bun on top of my head.

He reaches around my body and slowly unbuttons my shirt, sliding the tips of his fingers along the seams before he drags it off my shoulders. I let him guide me toward the tub, where he checks the temperature and gestures with his head for me to step inside.

The water is warm and soothing against my skin as I sink beneath the bubbles, and my whole body tingles with excitement when I notice Rafe slipping out of his jeans. He pulls his t-shirt over his head before slipping into the water behind me, and his hands instantly soothe over my skin. When his lips touch my neck, they send tiny waves of pleasure directly to my center, and as his strong hands knead my breasts and pinch at my nipples, I feel that desperation start to build in the pit of my stomach.

He lowers his hands over my wet skin— his palms are delicate as they stroke over my round tummy. Just lately, I've been feeling the tiny flutters inside me that he's read about in that book he treats like a bible. Nothing strong enough to be certain, or anything that he would feel from the outside, but I like to think that it's our baby's way of letting me know it's doing okay.

“Did you enjoy your day with Sophia?” he speaks softly, cupping water in his hands and raising it to spill through his fingers over my stomach.

“Yes, I missed you, though,” I admit, hoping that he might open up to me.

His lips skim my jawline, and I turn my head so our mouths touch. Sometimes I find myself craving Rafe's aggression. He's been so gentle with me since I've been pregnant. I miss our old ways, the bruises, and the way his fingers would press into my throat while he fucked me.

“They say absence makes the heart grow fonder.” He smirks against my lips, his hands slipping beneath the water and his middle finger stroking between my pussy lips.

“You should talk to me more about how you feel.” I rest my head against his shoulder and enjoy his touch, and when I

feel his cock stiffen against my back, I run my hands over his water-soaked thighs that lie on either side of my body.

“I prefer to show you how I feel.” His teasing finger slips inside me, and it feels a little different with the pressure of the water surrounding us. Much tighter and more intense.

Rafe makes me come... twice before we get out of the bath. After wrapping my robe around my body, he dries himself off and slips into some clean underwear.

“I want to show you something.” He curls his hand around mine and leads me toward the door out to the hall. There are no guards on patrol here anymore. Rafe sleeps beside me every night, and I’m sure that he trusts me not to run from him now.

He stops in front of his bedroom door and looks nervous before he opens it into darkness. I take a deep breath before he turns on the light, fearing what he’s about to share with me.

When the room lights up, my eyes struggle to take in everything that I’m seeing because what I’m looking at is nothing at all what I expected. The walls surrounding us have been painted a rich ivory color. I can still smell the fresh paint. The huge window is draped with luxurious cream fabrics that match. And all the furniture in the room is made of oak. There’s a wardrobe, changing station, and sleigh-style cot—that when I move closer—I see is already made up with soft linens that match the decor. There’s also a much smaller bassinet on the other side of the room that’s made up the same way and a gorgeous antique rocking chair set beside it.

“This is...” I feel tears swelling in my eyes as the words get stuck in my throat.

“If you don’t like something, we can change it,” Rafe says quickly, “I can repaint the walls, and we can change the furniture.”

“You did all this?” I look up at him in shock.

“Of course I did.” He reaches for my waist and pulls me closer to his body. “I want this to be perfect. I wouldn’t have trusted anyone else.” He wipes away the tear that falls onto my cheek with the pad of his thumb.

“I want the baby to sleep with us for the first few months. We can take the bassinet into our room,” he tells me, the excitement building in his voice as he drags me across the room toward it.

“This chair was my mother’s. I had Luca go to the old house and pick it up a few weeks ago. I’ve sanded it down and repainted it. I know it’s not new, but it’s the one she nursed me in. I think she’d like you to have it for our child.” The more he speaks, the more tears flow uncontrollably from my eyes.

“Do you not like it?” he asks, looking worried, and it feels like my heart might burst out of my chest.

“Rafe, I love it.” I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him all over his beautiful face.

“This is what you’ve been doing these past few days? I thought you were mad at me or worried about...” I stop myself from saying any more. I refuse to speak the man’s name and let him ruin this moment.

“How can I be mad at you, Riley, when you accept so much of who I am? Do you not think that I wish things could be different for you? That I could show you off to the world and treat you to lavish restaurants and vacations?”

“I don’t need all that.” I slide my hand up to his cheek and make sure his eyes are on mine. “All I need is you.”

He looks down between our bodies and smiles shyly, causing that flutter inside me again. “I can’t believe you gave up your room for the baby. There are loads of others in the house you could have turned into a nursery.”

“Riley, I gave my room up a long time ago. I gave it up for you. This was never my room. The day I brought you back here, I knew I couldn’t have you sleep anywhere else but in my bed. Luca moved my things into here while we were driving back from Adr...” He stops himself the same as I did. “Besides, all the other rooms are too far away from us. I want him close.” His palm flattens over my stomach again.

“Him?” I raise my eyebrows.

“I have a hunch.” He shrugs with a boyish grin on his face that makes me fall for him a little harder.



“I have to do some work in my office today.” I kiss Riley’s forehead before I slide my cock out of her still pulsing pussy, stepping away from where I’ve balanced her on the sink unit in the bathroom. She’s been insatiable for the past few days. Her sickness seems to have passed, and now all she wants to do is fuck.

I keep having to remind her, and myself that we need to be careful, but the girl’s turned feral on me.

“And what am I supposed to do while you work?” she teases, sliding her finger through her soaked pussy that’s currently leaking with my cum.

Just the way I like it.

“Online shopping? Perhaps buy some clothes for you and the baby,” I suggest. Riley spoke to me last night about the way I have her dress. She wants a little more modesty for the rest of her pregnancy, and seeing as she caught me at a weak moment, I agreed. She looks pleased with that idea, and the cutest of smiles tugs onto her lips as she slides off the unit and stretches up on her toes to place a kiss on my lips.

“I’ll have Ricardo bring you up a laptop, if you like.” I tuck my still-solid cock back inside my sweatpants before she tries taking it again. I’ve already been far rougher than I should have been with her this morning. Not that she had any complaints about it.

“Maybe I could sit in your office and work with you?” she suggests, trying to sound casual. I wish I could say yes to her, but I need to call and check in with my trainers. There’s an auction coming up that I need to go well. I meant what I said about coming out of the business. But it’s not as easy as simply stepping away. You can’t make people that are tainted vanish. What we already have will need to be sold. And the people who have worked for me will expect to be paid for their silence.

Gioele is putting a plan into action, and despite the fact I’ve already shut down one of my mansions in Woodland Park, he estimates it could take up to two years before the business can be finished.

“You’re far too much of a distraction for that.” I flick her cute little nose with my finger before turning the shower on for her. As I head into our bedroom to change, I consider the fact I’ll be making video calls and decide to put on a suit. My dealings may be illegal, but I like to maintain professionalism when I address my staff. I want to wait until Riley’s out of the shower before I leave, so I fire off a text to Ricardo instructing him to bring up his laptop so she can keep herself busy by shopping.

I’m just about to lay the fresh white shirt, I picked out of the wardrobe for her, on the bed when I hear her panicked voice.



“Rafe, you need to come quickly.” She throws me immediately into panic mode. I knew I’d been too rough with her just now, and my heart leaps into my throat as I race into the bathroom. I find her soaking wet under the shower, her eyes wide with her hand clutching at her stomach, and my chest feels like it’s gonna collapse. I can’t even fall apart because I need to stay calm for her.

“Come quick. I think I just felt a proper kick.” She looks up from her swollen stomach and beams at me.

Relief floods through my body like a rush of cool air. And as I move toward her, I don’t give a shit that the water soaks my shirt and pants. I want to share this moment with her, to capture the smile on her face and keep it forever as she takes my hand and guides it onto her tummy. It takes a few seconds, but I feel it, the tiny ripple that slides under my palm from beneath her skin.

“Did you feel it?” she giggles, her big blue eyes looking up at me with so much adoration that I suddenly don’t feel worthy of it.

It makes me feel so weak I have to sit down before I fall. Everything that’s changed in my life since she came into it feels like it’s just hit me in the gut with a sledgehammer.

“Are you okay?” she asks, looking down to where I crouch on the floor, my back against the tiles, my arms resting over my knees while I try to remind myself to breathe.

“I’m more than okay, Riley...” I find the strength to look back at her, hoping that the water running through my hair and dripping over my face will shield my tears. “I’m happy,” I admit, shocked at my own words and realizing that this is it. This is the feeling I’ve been chasing my entire adult life. And Riley’s the one who’s given it to me.

“Well, I’m glad about that, but you’ve completely ruined your clothes.” The sounds of her laughter echo around the bathroom and encourage me back onto my feet. I lift her body onto mine and rest her back against the tiles, careful not to crush the precious life she’s growing between us.

“You think I care about the suit?” I attack her mouth with mine like I’ve been starved of her, and then slowly, and with more appreciation than I ever thought I’d be capable of understanding, I make love to the woman who’s changed my life.

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We’re both smiling when I carry Riley out of the bathroom and lie her on the bed. My soaked suit is still on the floor, and the pair of us are wearing only towels as we lie out on the bed together and wait for our baby to make his move again. I’ve never been more in awe of something in my whole life, and it’s while I’m lying in elation that the door bursts open, and Ricardo barges inside.

I totally forgot that I asked him to come up here and bring the laptop, but as soon as I see the look on his face, I know that something isn’t right.

“What is it?” I sit up, already thinking of ways to end whoever thinks they’re taking Riley away. I don’t care if it’s her brother or the police. I’ll take them all down. She wants to be with me. It doesn’t matter how that came to be. I’ll kill anyone who tries to interfere with that.

“It’s your brother, boss,” Ricardo says, catching his breath. “He’s dead.”

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I've left Riley to get dressed, and now, I'm in my office pacing the floor and waiting for Gioele to get to me. This is bad, really fucking bad. Not because my brother is dead. That fucker had that coming to him. No, this is bad because I didn't control it. Despite our differences, we share the same enemies. Everyone knows we're family, and whoever went for Adriano could very well be coming for me too. I don't have a clue who did this or why they've done it, but until I do, I can't rest.

Gioele lets himself in and clears his throat awkwardly before he takes a seat.

"So what do we know?" I ask, rubbing the back of my neck nervously and lighting up a cigarette.

"It's not good, Raphael," the old man tells me solemnly.

"Your brother has been under investigation for some time now. It appears he knew about it, and he planted one of his men right in the thick of that it,"

"Undercover officer?" I ask, knowing the way my brother works. Like me, he knows it's best to have connections. Anyone can be bought if the price is right.

Gioele shakes his head. "He had one of his men fucking Helen Scott's daughter," he reveals.

"CIA agent Helen Scott's daughter?" I check, struggling to believe what I'm hearing. Turns out my brother was way smarter than I gave him credit for.

Gioele nods back at me.

"So, how did it come to this?"

“A few weeks ago, Adriano had Helen and her husband killed. The daughter was supposed to be in the car, but she wasn’t, and it’s come to light that Helen had some insurance in place.”

“Insurance?” I stare back at him, confused.

“The Souls.” Gioele raises his thick gray eyebrows at me.

“The motorcycle gang?” The Dirty Souls’ name has been coming up far too much just lately.

“There’s more,” Gioele adds, taking a long breath.

“Whatever it was that happened, it went down at your mansion in Woodland Park.”

“What?” My anger reaches a whole new level. “How am I only just hearing about this?” I smash my fist into my desk.

“The Souls cleaned up.” He lifts his shoulders. “We still haven’t found your brother’s body,” he admits.

“So then, how do we know he’s dead?” I ask, trying to stay calm enough to take all this in.

“I said we hadn’t found his body.” Gioele lowers his eyes to the floor. “We have his head. It was dropped off at his home in Taos this morning. And when I say dropped off, I mean literally. They tossed it over his security wall, and it landed in the pool.” I swear I see a flicker of a smile starting to form on the old man’s face before he reins it back in.

“I’ve already sent men out to your house. They assure me the place is clearer than a surgical room...”

“But?” I add when I sense there’s one coming.

“Adriano has lost a huge amount of men from his clientele list over the past few weeks. Some of them, as I suspected,

were also on yours. And although we have no evidence to say Helen Scott was investigating you, we also don't have any to suggest that she wasn't."

This is all too fucking much. Just when I'm starting to get my life on track, the C- I -mother-fuckin-A is the last thing I need poking around the business I'm trying to fold.

"And how do we know all this information?" I wonder out loud.

"I've had spies in your brother's home for years." Gioele reminds me. "That guy who was fucking Scott's daughter, his father, worked for your brother too. Apparently, the Soul who killed your brother stepped right into his office before it happened and told him that he was going to end the agency." Gioele looks almost impressed.

"What's his name? The one who killed my brother?" I ask because, for some strange reason, I feel anger toward him.

"His name is Brax Marshall," Gioele informs me. "I'm gathering as much information as I can about this club. We don't need an unnecessary war at a time like this," he points out the fucking obvious, but it does nothing to shimmer the rage inside me.

"You can leave now," I dismiss him, opening my office door for him to exit.

"But Raphael, we need to sit and discuss this. This club could be more trouble than we gave them credit for. We already know they do business with Samuele. This could be the start of a mass takedown," he warns

"Then I suggest you do what I pay you to do, Gioele, work a little harder to make sure that there isn't anything left for

them to take down.” I manage to snap my words out through a clamped-shut jaw.

“Well, maybe it’s time for you to stop playing happy families and start to realize what a fuck up your brothers left you in.” Gioele stands up from his chair and comes at me. “You’re in shock.” He lowers his tone but still looks equally pissed. “I’ll speak to you tomorrow when you’ve had the chance to take everything in.” He storms out.

Sitting down at my desk, I take some time to process my emotions. How can I feel upset about the fact my brother is dead? I detested him. I hated what he did. If anything, I should feel relieved that my secret is safe. But I don’t. I feel cheated. I was supposed to end him, not some self-assured member of a biker gang. My enemies will only see that as a weakness. But what shocks me most about Adriano’s death is that the burden of my secret seems so much heavier now that I am carrying it alone.



A driano didn't have a funeral. Or if he did, Raphael didn't bother going to it. I still don't know how he died. Rafe refuses to talk about him. But what I do know is that Rafe grieves for him.

He's trying to hide his hurt from me and is doing his best to put on a brave face. I understand why he's sad. Regardless of anything bad Liam could ever do, he'll always be my flesh and blood. The thought of anything bad ever happening to him makes my heart break.

"Dress warm we're leaving the house today." Rafe catches me completely by surprise when he interrupts my thoughts. We've finished breakfast and have been sitting in silence for far too long.

"Going where?" I ask, starting to get excited. I haven't left the house since the night of Maria's party, and the prospect of a change of scenery is appealing.

"I remember promising to take you for a drive. There's a nice viewpoint a few miles away. I could have Sylvia pack us a hamper."

“I really like the sound of that.” Reaching across the table, I touch a kiss against his prickly jaw before I leave him to go and choose something to wear.

I’m spoiled for choice since Rafe insisted I order an entire wardrobe of clothes, and with the chill from winter still looming in the air, I go for a cute pink sweater and a pair of white leggings that stretch comfortably over my ever-expanding stomach.

When I head back downstairs, Rafe is standing waiting for me. He has his ass resting against the driver’s door of his Ferrari, and when I step outside into the cool spring air, he smiles at me. He’s dressed in his version of casual, in tight jeans and a black shirt that’s undone enough for me to appreciate his chest. I can’t help thinking the sunshades he wears make him look like an Italian runway model.

“You gonna let me drive?” I smirk at him sarcastically.

As if a control freak like Raphael Verretti would ever allow something like that to happen.

“You drive?” He takes off his glasses and looks at me as if what I’ve just told him comes as a surprise.

“Of course, I drive. I’m an awesome driver.” I watch his eyes study me curiously, deciding if he should believe me or not.

“Do you have any idea how powerful this car is?” One of his eyebrows hooks up. He’s massively underestimating me.

“Let’s see.” I tilt my head and look at the car, trying to remember the name of the engine it’s packing. “An F136 twin turbo engine...” It comes to me, eventually. “780 horsepower. You could probably get her to reach 200.”



Rafe remains cool, slowly nodding his head, but I can see I've impressed him with my car knowledge.

My hands automatically react when he tosses something at me, and I stare in shock when I look down at them and see that he's tossed me the keys.

"You push past 70, even on a straight, I'll add another punishment to my list," he warns, striding around the hood and getting into the passenger seat. I squeal with excitement as I open the driver's door and slide in behind the wheel. Inside, the car still smells new, and I run my fingers over the dash and soak up the sheer luxury of it. If Liam could see me now, he would flip.

"So about this list..." I look at Rafe with a teasing smile as he leans over my body and pulls the safety belt around me. He takes extra care to ensure the bottom belt rests low and flat along my thighs instead of across my bump. Then after he's clicked it into place, he does a quick safety check of the belt crossing my chest, nodding when we're good to go.

"I'm capable of putting on my own seatbelt, Rafe," I point out.

"That's how the book says it's done. So that's how we do it," he explains simply, and I roll my eyes at him because I swear he's studied that book enough to recite it.

"You were just about to tell me about your list?" I remind him, starting up the engine and feeling the roar of its power vibrate right through my body.

"No, I wasn't." Rafe shakes his head with the smallest hint of a smirk on his lips.

"You know, I kinda like the sound of your little punishment list," I tease, slowly pulling off the drive, my foot

pressing down on the gas pedal and making the engine rev a little louder.

“Riley, the list is not little. You’ve racked up quite the number of strikes since you’ve been in your delicate condition.” The grin on his face grows wider, and the heat in his throat trickles between my legs and makes my skin tingle. I concentrate on moving forward as the gates start to open. Then, following Rafe’s instructions, I take a left when we get onto the road.

There are no other houses for miles. Rafe’s home seems to be located in the middle of nowhere. The scenery around us is beautiful, and the roads are narrow, windy, and a pleasure to drive in his car.

We’ve only been out for about half an hour, and already I can feel Rafe’s mood slowly lifting. He scolds me when I take one of my hands off the wheel to put on some music, but he does it with a smile on his face.

“You were right—you’re a good driver.” Rafe nods impressed. But I can’t take too much credit from his compliment. Anyone could be a good driver in this car.

“Thanks, I had a great teacher. My brother taught me.” I shift gears and give the engine a little throttle when we reach a straight bit of road.

“Shame I never got the chance to get a license, huh?” I chuckle to myself.

“What?” Rafe’s relaxed expression suddenly turns to shock. “Riley, are you telling me you don’t have a driver’s license?” he asks, sounding pissed.

“They forgot to hand them out after graduation at the carjacker’s school of grand theft auto.” I laugh to myself as I

check the rearview mirror.

“Stop the car,” he demands.

“You just told me what a good driver I was.” I slow down a little, hoping it will satisfy him enough to allow me to continue driving.

“Riley, pull the fuck over!” Rafe’s tone is furious, and I love the way his hand pushes through his hair, the way it does when he feels like he can’t control something.

“Jeez,” I roll my eyes as I pull in off the road and slow down to a stop.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asks, the look on his face super serious.

“Me and Liam lived on the streets. We had to get money somehow.” I remember the buzz I used to get from stealing cars with my brother.

“You used to steal cars?” His eyes double in size as he checks he’s hearing me right.

“My fingers were smaller than Liam’s. I could hot wire way faster than he could,” I tell him proudly, then await the lecture he’s no doubt going to give me.

“Hot as that sounds, Riley Hayes...” His fingers dig into my thigh as the top half of his body stretches across the seat so he can kiss my neck. “You just earned yourself another strike.” His breath tickles my ear, and I can’t help but giggle.

“Baby, you can add as many strikes as you like, I just drove a Ferrari.” Twisting my grip on the wheel, I side-glance him.

“Well, I hope you enjoyed it,” he whispers seductively. “Your little joy ride is over. We’re switching.”

His teeth clamp down on my ear lobe before he moves to get out of the car and I watch him efficiently march around the hood to my side. He opens my door and gestures his head for me to get out. Begrudgingly, I do as he orders, making sure my body slides against his as we pass. Then moving around the car, I take my place in the passenger seat and fix my own damn seatbelt.

Rafe looks incredibly sexy when he drives. The concentration he puts into watching the road in front of him and the way his hand rests on my leg when he's not switching the gears makes me wish he'd pull over and fuck me on the hood. But of course, that doesn't happen. Instead, he drives us to the lookout point he told me about and lying here now, after eating the food that Sylvia packed for us— I have to agree with him. It really is beautiful up here.

I can see out for miles, and there's nothing but mountains and landscapes. The world seems so abandoned from up here.

"You know it's okay for you to miss your brother." I decide the serene and calm atmosphere is a good opportunity for me to try to talk to him about his grief. I hate the thought of him keeping things from me and suffering alone.

"I don't miss Adriano," he tells me sharply.

"Were you two close when you were kids?" I push for more, curious to know more about Rafe's childhood.

"We were close once," he admits, picking at the crumbs from the baguette in his hand.

"So it doesn't matter about all the wrong things that he's done since then. You should grieve for the brother you lost, even if it was a long time ago that you lost him." I raise my

hand and let my fingers play with his hair. He's due a haircut, and it has a slight curl on the ends. I like it this way.

"Do you miss your brother, Riley?" he asks thoughtfully, and despite knowing my answer will hurt him, I decide to answer his question honestly.

"Every day," I admit sadly.

Rafe's head nods understandingly, and he looks out at the view to avoid making eye contact with me.

"Liam doesn't even know he's gonna be an uncle." My eyes fill up with tears at the thought of that, and I quickly face away from Rafe so he doesn't notice them.

"Your brother can't give you the life I can, Riley," he reminds me. "I feel bad for the way it has to be, and I hate the thought of you hurting, but you knew what you were sacrificing when you agreed to be mine." His hand reaches out and cups my chin, forcing me to look at him again. "We're each other's family now, Riley. We don't need anyone else." His eyes focus intensely on mine.

I nod back at him slowly, letting him wipe away my tears while I try to recall a time when I had a choice.

"How about I let you drive home?" he offers me a lopsided smile as compensation.

"But I thought you said..."

"I trust you," he interrupts me, his hand sliding behind my ear so he can pull me in closer and kiss me. Every time his lips touch mine, I feel a tugging at my core, and I wonder if something this simple will always be as intense with us.

"Come on, let's get you home." Rafe stands up, holding out his hand for me, and I take it, letting him help me off the

ground.

“Rafe.” I tug on his hand when he starts to move us toward the car, and he turns around and looks back at me with those dark eyes.

“I trust you too.” I suddenly feel like I need to tell him that. I don’t fear this man anymore. How can I when I know he’s capable of such tenderness? “It doesn’t matter to me anymore how all this started. All I care about now is our future.” I look down between us to where that future is growing.

“Close your eyes, Riley,” he whispers softly, and I instantly do as he tells me. I sense him moving around me but keep my eyes shut tight. He’s behind me now, and I feel his hands sweep my hair over one of my shoulders. He kisses my neck as his arms move over my head, and something cool touches the front of my chest.

“I was going to wait and give you this gift after the baby was born,” he whispers, his lips so close to touching my ear that it makes my pussy pulse. I reach up and touch whatever it is he’s fastening around my neck, and when I open my eyes, I look down and see the pretty silver crucifix, encrusted with diamonds and hanging where my mother’s used to.

“It’s beautiful,” I smile. I’ve never had a gift like it before. It seems such a luxury for a girl who had to steal to eat. “It must have cost you a fortune.”

“Your trust in me is worth more to me than anything I could ever gift you, Riley,” he tells me, wrapping his hand around my waist. He kisses the skin on my neck and inhales me as he breathes. “And you deserve so much more,” he tells me before taking my hand and leading me to the car.

“Money isn’t everything, Rafe,” I remind him as he holds open the driver’s door for me to get inside.

“Yes, you’re starting to make me realize that.” He flicks my nose with his finger. “But I have it, and for as long as I do, you will be treated as you should be.”

I make myself comfortable behind the wheel and look at my reflection in the rear-view mirror, admiring how beautiful Rafe’s gift looks. I don’t bother putting my safety belt on. I wait for him to do it because I know it’s what he needs. The fact he’s letting me drive is a huge step for him. I won’t take the small pleasures away from him too. He buckles me up the same way he did before, his palm rubbing across my tummy affectionately when he’s satisfied that we’re secure. Then he kisses my cheek and smiles at me, that smile that never fails to make my insides melt.

I look at the necklace one more time in the mirror before I start the engine and feel guilty for the sadness it brings me. I don’t want to be ungrateful for Rafe’s gift. It’s the most elaborate thing I’ve ever been given. It’s stunningly beautiful, and I know it would have cost Rafe a small fortune.

I love it...

But it’s not my mom’s.





4 MONTHS LATER

“Please tell me today will be the day,” Riley sighs while I massage more cocoa butter into her overstretched skin. When she noticed a stretch mark in the mirror a few weeks ago, she completely freaked out, and even though I told her they would fade over time, she still insisted we do something about them. So this has become part of my morning ritual.

I fucking love the way Riley’s body has changed. Pregnancy really suits her. Her tits are so swollen and full that I struggle to keep my hands off them, and she wouldn’t believe me if I told her, but I find the fresh pink lines that mark the skin on her stomach sexy.

I’d never admit it to Riley for the risk of her hating me, but I don’t want them to fade. I’m naturally territorial when it comes to her, and watching my child grow inside her has only fed that instinct. The thought of her bearing a permanent reminder of this time on her skin brings me a great deal of satisfaction.

“Viktor says that the baby is ready,” I try reassuring her, despite being worried sick myself. I’ve spent so many months worrying about Riley going into premature labor that I forgot to research the risks of her going past her due date. According to Viktor’s calculations, Riley is ten days overdue. Any more than fourteen would require intervention, and that also comes with its risks.

When I slide my hand over her huge, round belly, our baby responds to me with a nudge of an elbow or a knee. I’ll never tire of feeling our child move around inside her or how incredibly sweet it sounds listening to Riley talk to him when

she thinks no one else is listening. It makes all the stress and anxieties I've had these past months worth it, and I've already decided that I'll be knocking Riley up again sometime in the very near future.

"You should rest today. You need to preserve your energy." I drag myself out of bed and pull on some clothes. Gioele will be here soon, that's if he hasn't arrived already. He seemed eager to speak to me about something when he called last night.

"Or... I should keep active and try to evict this little one." My stubborn girl struggles into a sitting position and attempts to get out of bed. I hold out my arm to aid her to her feet, despite wishing she would just take it easy.

"So, what do you intend to do with yourself?" I roll my eyes as I walk toward the wardrobe to pick her out something to wear. It's mid-July and pretty damn hot, so I choose a light fabric for her. She'll look pretty in this little summer dress, her tits will spill over the low, frilly neckline, and the short length will provide easy access. Because if Riley is up for anything strenuous today, it should be my cock.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll take a walk around the grounds or see if Sylvia needs some help around the house."

"No!" I snap quickly, making her jump. "No more helping Sylvia," I repeat, calming my tone a little. I have to put my foot down on that one, for Sylvia's sake. Over the past few weeks, Riley seems to have gone stir-crazy. Just a few days ago, she emptied all the kitchen cupboards and rearranged them. It took Sylvia days to work out where everything was.

"I was thinking about moving the furniture in the living room, so it faces the garden instead of the fireplace. We could

switch it back around when the winter comes,” Riley suggests, stretching up her arms so I can drag the dress down her body.

“Absolutely not. You are not shifting furniture around.” My head shakes sternly.

“Well, obviously, I’d get Ricardo to do the heavy stuff.” She tuts at me as if I’m being overbearing, and I reach my arms around her ass and crumple the fabric of her dress in my fists.

“Why don’t you take a swim? If you wait until I’ve finished my meeting with Gioele, I might even join you.” Sliding my nose along her cheek, I kiss her temple.

“And then we can do what we did the last time we took a swim together?” she suggests hopefully, her dainty little fingers twisting the buttons on my shirt seductively.

Riley loved it when I fucked her in the pool a few nights ago. After Viktor told us that sex was the most effective way to induce her labor, I decided to get inventive. I had the pool room decorated with candles and roses, although there had been no success on the labor front. We *did* discover that pool sex was Riley’s new favorite kind.

“If you promise to behave and quit overexerting yourself, then yes, we can do that.” I kiss her on the forehead before making my way out to the hall.

“How’s our mother-to-be?” Sylvia catches me on the stairs. She’s been unable to hide her excitement about the baby coming. The woman’s knitted more blankets than we could ever use and has become much closer to Riley over the past few months.

Sylvia never did have any children of her own, which I believe to be a great shame. She’d been in my parents’ service

a long time before I was born and has been dedicated to me since I was a child. She would have made a fantastic mother, and I've already decided to employ someone to lessen her duties so she can enjoy a more grand maternal role in our child's life.

"Any developments during the night?" she asks optimistically when I forget to answer her last question.

"Do you think I'd be this calm if there were?" I raise my eyebrows, and the old woman chuckles at me.

"Please tell me she's tired today. I don't think I can take her turning my kitchen upside down for a second time."

"They call it nesting. She wants to rearrange the living room next." I rub the back of my neck awkwardly. Just lately, I've had to approach situations with Riley cautiously. The slightest thing will set her off crying, and as pretty as I find her tears, I really don't like the idea of her stressing.

"Well, I'm all done in the kitchen. Do you want me to distract her for a little while?" Sylvia offers. I nod and yawn at the same time.

Lack of sleep is starting to have an effect on me now. The closer Riley gets to delivering, the more frequent my nightmares have become. They've grown so vivid that I dread closing my eyes, and I can feel my body slowly being drained by them.

"Gioele is already here— he's in your office," Sylvia informs me, "and Raphael, you should try to get some sleep. You're looking worn out." The concern she's wearing on her face shows that I'm doing a shit job of hiding how weak I feel at the moment. Sylvia smiles at me before bustling on up the

stairs, hopefully, to keep Riley out of trouble until my meeting is over.

Gioele is sipping an espresso when I find him in my office. It's been a while since we caught up, and I hope this 'something urgent' he needs to talk to me about is good news.

"Am I to offer you my congratulations?" he asks, resting the tiny cup on its saucer before placing it on my desk.

"Not yet. The child is proving its stubbornness even before it arrives." I take a seat at my desk and wait for him to tell me what all this is about.

"I can't imagine where it would possibly get that from." Gioele looks back at me judgmentally, before clearing his throat and preparing to talk business. "I've done some research into the motorcycle club, as you requested. I've even managed to get someone watching them from the inside."

"And?" I'm becoming intrigued.

"They seem pacified by the death of your brother and the takedown of his organization. It also appears they have concerns of their own to keep them busy."

I throw him a curious look over my desk.

"Some Albanian usurper seems determined to expand his narcotics business in their peaceful little town," he explains, passing it off as unimportant, and I nod back, feeling satisfied.

The process of me removing myself from the sex trade isn't moving fast enough for my liking. My brother's death has had its impact on my clientele too, and the Souls have proved to be a lot more ruthless than I had originally given them credit for. They somehow managed to obtain a list of Adriano's clients and wipe them from existence. More importantly, they did it with a high level of professionalism.

Suicides were faked. Deaths were made to look like home invasion homicides, and the ones whose bodies haven't been found yet, have a trail of evidence that explains their sudden "disappearances."

This motorcycle gang from Manitou Springs knows how to fuck shit up.

"There is something else that I think you should know about." Gioele gets that look on his face, the one he always gets when he's about to tell me something he knows I won't like.

"One of my guys took these photos two days ago. He places a brown envelope in front of me. "I've been asking him to keep an eye on Brax Marshall in case you wanted to make an example of the fact he killed your brother," he explains, and I know exactly what Gioele's hinting at. He thinks I'm showing weakness to my enemies by not enforcing some form of retaliation over Adriano's death.

I pull the photos out of the envelope and look at the images. They are all taken on a town street, on the opposite side of what looks like a tattoo studio. The bikers are easy to distinguish. They all wear the same leather cuts. I see two handy-sized men almost identical to each other. An equally hard-looking fucker who looks in his early twenties is smoking a cigarette beside them, and Brax is sitting on his bike that's parked on the sidewalk alongside all the others. There's another person in the photographs, one much younger than the other men. He's smiling in one of the pictures, but in all the others he looks like he's caging in fury. The fact he wears a leather cut, with the word 'Prospect' on his patch, and the sight of him, with them, causes the blood to freeze in my veins.

“Is that...?” I look up from the photo.

“Liam Hayes,” Gioele confirms, breaking eye contact to look at the floor.

“What the fuck is Riley’s brother doing with the people who killed Adriano?” I throw the photographs back down, trying my best to remain calm.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. I will have my source on the inside look into it. But the fact he’s prospecting suggests he intends to stick around. A Prospect is a...”

“I know what a fucking Prospect is, Gioele!” I yell in frustration, my hand trembling as I massage my temple. I don’t need this added worry on top of everything that’s going on right now.

“Do you think they will come for her?” I ask, already fearing the answer I might get back from him.

“All this could be coincidental, Raphael. You can imagine the appeal a motorcycle club would have for a kid who has nothing to care about anymore.” Gioele shrugs.

“Maybe he knew Adriano took his sister and is drawn to the men who took his life. That doesn’t mean he would know that the girl is with you now. He may even assume that she’s dead. Many of your brother’s victims ended up that way.”

Gioele’s words give me no confidence, and I feel a stab of pain in my chest hearing him categorize Riley as a victim.

“Watch them carefully. I want to know of any move they make that might be a threat,” I order, and Gioele nods his understanding.

“Raphael, while I’m here, we should talk about your brother’s assets,” he adds, trying his best to be tactful.

“I told you I’m not interested.”

My brother’s final fuck you to me was to leave me everything in his will. I want nothing of his. My father cut him off years ago. This means all Adriano’s fortune has been earned through his own business, and I want no benefit from that.

“Give it all to charity,” I tell him for the hundredth time.

“Are you sure, Raphael? If you are planning on coming out of business yourself...”

“I have no need for his money. I have more than enough to take care of my family,” I snap. Since being with Riley, I’ve felt guilt for the way I earn my own money. The way Adriano earned his is unthinkable.

“Fine. I’ll have his places sold and make the donation to your usual charity.” Gioele looks disagreeable, but on this occasion, he can go fuck himself.

I take the photos of Riley’s brother with the Souls and lock them in my top drawer before I take the time to see Gioele out, despite knowing that I should spend some time alone and let my anger simmer. I go in search of Riley.

I find her in the living room with a frustrated-looking Ricardo. He’s holding up one end of the heavy couch, dragging it in the direction she’s pointing. Sylvia tries to hide the amusement from her face when she notices me, and as soon as Riley spots me, she waddles her way over and wraps her arms around my neck. I squeeze her back and remind myself to stay calm. I don’t want her picking up on my stress. It’s bad for her, especially at this crucial time.

Seeing her brother with them has only fed my anxieties about losing her, and now I stand to lose so much more. My



hand strokes over her swollen stomach, and all my predatory instincts go into overdrive.

Riley stretches up on her toes to kiss me, seeming oblivious to all the tension I'm trying to keep contained, and I manage to smile at her when she places her hand over mine.

Gioele may not be concerned about Liam's relationship with the Souls, but I have a feeling there is much more to it. If the kid is smart, he'll know he stands no chance of getting her back alone. With them, he has much more power, and it only reinforces my need to keep Riley close.

"Let's go take that swim." I keep the fake smile on my face, reminding myself that she belongs to me and that no one, not even her own flesh, and blood, will be taking her away from me.



My fingernails dig hard on the wooden headboard, and I moan loudly as Raphael thrusts into me from behind. Both his hands gripping my huge stomach and his teeth scraping the skin on my shoulder. I've lost count of the number of orgasms I've had, and I don't know what's gotten into him, but he's being so much rougher than usual. This is the sex we used to have before he started treating me like I might break, and as I feel myself building for another climax, I wonder if my knees will hold me.

"Scream for me," he hisses into my ear, the tension in his voice and the warmth of his breath urging me closer. "Tell me who you fucking belong to, Riley."

One of his hands raises over my sweat-sheened skin, slipping between my breasts so his fingers can curl around my throat. It's been so long since he's held me like this, and I can feel the desperation in his grip.

I've craved this so much during the past few months, and it feels fucking incredible to have him back like this.

"I can't hear you, Riley. You need to tell me," he growls.

“You... Rafe. I belong to you,” I manage before another orgasm rips through my body, this one making me scream so loud I worry someone might hear us.

My pussy tightens around his cock, but Rafe doesn't let up. Shocking me when he slams into me harder. “You're mine. I'll never let anyone take you from me.” His fingers bury deeper into my throat, almost making me choke, and he uses his grip to pull the top half of my body taut against his. I can feel his chest slamming through my back.

“I mean it, Riley, when it comes to you, there is nothing I wouldn't do to keep you.” He stills inside me. The hand he holds on my stomach stroking so tenderly while his other grips my neck with such tension, I feel the shake in his fingertips.

“I'll never leave you,” I whisper because it feels like it's what he needs to hear, and it's true. The love I've developed for him since I've been here is almost painful. I have no interest in the world beyond our fortress, and I can't imagine a life without him in it.

He pushes hard into me one last time, and I feel his cock pulse inside me. Filling me with warm threads of his cum before he buries his head into the crook of my neck and attempts to catch his breath.

“You okay?” he asks after a few desperate gulps for air.

“I'm fine,” I smile to myself as his hand slides down from my throat to join the other one on my stomach.

“Fuck... I'm sorry.” I hate that he sounds so disappointed in himself.

“Don't be sorry. I've missed this,” I assure him, my pussy still throbbing around his long, thick shaft as he slowly eases out of me and rolls onto his back.

“Jesus Christ.” He stares up at the ceiling, still struggling to breathe. “You sure you’re okay?” He rolls onto his side and studies me. “I lost control. I shouldn’t have been that rough.” The look of devastation on his face wounds me. I wish he wouldn’t beat himself up so much.

“What’s on your mind? Talk to me,” I beg. Shifting into a more comfortable position. I’m really missing being able to lie on my stomach. “Are you scared about the baby coming?” I check, knowing that Rafe hasn’t been sleeping all too well. I hear him tossing and turning at night, and I’m certain it’s because he’s worried about us.

“Course not,” his head shakes, trying to prevent me from fearing the inevitable. “I’m just...” His eyes flick away from mine the way they always do when he’s ashamed of something. “I’m just so close to having everything I want, Riley, and I’m scared it’s gonna be snatched away from me somehow.” His jaw tightens as he pulls his fingers through his hair and looks down at his sweat-soaked abs. I’ve grown to love all versions of Raphael Verretti, but this slightly vulnerable one is my favorite.

It almost makes him seem human.

“Well, we are going nowhere. You’re stuck with us.” I kiss his cheek before snuggling into his chest and feeling his body relax a little. His breath has just started to regulate when he speaks up again.

“Riley, what would you do if your brother found you?” He sounds almost threatened, and it makes me curious as to why Liam has become important all of a sudden. We haven’t spoken about him since the day Rafe gave me the diamond crucifix. In fact, he’s done everything to avoid talking about him.

“I’d tell him that I was happy and that I belonged here with you,” I assure him, lifting up my head so I can look him in the eyes. “I told you, Rafe, I won’t ever leave you.”

He gives me a sad smile, his hand cupping my face, and when he slides my hair over my shoulders, that smile suddenly turns serious. I watch his eyes widen, and his nostrils flare, and I know immediately something’s wrong.

“What is it?” I start to panic.

“I’ve hurt you.” His hand pulls away like my skin just scolded his fingertips.

“Raphael, I’m fine,” I assure him.

“I shouldn’t have taken you like that.” He shakes his head. “Look at the mess I’ve made of you.” His fingers are trembling when they touch the sore skin on my neck, and I find myself missing the man who used to get off on leaving his mark on me.

“I feel fine. I enjoyed it. Please don’t feel bad about it.”

Rafe doesn’t look convinced. He’s too mad at himself to see logic.

He’s taken on far more stress than he’s needed to while I’ve been pregnant. He’s worrying about every little thing, and I know he’s getting anxious about the birth. I’m scared too, but I know everything will be okay. We deserve to be happy.

“You should get some sleep.” Rafe sounds deflated as he leans his head up to kiss me, and then, slipping his arm around my middle, he tucks my back against his chest and holds me until I fall asleep.

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It's the middle of the night when I wake up. Rafe's body is so hot and clammy that his skin sticks to mine. The tension in his muscles and his erratic breathing make me worry something is wrong.

When I realize he's having a bad dream, I stretch over to my nightstand and turn on the lamp. It hurts to see him look so tortured, his face contorted into an expression of agony, and the veins in his neck bulging against his skin.

"Rafe," I whisper his name. Not wanting to startle him, but at the same time, needing to wake him from his misery.

He doesn't respond— his eyes only squeeze shut tighter. "Don't leave me," he whispers, his voice so broken it's barely recognizable. "Please don't leave me."

"Rafe, you need to wake up. You're drea—" The words get stuck in my throat when a pain slices through my stomach, and I feel a warm gush soak the space between my legs.

"Rafe." My hand grips at his arm, as suddenly reality dawns on me.

This is it. Our baby is coming.

"Rafe," I call his name again, this time a little more desperately. "It's time," I tell him, trying my best not to panic. When his eyes flick open, and I see the agony inside them, the crushing pain in my abdomen is suddenly consumed by the sadness in my heart.



I run through the woods, and despite the air around me being so open and fresh, it feels suffocating. The weight of the trees collapses around me, their darkness closing in tighter and tighter.

Through the dark, I can hear her calling out for me. She's scared, she's in pain, and I'm gulping in air, trying to breathe. I know I need to get to her, but I'm so scared all I want to do is run in the opposite direction.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. All this is my fault. She thinks she needs me, but she doesn't. What she needs is medical attention. A hospital. But the risk is too great, and I'm too fucking selfish.

When I reach her, she looks so relieved to see me. Like I'm the one who's going to make this all go away. But I'm not a cure for her pain. I'm the creator of it.

I've ruined her life, and from the way she's screaming, it feels like tonight might be the end of it.

We're all alone out here, just the two of us, stranded with our fear and surrounded by blackness. There's nothing but the

cold, and as her body trembles against mine, and she begs me not to let anything happen to her. I just know that something's wrong...

"Rafe. It's time—the baby's coming." I feel the tension in the fingertips that press into my sweaty skin. I hear the pain in her voice, and when I force my eyes open it's Riley that I see. Her eyes are wide and fearful as she puffs tiny breaths of air from her mouth. And I have to shut away all my fears and be strong for her.

"Shit!" I shoot up from the bed, and when she pulls the covers away from her legs, I see that she really means it.

"My water broke, and I had a definite pain," she tells me with a brave smile on her lips.

"I'll call Viktor." I scramble to pull on some clothes and locate my cell. My fingers fumble as I scroll through my contacts to Viktor's name. I've rehearsed this moment in my head a thousand times over, and yet now, when it's important, my mind feels completely blank.

Viktor answers his phone efficiently, assuring me he will be with us within twenty minutes, and I quickly turn my attention back to Riley.

"How far apart are the pains?" I ask, sitting beside her on the edge of the bed and rubbing the heel of my palm into her lower back. The book said it helps with relaxation. I remember that part, at least. And when I suddenly become very aware of the fact that we will be alone in this for twenty whole fucking minutes, I feel my throat starting to close up.

"Relax, I haven't had another one yet. We have plenty of time," she assures me, which is ridiculous, considering she's the one in fucking labor here.



I really need to pull myself together. To forget my nightmare and push aside my anxieties so I can be here for Riley.

“Sorry about the bed.” She cringes as she looks over her shoulder at the huge damp patch in the center. As if I’d be worried about the state of the goddamn bed at a time like this.

“Holy shit!” Her body turns rigid, her face scrunches in pain, and I feel fucking helpless.

Taking her hand in mine, I remind her to breathe because that’s all I can do. I can’t make her pain go away. I can’t ensure that all this is going to go okay. I can’t control anything, and it’s making my throat tighten like I’m suffocating.

Viktor arrives within fifteen minutes and sets straight to work, checking Riley over. I call for Sylvia, who seems to know all the right things to say to Riley when she has one of her pains, and in between, she busies herself, stripping the bed and laying down the protective sheets that Viktor brought with him.

Riley’s fucking incredible. She’s calm, she’s focused, and keeps ensuring me that she’s okay, which only proves what a shit job I’m doing of keeping it together for her.

I grow more and more anxious as the hours pass by. Riley is starting to look shattered. The pains have been coming every five minutes for ages, and I see the look of terror on her face each time she feels the next one start.

She’s managed to find a comfortable position straddling a chair by the balcony door, and I crouch behind her, rubbing her back in my feeble attempt at doing something useful.

“Why is it taking so long?” She looks over her shoulder at me wearily. Viktor and Sylvia have left us alone to go and get something to eat downstairs, and I try to think of something to say to her that will make her better.

“These things take time.” I massage my fingers into her back a little harder.

“They’re getting worse and closer together. I think I should take some of that gas and air.” She grimaces as another contraction ripples through her body.

Pain looks beautiful on Riley. I’m such a sick bastard to be thinking that right now, despite all the worrying I’m doing and while she’s trying to bring my child into the world.

“How are we doing?” Sylvia opens the door, bringing with her a tray of food. “I thought you might like something to eat.” She places the tray on the bed, and I nod politely, although there’s not a chance I could eat anything.

“Do you want anything, dear?” Sylvia steps around to Riley, who lifts her head up from between the arms she’s resting over the back of the chair.

“Yes... for this to be over.” She breathes through another contraction, her hands now squeezing the wood as her body shakes. She screams, and it makes the pain in my chest amplify.

“I can’t take the pain anymore,” she sobs, and it all feels too much. The hurt in her voice, combined with the guilt inside me, causes a surge of anger to rush through my blood. I’ve tried being strong, but I need a moment. I need to lose my fucking shit, and I can’t do it in front of her.

“Stay with her.” I nod at Sylvia before getting off my knees and storming down the stairs into the kitchen. Viktor is

just finishing off his plate, and he smiles at me calmly when he sees me.

“How is she?” He stands up from the table, casually wiping his mouth with his napkin. The fact he’s acting like this is just another day at the fucking office makes me want to crush his skull. He doesn’t seem to be grasping that I could lose the two most precious things in this world.

Rage and fear drive me forward, and I grab him by the collar of his shirt, forcing him into the wall behind him.

“You need to make her pain stop.” I force the words through my teeth, and Viktor’s eyes bulge out of his head. He looks scared, but it’s only a fraction of the fear I’m feeling right now, and he’s the only person who can fix it.

“We can see how she manages with the gas and air and if that isn’t effective enough, I do carry pethidine.”

“Is that harmful to the child?” I check, my grip on his shirt faltering slightly.

“Not at all. It’s used during labor all the time.”

I nod back at him.

“Why is it taking so long?” I can hear the fret in my own voice, and I know I’ll have to pull myself back together before I return to her.

“Everything is progressing perfectly normally. First-time mothers often take their time to deliver. Believe it or not, Riley is making excellent progress,” he assures me, forging a confident smile, and my fingers crush a little tighter as I force him harder into the wall.

“I swear, if anything happens to them, I will kill you, along with anyone who has ever meant anything to you,” I threaten,

making his creepy smile morph back into horror.

“I assure you, Raphael, they will both be okay,” he explains.

It’s nowhere near good enough for me, but I release the man anyway because upstairs is a woman who needs me, and as much as I hate to say it, she needs him too.

It’s time for me to step up and be there for her.

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It’s another four hours before Viktor tells Riley that her body is ready for her to start pushing. There’s hardly any lapse between her contractions now, and her screams are filling my chest with a pain I’ve only ever felt once before in my life. I can’t go back there, not now. Not when Riley is starting to fall apart and needs me at my strongest.

I hold her hand and feel her fingernails embedded into my skin. She wouldn’t believe me if I told her, but I feel her agony, and I swear if I could take her place, I would. I’m so fucking selfish for putting her through this, and I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

“You’re doing really good,” I tell her, wiping away the strands of red hair that cling to her face with sweat. She barely has time to breathe before another pain hits her, and her body shakes with tension as she pushes hard, and Viktor counts down from ten.

She’s exhausted and barely has anything left in her when Viktor tells me the baby’s head is crowning. So I squeeze her hand tighter and wrap my other arm around her shoulders.

“You’re so close now, Riley. You have to get through this for me. I demand it,” I tell her, trying so hard to keep the tension out of my voice.

“Trust you to give me orders while I’m fucking—” Her body tenses again, and she pushes her chin deep into her chest.

“The baby’s head’s been delivered.” Viktor looks up at me, nodding to assure me everything’s okay down there. I don’t look. I can’t look. It will only make my anxieties worse.

“You hear that? This is nearly over,” I encourage Riley, kissing her sweat-soaked forehead and making one final plea to the man upstairs that they’ll be okay.

Riley screams again, her hand shaking in mine as she continues to push, and when her scream turns into a relieved sigh, and the sound of a bleating little cry fills the room, I feel my whole body relax.

“You have a son.” Viktor holds the tiny slippery bundle out in his hands, and I feel the lump in my throat threaten to choke me. Here he is. The next Verretti heir has arrived into the world, and I’m determined to make it a better place for him.

His tiny limbs stretch out as Viktor places him on Riley’s chest, and I watch her soothe his back with her shaking fingers as tears of joy fall off her cheek and onto his head of jet-black hair.

“Riley.” I swallow past my tears, and whisper her name because at this moment there is nothing else. Just her and him. My whole fucking existence feels like it’s been for this moment.

She looks up at me and smiles through her tears, and I cradle her tighter in my arms, my palm resting over hers and feeling our tiny son’s strong heart beating through his back.

The rush I feel is so consuming. I almost fear it. Because I know what it'll make me capable of.

“I did it!” Riley’s eyes glimmer with pretty tears, and she’s so fucking beautiful that it hurts to look at her.

“You did.” I kiss her forehead, and when we both look down at the tiny person we created together, suddenly, the world doesn’t seem like such a bad place.



13 MONTHS LATER

“F or goodness sake, Raphael, I practically raised you. I’m sure I can manage a sleeping child for a few hours.” Sylvia argues with an uneasy-looking Rafe as she shoos us out the door. He’s been planning, us, a night out for weeks now. It will be the first time I’ve left the house since Rafe let me drive his Ferrari into the mountains, and this will be the first time we’ve left Gabriel since he was born. I understand that he’s apprehensive. It feels strange for me to be leaving my little boy, even for a few hours, but I know Sylvia is more than capable. She’s incredible with him.

“Fine, but if he wakes and won’t settle back down, you call us. I’ve ensured there is cell reception where we’ll be,” Rafe promises Sylvia as we take a few more progressive steps out of the house.

“Yes, Raphael, and I will make sure to check in on him every half an hour.” Sylvia rolls her eyes at me as Rafe takes my hand in his and guides me around the car to the passenger side.

“Oh, and don’t forget to carry the baby monitor around with you. Even if you go to the bathroom.” He turns back around before opening my door for me. Sylvia lifts the monitor from her apron pocket and waves it in the air at him. “Just get out of here and enjoy yourselves. We will be fine,” she promises.

“You know she’s been desperate for you to trust her to babysit,” I tell Rafe after he checks my seatbelt is secure and pulls off the drive.



“Riley, the last baby she took care of was me,” he points out seriously. “Gabriel can be a handful. Especially now he’s started walking.”

“Sylvia has been helping us take care of him since the day he was born. She’s not exactly rusty. Now, please, can we enjoy our night together? I’ve been so excited about leaving the house.”

Rafe rests his tattooed hand on my knee and relieves a little of his tension by squeezing. Then he looks across at me with those narrow eyes and his sexy pout before his face transforms into a smirk.

We travel for about an hour before I finally cave into temptation and ask where we’re going.

“Are you going to tell me where you’re taking me now?” I ask, trying to contain the excitement in my voice.

“I’m taking you on a date.” He gives nothing away, and his voice sounds so seductive that my lady parts quiver.

“You’re about two years too late,” I giggle, and the look he gives me suggests I’ve earned myself a thrash of his palm when we get home. Me and Rafe have never had a normal relationship. Our circumstances prevent us from going to restaurants or fancy bars, not that it bothers me. Everything we need is at home. But I do love the idea of a date with him. Especially since I’ve never been on one before.

“I invested in a restaurant a few months ago,” he informs me, taking me by surprise. Raphael never speaks to me about his business dealings. But since he makes his money from property development, I don’t know why I’m so shocked.

“It’s in a secluded spot, with an excellent view,” he explains further, “So, I arranged for it to be closed to the

public this evening, enabling us to sample the chef's new menu. I'd like your opinion." He continues to concentrate on the road ahead of us.

"I'm hardly a food connoisseur. My favorite food is burgers and fries." I laugh again, thinking of the number of times Rafe has sent Ricardo, or one of his men, into town to fetch me food from the diner.

"Okay..." Rafe gives in and smiles to himself. "Perhaps I have a proposal for you." His eyes flick from the road onto mine briefly, and I sense a little nervousness in them.

He pulls up at the mountain top restaurant, and when he gets out of the car, I stay in my seat and wait for him to open my door for me. I take in the beauty of the place while Rafe opens my door like the perfect gentleman, offering me a hand to help me out. There must be hundreds of twinkling lights and beautiful roses decorating the trellis that lines the path to the entrance of the restaurant.

The place has a real Italian vibe—the building is small and cozy, with shutters on the windows. The smells that come out from the one that I assume is the kitchen are heavenly.

A middle-aged man dressed all in black meets us at the door, and I notice the table that's been set up in the perfect place to admire the scenery. Looking down at the short, black lace dress Rafe picked out for me tonight, I suddenly feel totally overdressed. Especially since it's only the two of us and a few restaurant staff here.

"You look beautiful tonight," Rafe tells me as if he senses my doubt, and his hand rests on my ass as we move to follow the waiter. Rafe takes over from him, pulling out my chair for me before I sit down.

Parenthood hasn't changed our relationship at all. I still feel the need to jump his bones every second of the day, and Rafe still needs a certain level of control. The fact he does it with such sex appeal makes me yield to him willingly. That and the fact I know his overbearing ways come only from his heart.

"We'd like a sample of everything," Rafe explains to the waiter, refusing the menu he tries to hand him. "Also, a bottle of the Castello Vicchiomaggio, please." He waits until the waiter has left before reaching across the table and taking both my hands in his. The way he stares at his fingertips as they brush over my skin is intense. It always is when his hands are on me.

"This is nice, isn't it? Just the two of us. Sometimes I don't think I give you enough of this," he confesses guiltily.

"You give me everything, just like you promised you would." I shake my head, wondering where this has come from. Raphael has a perfect balance. When he's not working from his office, the three of us spend our days together as a family. In the short time Gabriel has been in our lives, we've already made such wonderful memories. I think back to last week when he took his first steps along the gravel path. Rafe looked so proud when he picked him up and spun him around in the air. I'd felt such unconditional love that I worried my heart could erupt from it. I still have the rose that Rafe picked and tucked in my hair, as we walked back inside the house together, that day. I pressed it—the way me and my mom used to do when I was a little girl.

Raphael has taken to fatherhood so naturally. Yes, he worries too much, and he probably spoils our son far more than he should, but I can't help but love him for it.

Despite giving every ounce of his energy to Gabriel, Rafe still always manages to find time to make me feel adored. He lavishes me with gifts that I don't need. He cooks for me because, apparently, he likes the noises I make when I eat. And once our little boy is sleeping soundly in his bed, it's me who gets all of his attention.

Some nights he makes love to me like I'm made of glass, and he's scared I'll shatter. Then others, he punishes my body like I'm his little fuck toy.

What we have is perfect.

"I want to ask something of you, Riley, which is selfish, considering you've given me so much already." His voice is low, and I sense his nerves through it. I already know what Raphael wants. Despite all the worrying he did while I was pregnant with Gabriel and telling me after his birth that he never wanted me to go through it again, he wants another child. And it would be criminal of me not to give him one.

Our son is adorable, and being a mother has proven to be the most rewarding thing I've ever done. That, and the fact I swear the man in front of me was born for the sole purpose of being a father, is the reason I won't refuse him.

"I want us to have another child, a little sister, for Gabriel," he tells me, his forehead creasing while he awaits my response.

"You know you don't get to pick what you get, right?" I smile playfully, making him suffer a little longer.

"There are things we can do to sway the odds in our favor. Certain diets and times of the month when it's more likely we would conceive a girl. I researched it." He lifts his shoulders

into a shrug, and I have to stop myself from laughing because he's being very serious.

"Does your need for control hold no boundaries?" I ask.

"I like to have as much of it as I can." He takes the wine from the waiter and pours some into my glass.

"Honestly, I don't really care if we have another son or a beautiful daughter. I just want to make more children with you, Riley, a couple more in fact."

"Sure," I nod casually, taking a sip of my wine. It's delicious, fresh, and crisp, and I can't wait to taste the food here too.

"I thought you'd take a little more convincing," Rafe laughs. He always looks so handsome when he's happy.

"Why? I think it will be good for Gabriel to have a little brother or sister." I lower my voice and lean across the table. "And I love how antsy you get when you're trying to knock me up." I tease the toe of my shoe up his leg and let it rest between his thighs.

Rafe bites down on his bottom lip, and a thrill shocks my body when he snatches my ankle in his hand, squeezing it so tight I feel him bruising. "Careful, *Briga*," he warns. "I might choose to knock you up right here on this table." He rubs his thick bottom lip against the top one like he's thinking about me spread out in front of him. It makes my pussy scream for his attention.

I somehow manage to calmly sip my wine before I look over my shoulder to check the waiter is out of earshot.

"I don't see the need to wait. We both know what we want," I tease, sucking my index finger into my mouth before I slide it beneath the table. Rafe has very strict rules about me

touching myself. It's only ever to be done on his command, but all this talk of him knocking me up has me horny enough to push his patience and suffer the consequences.

"Riley," he warns, pulling air through his nostrils. I'm just about to slip my finger inside my panties when the sound of his cell ringing interrupts us. He quickly pulls it out of his suit, no doubt worrying that it's Sylvia. I watch his confusion turn to a frown before he answers.

He's only been on the phone a few seconds before his face turns murderous. So murderous that I worry something's happened to Gabriel.

"I'm an hour away. I'm leaving now." He stands up on his feet. "She will have to come with me." He looks down at me like I've suddenly become an inconvenience, cutting the call and placing his phone back in his pocket.

"We have to leave." He holds out his hand to pull me up from the table, scaring me with the tension in his grip and the heat burning in his eyes.

"Please tell chef Marco that we will return and sample his menu another time. I have an urgent matter to attend to," he explains to the waiter before practically dragging me out of the restaurant, crushing my fingers as he leads me to the car.

"What's happened? Is it Gabriel?" I ask, fearing the worst. Rafe shakes his head, and I quickly realize that he's not worried. He's angry. Furious, in fact.

"I have to deal with a situation. The place where I need to be is an hour east from here, and I haven't got time to take you back home first." He explains, sounding like he's torn.

"Okay, then we go. Don't worry, Sylvia will be fine with Gabriel." I stroke my palm over his shoulder, trying to ease

him down. I know tonight was important to him, and it was a lovely thought, but life happens, and I know that Rafe's work is important to him.

The little he's told me is that he inherited the business from his father, and seeing he's such a proud man, I know he feels the pressure to maintain its success.

"I haven't got a fucking choice," he growls, opening the door for me to get inside and waiting for me to get settled before he slams it shut and rests his ass against the window. I watch him trying to breathe himself calm, and can't help wondering how serious this situation is.

Rafe remains silent and drives much faster than usual on our journey toward whatever the emergency is. I hold on to the door handle as he shifts the gearstick aggressively and makes what he told me would be an hour-long trip in less than forty-five minutes.

Driving through the city, Pueblo feels strange, but it reminds me how much I've missed the bright lights and the bustle of a city.

It suddenly dawns on me why Rafe's so angry. He thinks bringing me here and dealing with whatever this problem is will make me want to run from him, and it hurts a little to think he could believe that after all this time.

We approach the outskirts on the other side of the city, and Rafe surprises me when he pulls up outside what looks like an old, abandoned nightclub. It looks far too run down to belong to him.

"Is this one of your properties?" I ask, trying not to sound shocked.

“Don’t ask questions, Riley, just stay in the fucking car.” He scrubs his hand over his face before he slams his palm angrily into the steering wheel. There’s a guard on the door who looks even bigger than Ricardo, and the building reminds me of the ones Liam warned me weren’t safe at night.

“Rafe, maybe I can help. Just tell me what’s happened,” I say, starting to feel really nervous.

“I told you, it’s just business.” He fails at keeping the anger out of his tone. “I won’t be inside for very long. But I need you to swear to me that you will not get out of this car.” The way his chest rises and falls makes it look like he’s struggling to find his next breath.

“I promise.” I place my hand over his to try to calm him.

“Okay.” He blows out a breath and soothes his hair back. “Lock the doors once I’m out of the car, and do not open them until I get back.” He leans over, pressing a tight kiss on my cheek before he gets out of the car. I wait until he’s slammed his door shut before I flick the lock switch. Then when he’s satisfied that I’ve done as he asks, he walks toward the nightclub door, nodding curtly at the guard who steps out of his way.

I sit and wait patiently for him to come back out, having no idea how much time has passed. Rafe’s determination to keep me from whatever’s inside that building injects me with a dangerous dose of curiosity, as I watch the guard on the door press his radio piece closer to his mouth and say something before he turns to go inside.

It’s an opportunity, one I know I shouldn’t take. I promised Rafe I’d stay in the car and since he’s over-cautious, he’ll be scared that I’ll be recognized as a missing person. But I’ve never been to Pueblo in my life. I don’t know anyone here,



and it's been so long since I disappeared no one will be looking out for me. Whatever happened here tonight has upset Rafe. He's always kept his work so distant from our home, but we're a family now, and I want to ease his burdens.

I have a quick battle with myself over what I should do, and after reminding myself that Rafe can never stay mad at me for long these days. I decide to go inside and check things out.

The entrance isn't guarded anymore, which makes it easy for me to step inside, and I quickly hide behind a cloakroom wall when I hear voices coming back down the corridor. It gives me that familiar rush I'd get when me and Liam would sneak through the back doors of grocery stores and steal from the stockrooms.

"He's fucking pissed." I peek my head a little around the corner to see one of the guards speaking to the other as he bolts the front door closed and heads into a room a few doors down.

I slip out of my heels, picking them up to carry them before I quickly rush down the long narrow corridor in search of Rafe. It doesn't take me long to hear his voice, he's yelling something in Italian furiously, and I check the coast is clear on either side of the hall before I look into the room through the narrow gap in the door. My hand slams over my mouth to hide my gasp when I see all the blood and a body slumped on the ground near his feet.

"What do you want me to do, boss?" a voice I don't recognize asks, and I flinch when I witness Rafe violently snatch the man up in his fist and slam him into the mirror on the wall.

"I want you to explain to me how a stranger managed to get himself into one of my auctions, kill one of my clients and

three of my men, and then leave with a girl he didn't fucking pay for," he yells, all his cool completely lost. Fear and betrayal all attack me at once, and I suddenly worry I'll throw up all over the red carpet beneath my bare feet.

"Who the fuck was he?" Rafe bellows into the man's face, who pales in pure terror.

"He had Alistair Stewart's ID and looked like him too. All the CCTV was down, so we don't have much to go on, but the guys on the door didn't question his identity. Whoever he was must have been a good match."

"So if that wasn't Stewart, where is he now?" Rafe asks.

"He was admitted to hospital earlier this evening, sir. He's in pretty bad shape, apparently."

"So this was planned." Rafe drops the man from his grasp, pushing back his hair as he paces the floor in front of him like a caged animal. The guy's body slides down the wall weakly before he attempts to scurry back up to his feet.

"The girl he took. How much did she fetch?"

"750,000, the money had already been wired."

"And it was the one you trained yourself, the virgin you insisted on keeping for so long. You were fond of her, Pablo, were you not? How do I know this wasn't all a setup for your benefit? I find it hard to believe anyone here was stupid enough to provide an outsider with information."

"It has nothing to do with me, boss. I wouldn't betray you. We all know what happened to Enzo." There's more fear in the man's eyes now, and it makes me wonder who Enzo is and what the hell happened to him.

“The other girls that were purchased tonight. Where are they now?” Rafe asks.

“All with their buyers, sir. Three had already left before it happened. The other one was escorted from the premises as swiftly as possible.” I hear Rafe’s slow, heavy breathing. It’s how he always calms himself when he’s agitated.

“I’ve got to get home. I’ve risked too much by being here tonight,” he says. “I’ve been in this business for seventeen years, and this is the biggest fuck up I’ve ever seen. Clean this fucking shit up, and speak to Gioele. I want him to know everything you told me so he can start figuring out who pulled this shit off,” he orders.

“How many women do you have in my house at Peyton?” he checks. I need to get out of here before Rafe notices me. I haven’t had a chance to process everything I’ve heard, but I already know that he’s been lying to me, and he wouldn’t want me to be hearing this.

“We have seven, including Clara, but she will never be sold, not after what Dury did to her face.”

“Men will always buy sex, Pablo,” Rafe speaks cruelly. “There will be some sick fucker out there who will get pleasure from her disfigurement. I want that property cleaned up by the end of next month. Even if we don’t get full value for the stock.”

“But sir...”

“Just fucking do it,” Rafe snaps, rapidly losing his temper, and I decide it’s my cue to leave. I rush back up the corridor before he comes out of the room. My fingers fumble with the heavy bolt on the front door, and I pray for it to release as I hear more yelling come from the room behind me. Then when

silence falls and I fear I've run out of time, the bolt shifts, and the door bursts open.

The night is dark and calm. It would be so easy to run, but how can I when my son is at home sleeping soundly in his bed? My heart feels too heavy to carry as I take my only option and rush toward the car, quickly settling myself back into the passenger seat, trying to steady my breathing before he comes out.

I heard everything Rafe said, but it can't be true. He wouldn't be capable of selling women, not after all the things he said about Adriano. I have to calm my trembling before he comes out. I can't have him suspect that I know anything. He's already mad. I don't want him to be mad at me too.

Rafe must know all this shit is wrong. Why else wouldn't he have told me about it? He's been lying to me all this time, and now I have to decide what I'm going to do about it.

I need time to be sure before I react, especially since it feels like my whole world has just been tipped upside down.

I watch Rafe come out of the building, his pace steady as he walks toward the car. He's managed to find that calm before coming to me, and he smiles me a guilty smile as he slides into the driver's seat beside me.

"Sorry, that took longer than expected," he apologizes.

"Is everything okay?" I act as normal as I can.

"Nothing for you to worry about." His hand reaches out to stroke over my hair, and I don't lean into his touch the way I usually do. Instead, I fake him a smile. Then, after he pulls me closer and presses a kiss on my forehead, I settle back into my seat and stay silent for the rest of our journey home.

I knew right from the first day I met Raphael Verretti that he carried secrets, but what I failed to predict was that those secrets would have the power to destroy me.



It's hard to keep yourself contained when you're feeling like you need to slice someone open, but I have Riley to think about. I can't risk her being suspicious of anything.

All I'd wanted was one night, one night, to take her away from the house and show her how much I appreciated her... and I couldn't even give her that.

It's unfair of me to ask her to give me another child, especially after what she went through to give me Gabriel. But seeing her and my son together seems to mend all the broken pieces inside me. Their happiness is my only ambition these days. The love I feel for them is like a drug, and I can't remember a time before I had it. What I do know, is that I couldn't survive without it now.

Riley's been quiet since we left the club, probably because she's picked up on the mood I'm in. I tried so hard to get a grip of myself before I returned to the car, but what had happened here tonight was all too fucking much. Some mother fucker has stolen from me and killed one of my best clients, along with three of my guards. And it pisses me off that the mother fucker is still breathing.

For now.

My hands tense around the steering wheel as I make the long journey back home and think of how things could have been so much worse. Unfortunately, bringing Riley here with me was unavoidable. I insisted Ricardo stay at home with Gabriel because I'd been so sure that I could protect Riley by myself. Turns out I was wrong. My actions have put her at risk. She could have easily been seen, or worse, hurt. And that's without mentioning how I put myself at risk of being exposed to her.

I feel myself relax a little when she falls asleep. Riley likes to ask questions. Her thirst for better understanding is one of the things that appeal to me most about her. But right now, I'm too wound up to tolerate them, especially since I know her questions will all be aimed at the one thing in my life I'm not prepared to share with her.

I need to speak to Gioele and see if he knows what any of this is about. Attendance to my auctions is strictly invitation only. Somehow I've landed up with a client seriously ill in hospital and another one dead. I'm starting to see a familiar pattern, one that I don't fucking like. And one that I'm starting to fear could be linked to the motorcycle club that Riley's brother is now a part of.

When we finally get home, I gently shake Riley awake. She must have been in a deep sleep because she flinches and looks shocked when she opens her eyes.

"It's okay, we're home," I tell her, smiling past all the anger that's built up inside me. She opens her own door, eager to get inside. No doubt she's missed, Gabriel. I know she hates to be separated from him, even if it's just being in a different room.

Riley has proved to me since the day he was born that I picked the mother of my child wisely. She's unconditionally loving and patient and getting to share all the things our little boy does daily to make her smile almost feels too good to be true.

I slide my hand around her hips as we move inside the house where Ricardo is already standing, waiting for me beside my office door. Sylvia yawns as she steps out of the living room, still clutching the baby monitor in her hand.

"He's been no trouble. I checked in about ten minutes ago." She hands the monitor over to Riley, who looks at me awkwardly before dashing up the stairs to check in on him herself.

She moves so fast that I don't have the chance to tell her that it'll probably be a while before I join her. I'll need some answers before I can attempt any form of sleep. I have to be assured that what happened tonight didn't have anything to do with Riley's brother trying to take her from me.

"Shit, boss." Ricardo closes the door behind him once the coast is clear, and we're alone in my office.

"Where is Gioele?" I snap. Now that Riley's at a safe distance, I can feel myself starting to lose control again.

"He's taking the next flight in from Boston. He'll be here in the morning," he assures me. "How's Riley? She seemed a little sketchy back there. Did she..."

"What do you mean sketchy?" I snap. "Tonight is the first night she's been away from her son. She hasn't left the house in over a year, and tonight I had to take her through the middle of a fucking city," I point out, just in case he's forgotten.



“Do you think she suspected anything?” he lowers his voice, looking even more concerned.

“No,” I shake my head confidently, passing off his comment as ridiculous. “I had her wait in the car.”

I’d hated having to leave her outside alone, but I couldn’t take her in with me, and when I saw the state of the situation, I was grateful that I hadn’t. I trace back through all the things Riley might have found suspicious about what had happened earlier. Hopefully, she will be asleep by the time I join her in bed, so I will have plenty of time to come up with a reasonable explanation.

“You have any idea who’s behind this?” Ricardo asks, his eyes thinning into tiny slits.

“I have my suspicions,” I nod, not giving too much away as I pour myself a scotch and take a seat at my desk. “I just can’t seem to find a link, though. There were five girls auctioned tonight. Why was she the one they took?”

“Perhaps she was the one that appealed.” Ricardo shrugs his shoulders.

“Perhaps.” I pout before knocking back what’s left in my tumbler. “Or perhaps it was done for a reaction. To drive me out and expose me.” The rage begins to bubble hotter under my skin.

“We need to level up security around here. If this is part of some plot to get her back, we need to be one step ahead. No fuck ups,” I warn.

“I’ll pull some men together. Nothing’s gonna happen to her or the kid, boss. You got my word on it,” Ricardo promises before leaving me in peace.

As soon as the door is closed behind him, I open up my top drawer and take out the photos that Gioele has provided me with over the past few months.

Liam Hayes has changed. He now carries a blackness inside of him that I know firsthand can only come from grief. And grief can be a powerful weapon to a man who knows how to use it.

It can drive a man to greatness, but it can also tear him apart.

I don't care whether the kid and his club are looking to find Riley or seeking revenge because they assume her to be dead. I decide that with them, I need to play the long game.

No rash decisions, no mistakes. I need to take down the Souls to protect my family, and if that means killing Riley's brother in the process, then it will have to be done.

I wait a few more hours until I can be sure that Riley's asleep before I climb the stairs to go to bed myself. I check in on Gabriel on the way past his room and smile to myself when I see him sleeping on his front, with his hands above his head in the exact same way Riley likes to sleep. I tease one of his dark curls off his forehead before bending down to kiss him there.

*"Buonanotte mio mondo,"* I whisper before creeping back onto the corridor and making my way to Riley.

She's sleeping soundly when I step into our room. She's even wearing the shirt that I laid out on the bed, ready for our return, before we left.

I still love the sight of her in one of my plain white shirts. My plan had been to come home from a night at my new restaurant and spend the entire evening making love to her in

it. I want to get started straight away, making another child that we can fill with love and spoil.

But as I slowly undress and carefully slip under the covers beside her, I take care not to wake her. I need time to invent the lie that's going to shield her from the fact she lies beside a monster each night. And right now, with all the anger coiling through my veins, I'd be incapable of being gentle with her.

Tonight my need to feel the inside of her pussy isn't important, and as I slide my hand over the smooth tops of her thighs and feel her skin against mine, I remind myself of the positives of the evening.

Riley wants exactly what I want. She wants to expand our family. And for that, how can I not feel like the luckiest man on the planet?



I open my eyes and smile at the sight of my little boy snuggled up between us. Rafe's strong arm rests over the pair of us protectively, and I watch them both sleep. In those blissful few seconds, I forget everything that happened last night and allow myself to still believe that this life I've been gifted by Rafe is pure and good.

Then reality rolls over me like a black storm cloud, dulling the vision in front of me and making me feel like my air supply has been cut.

I quickly get out of bed and head for the bathroom, moving quietly, so I don't wake them. I need a little space and some time to think all of this through.

Is Rafe really capable of this? There might be a perfectly innocent explanation for it all. There has to be because I know Rafe. I've spent almost two years with him.

I love him.

Sure, the man can be controlling, and I've always known there was a dark side to him. But trading women? It can't be true.

While I wash my body, I try to come up with a way to find out more information. I wonder if Sylvia knows about Rafe's dealings, and if she does, how she feels about it. And the more I think about it, the more things start to make sense.

Was that the reason Rafe had been at Adriano's house the day he saved me? He didn't seem affected by the horrors down in the basement. Is this why he couldn't save those people?

Rafe couldn't end Adriano's wrongdoings because he was doing wrong himself.

Stepping out from behind the shower glass, I wrap myself in a towel and step over to the basin unit. I carry on with my usual morning routine, despite my life feeling so different. I brush my teeth, then unzip my cosmetic bag and moisturize before I take out my birth control pills.

"What are you doing?" Rafe's deep voice startles me, and the packet falls out of my hands into the basin. I take a deep breath, remembering to act normal as I stare into the mirror at his reflection.

"Morning." I attempt a convincing smile and will my hands to stop trembling.

"You showered without me." He tilts his head like he's displeased, his almost black eyes analyzing me suspiciously.

"I didn't want to wake either of you in case you had a rough night. I must have been so tired last night I didn't even hear Gabriel wake up."

"He woke up around five, so I fetched him in with us," Rafe explains, moving closer and looking dangerously handsome in just his boxers. His hair is rough and unruly from sleep, and desire is etched all over his face.

My whole body freezes when his hands hold my hips, and he peers over my shoulder.

“What are these?” He reaches into the basin and retrieves my pills, holding them up between two fingers in front of my face.

“You know what they are. It’s my birth control.” I laugh nervously.

“And what are you doing taking them?” His lips touch my neck, sending a shiver of fear down my spine and a spark of thrill to my center.

“I thought we made a decision last night,” he whispers against my ear while his other hand slides under my towel, and a finger teases between my pussy lips.

“I... I didn’t know we were gonna get started straight away.” I try so hard not to enjoy his touch. I may not know who Raphael Verretti is anymore, but I do know what his hands can do to me. The effect his mouth has on my skin, and how good it feels to have him inside me.

“I want to get started right now.” Releasing the packet of pills back into the basin, he makes a ponytail out of my hair and holds it in his fist. His tight grip forces me forward, so my body presses into the surface in front of me. I watch him bite his bottom lip and roll his hips against my ass in our reflection.

“Rafe, what about Gabriel? He might wake—” The finger he has pressed between my legs finds the perfect spot, and I feel my eyes roll in my head.

“I’ll make it quick,” he promises, taking the pressure away from my clit and focusing his attention between us, pulling down the front of his boxers and making sure his thick, heavy cock is the next thing to slide between my already-soaked slit.

I should tell him to stop. Right now, I don't even know if I like the man who's looking back at me through the mirror. But it feels too good, and I want him enough to try to pretend that last night didn't happen.

The tip of his cock presses against my entrance. I hear myself moan as he fills me up and eases all the hurt that's built up inside me. The power in the grip he has on my hair intensifies each time he pushes into me.

I feel the heat in his eyes scorch me through our reflection as he watches me get off on his cock, and his hard, deep thrusts bring me to orgasm in no time at all. Tears start to fill my eyes when I think of what I heard last night. Of the women, like me, who Rafe might have hurt. And I wonder to myself how I can still find the man so attractive. How is my body still allowing him to command it with pleasure?

"Riley." His voice is strained when he speaks my name. His eyes focused and his jaw tense, the way it always is when he's about to come.

"Yes," I whisper softly through my tears.

"You're mine," he growls, tugging at the ponytail in his hand and wrenching my head so far back that he's able to reach over it and kiss my lips. Then with his other hand shifting up my body and gripping at my stretched-out throat, he growls into my mouth as he offloads inside me.

His warm cum fills me, and my body reacts by throbbing around him and clutching him inside me tighter. I feel like I could burst out of my skin when I give up another orgasm to him.

We're too consumed, our bodies entwined, and all my rational thoughts are suppressed by pleasure as his grip leaves

white imprints on my still-damp skin.

Rafe sighs with relief when his head tucks into my neck, and he catches his breath. And when he eventually looks up and sees me through the mirror, his satisfied expression instantly flips to concern.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks, confused. Rafe knows my limits. He knows I like it when he’s rough with me, and there have been much rougher times than this.

“No.” I fake another smile and shake my head.

“Maybe next time?” He grins me a boyish grin and winks. It’s enough to confirm that he doesn’t suspect anything, and I’m grateful for that, at least. I need Rafe to be oblivious while I figure out what I’m going to do about this.

He kisses my neck one more time before taking my pill packet from the basin in his hand. “I’ll call Viktor and tell him we won’t be needing these for a while.” He clasps my jaw and twists my head so he can kiss my lips before he pulls out of me. Then I watch him toss my pills into the trash before he steps into the shower.

I fight against the urge to scramble on my knees and retrieve them, managing to act normal as I leave Rafe to his shower and move to the bedroom to get dressed. Gabriel stirs when I start to blow dry my hair, and Rafe is already walking out of the bathroom to tend to him before I have the chance to go to him myself. I watch with a heartbroken smile as Rafe blows raspberries into our little boy’s tummy and makes him giggle hysterically.

A huge part of me just wants to forget everything that I saw and heard last night. Given time, I’m sure I could wipe it



from my memory. The same way I have the horrors that were being kept in Adriano's basement with me.

I've been so convinced that this is happiness that Rafe has been sheltering me from the outside world because he wanted to protect me from it. I must have lost my grip on reality somewhere along this journey he's taken me on.

I stare at the man who forced me to fall in love with him. There's a smile Raphael reserves especially for our son. It's pure adoration and the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Looking at it now and watching him be so loving with our son, it's impossible to believe that he's capable of such hideous things.

"What's on your mind?" Rafe lifts his head up from Gabriel's tummy to ask me.

"Nothing." I smile back, placing down the hairdryer I'm using before moving to join them. Gabriel climbs up my body and wraps his arms around my neck, and I hold him close, kissing the dark curls on the top of his head and willing myself not to cry.

Rafe is serious now, his arm stretching around my shoulders and tucking me in close to his chest.

"Last night scared you, didn't it?" he says, pulling us all back to rest against the headboard. I don't answer him, just keeping my lips pressed against Gabriel's head. "You should know by now, Riley. I would never let anything happen to you. I—"

"What was that place?" I interrupt, turning my head to face him so I can watch his reaction.

"It's not important, nothing for you to worry about," he answers simply, his lips touching my temple.

“But you *were* worried,” I point out, watching all the confidence drop from his face.

“It’s a nice day. You and Gabriel should enjoy the garden together. I’ll be busy in my office for most of the morning, but we could have lunch together by the lake.” There’s a change to his tone, one that dares me to push him on the subject, and knowing that I need to remain on his good side, I yield to it.

“That sounds perfect.” I smile up at him, holding my boy a little tighter. I hate to even think about having to run from Rafe — I know the task would be almost impossible. But if it comes to it, for the sake of my son, the least I’ll do is try.



“It’s them, isn’t it? The Souls.” I cut straight to the point when a tired-looking Gioele steps inside my office.

“It is,” Gioele agrees, opening up his briefcase onto my desk and taking out some more photos. “These men bear the closest resemblance to the man whose ID was used to access the auction.”

I study the photos hard. I’ve seen the twins before in the many pictures Gioele has provided me with over the last year.

“Do you know why?” I ask, not liking the way Gioele shifts in his chair before he answers.

“We found the source of the information leak,” he informs me.

“It was one of the hostesses. It appears she was taking a bribe from the club’s president. Her boyfriend is serving a sentence in El Paso, and she was buying him protection on the inside.”

“And where is the girl now?” To think a member of my staff would betray me makes me savage. I take care when

employing, and pay well enough for this shit not to be a fucking issue.

“She’s being held, but it seems she fears the Souls too much to talk.”

“Then you make sure that she fears us more.” I slam my fist onto my desk.

“Raphael, the girl, is Luca’s sister.” Gioele clears his throat, acting as if that makes a fucking difference. A traitor is a fucking traitor.

“Then I will speak to Luca too.” I take my phone from my pocket and fire a text to Ricardo, asking him to come to see me.

“I understand you must be angry, Raphael, and rest assured we will get to the bottom of this.”

“I need to know if they were coming for her,” I snap, feeling myself starting to lose control. I’ve been keeping everything together, but now I know my suspicions were correct, I can feel them closing in on me. I need to protect what’s mine. “These Souls seem to make a habit of destruction.”

Gioele nods, agreeing but not looking at all that confident.

When Ricardo knocks on the door, I call out for him to enter.

“Boss,” he tips his chin at me before acknowledging Gioele.

“I need you to go with Gioele. We have the person who leaked the information about the auction, and I need you to make her talk. Then you must make her pay.” I give him my orders, and Ricardo frowns back at me like I’m crazy.

“Her?” He stares between me and an unsure-looking Gioele in confusion.

“Yes, Luca’s sister, she’s been feeding the Souls information to maintain her boyfriend’s protection in prison.”

“Fuck, Rafe. Luca is a friend.” Ricardo’s reluctance to comply burns my blood even hotter, and I stand up from my chair and slam my fists on my desk for a second time, making Gioele jump out of his wrinkly skin. “I don’t give a fuck who she is! She betrayed me, and so she must pay. Luca too.”

“Rafe, maybe you should think this through. There could be a mistake, a reason. Desperate people do desperate things.”

“Are you to be the next member of my staff that lets me down?” I ask him sharply, ignoring the hurt I see on his face. Ricardo is much more like family to me than staff. He’s proven that more than once.

“No, sir,” he speaks, with a sour look on his face.

“Then you best prepare yourself to leave. I’ll deal with Luca myself.”

Gioele nods his head solemnly before he sees himself out while Ricardo hangs back, and when the door closes— and we’re alone— he looks at me desperately.

“Rafe, I’ve had your back for eighteen years. I’ve never questioned a single decision you’ve made. But please think about this. I’ve never hurt a woman before. Do you really want to go down this road?” Ricardo proves that he doesn’t know me as well as I thought he did.

“I gave the girl a job— a respectable one— because her brother had proved himself to me. She chose to give her loyalty to the Souls.”

“Luca and Marcella’s father was a good friend to yours. I’m not denying what the girl did was stupid, but—”

“What the girl did could have cost me my family,” I seethe back at him, and the fucker’s lucky there’s nothing in arm’s reach for me to throw at him.

“She was just trying to protect someone she loves,” he adds weakly.

“Ricardo, I pay you to deal with my inconveniences, not to become one. Now fuck off and deal with them or add your ass to my shit list.”

“Boss, I’m just asking you to think about this before you do something you regret,” he pleads with me one final time, and I wonder if he actually thinks this is a bad idea or if he fears hurting a woman.

“I’ve misjudged you, Ricardo.” I sit back in my chair and let my index finger slide under my bottom lip. “I thought you had grown to care for Riley and that you were prepared to protect my son against any threat.”

“No misjudgment, Raphael. I would protect either one of them with my life.”

I nod calmly as I absorb what he’s saying. I’ve had no reason to disbelieve him. I see the way he protects them, and I know that he cares for them both. It was harsh of me to throw that into question. But that doesn’t make the slightest difference to the outcome for Marcella.

She had the balls to fuck with me. She will pay the price of her betrayal the same way any man would.

“Then you will have no problem killing the person who put them in jeopardy.” I finish the conversation by standing up from my desk and leaving my own office.

I have the sudden urge to be with Riley. I can deal with Luca later. But first, his sister can wish she'd let her boyfriend's ass get raped in county.

I need to step out of the life I hide from Riley and into the one I've created for her. And I need to hurry the fuck up and shut it all down so I can take her and my son as far away from the Dirty Souls as I can get them.



“I need to travel to Chicago today.” Rafe doesn’t look up from his task of feeding Gabriel his breakfast. My little boy sits so contently on his daddy’s knee while he supplies him his favorite, Nanny Sylvia’s French toast.

I smile in response, but on the inside, I feel like I’m drowning. It’s difficult living in a perfect world when it suddenly doesn’t seem so perfect anymore.

“You’ve been quiet these past few days. Are you coming down with something?” he asks, his eyes lifting to study me suspiciously across the table.

“I’m just tired.” I shrug him off, sipping my coffee and trying to ignore the nerves building in my stomach. If Rafe’s out of the house today, I’ll have the opportunity to do some digging.

I’m running out of time. When I went to retrieve my pills from the trash the other day, they had vanished. Raphael is a control freak. The fact he’s taken them proves that he’s unconvinced of my commitment to our agreement. It also means that I’m unprotected, and Rafe’s been proving ever



since that morning just how committed he is to us making another child.

“I’ve arranged for Sophia to visit. Sylvia can take care of Gabriel,” he informs me, poking out his tongue at our son as he speaks.

“What will you be doing in Chicago?” I ask, trying my best to sound casual and not like I’m trying to catch him in a lie.

“Just business, nothing that would interest you.”

“Try me.” I attempt to sound cute, giving up trying to eat what’s in front of me. I’ve struggled with meals for days now. There’s nothing quite like finding out the man you’ve fallen in love with exploits women to ruin your appetite.

Raphael stands up from the table and brings Gabriel to me, placing him in my lap. He kisses his cheek and ruffles his hair before he redirects his lips to the top of my head.

“You know I like to keep my business and my home life separate, Riley... Sophia will be here at noon, and I will be back in time for dinner. Get some rest. I intend to keep you up for most of the night.” I sense a threat in his tone, and I wonder if my paranoia has invented it. The worst thing about his promise is the fact that I know I will enjoy what he has planned for me.

Raphael has full control over my body. He knows how to pleasure it, and despite all my suspicions, I still crave him like I’m a junkie, and he’s my fix.

When he leaves the room, I feel the air lift, and all of a sudden, it’s easier to breathe. Gabriel looks up at me and smiles. He still has berry juice around his mouth, so I clean him up with a napkin before I cuddle him close to my chest. I

feel guilty whenever I look at him these days. He's an innocent little child. He never asked to be born into this world. He loves his daddy unconditionally, and I know whatever decision I make will affect him one way or another.

The weight of that pressure crushes me.

Rafe says goodbye to us half an hour later, and Sylvia wastes no time fussing around Gabriel, insisting that she take him into the garden to look for bugs. I wait until I hear her chatter off through the patio doors with him excitedly before doing a quick scan around me for any signs of Ricardo, then heading into Rafe's office.

I've been inside Rafe's office lots of times before, but never alone. And suddenly, I have no idea what I'm actually looking for. I'm surprised that his laptop is still here since he left for business, but I figure it's a good place to start. When I lift up the top and see the selfie of the three of us as his screensaver, guilt drops into the pit of my stomach like a heavy brick. We all look so happy, and it makes me want to shut the laptop down and never know the answers to all my questions. But for the sake of my own sanity, I know I can't.

The laptop is password protected, so I try all the obvious ones first. Gabriel, Gabriel's date of birth, my name. Nothing seems to be working. And not wanting to waste precious time, I try his desk drawers while I think up some other possible password ideas. The top drawer is locked, but the ones below open freely, and I quickly flick through all the paperwork that's neatly filed away.

There are five brown files, and I pull out the one that's labeled Chicago, because I know that's where Raphael has gone today. The first page inside has a heading of today's date, and below it is a list. One that makes my blood turn cold.

*Lot A - brunette, green eyes - 23 - broken - starting bid  
200,000*

My fingers tremble, and my eyes fill with tears as I read on.

*Lot B - brunette, brown eyes - 19- virgin - starting bid 400,000*

There are more. Five, to be precise, and I shut the file after seeing far more than I need to.

I can't stop my hands from shaking when I try to place them back. There is no more hope of me being wrong. The evidence is black and white, and I feel my heart bleeding from it.

I know what I need to do. I've been thinking rationally for a few days now and Rafe not being here is the best opportunity I'm going to have to run. I just wish I wasn't so broken inside. I feel too weak to stand on my feet right now, let alone try to break out of this place.

Rafe has guards everywhere, and I know Ricardo won't be too far away. But I have to try. I can deal with my emotions later when me and Gabriel are free from this place.

I close the drawer and move toward the door, being careful as I open it in case there's someone lurking in the hall.

I stay still when I hear voices.

"I know he called you, but I'm telling you I don't want you here," Ricardo speaks harshly to his sister.

"You're being crazy. Rafe says Riley's under the weather and needs cheering up, and the girl needs her infills done. It's been three weeks."

"Sophia, this isn't a fucking joke. Raphael is losing his shit. He's dangerous to be around right now. If you knew the

stuff I've had to do just lately, you wouldn't question me. Just get back in your car and drive back home."

"Stuff, what stuff? Is this why you weren't at dinner on Sunday? Mama was pissed as hell, you know—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Soph, just fucking listen to what I'm saying," Ricardo interrupts her, his voice becoming more and more frustrated.

"Rafe will be pissed at me if I let him down," Sophia says, and I imagine her crossing her arms over her chest in defiance.

"I'll make up an excuse, say you were sick. He wouldn't want you here if he thought you risked Riley and Gabe getting sick too." Ricardo has referred to Gabriel as Gabe since he was born. The two of them have become so close Rafe has even asked him to be his godfather. Not that there has been a christening, but that's a story for another time.

"Sophia, get the fuck out of here!" Ricardo orders her one last time, and I sigh with disappointment as I hear her heels click against the wood floor, moving further and further away.

I don't know what I was expecting from her visit. Would I have told her what I had found out? Asked her for help even though I knew it would endanger her?

Ricardo is right through. She is better off leaving this place. Now I have to ensure that I can do the same.

Checking the coast is clear, I slide into the hall and rush up the stairs to my room. I know there's a small suitcase under the bed that Rafe uses when he spends a night away, but I wonder how I'm going to carry that with Gabriel. Maybe I could take a car to give me a head start. I could drive into town and hop on a bus to anywhere that's far away.

I quickly change into something more practical. A pair of yoga pants and a blouse. Then I pile a sweater over the top, despite the heat. The less I have to carry for myself, the more I can pack for Gabriel.

Taking the suitcase, I move toward Gabriel's room, and more tears form in my eyes when I recall the day Rafe showed me in here for the first time. Our future had been so bright back then, and it's scary to think that the only thing that's changed since then is the fact that now I know who he really is.

Leaving the case open on the changing unit, I start to collect Gabriel some clothes. I pack some diapers, and his favorite snuggly, too.

“What are you doing?” The voice that comes from behind me makes the breath catch in my throat, and when I slowly turn around and see Ricardo standing in the door frame, I close my eyes and realize all my hopes of leaving have been crushed.

“I have to leave,” I confess, praying that he might take pity on me. I heard what he just said to his sister. He knows Rafe is dangerous. And I'm relying on the fact Ricardo loves Gabriel. There's a part of me that believes he might love me too, in a bratty younger sister kinda way.

“I know what Rafe does, how he uses women and sells them.” The words taste like acid in my mouth as I set them free.

“I can't let you leave.” Ricardo's eyes drop to the floor, suggesting he's ashamed of being a part of all this.

“Please, Ricardo, think of Gab—”

“I meant, I can’t let you leave like this,” he interrupts, stepping toward me and placing his huge bear-like hand over mine. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes before he speaks again.

“You wouldn’t make it past the front gate, and if by some miracle you did, where would you run to, Riley? You have no money. Nowhere to go. And Raphael is relentless. He’d find you, and then... Well, I don’t know what he’d do anymore.” There’s so much hurt in Ricardo’s voice. For the first time, the huge brute seems fragile.

“I’ll help you, *Briga*, but we have to bide our time. He can’t suspect, and you’re gonna have to do a better job of keeping it together until I can work something out.”

“You’ll help me?” I check, both shocked and relieved at the same time, when Ricardo nods his head. I also sense the pain this betrayal to Raphael is causing him, but I can’t worry about that.

“Ricardo, I wish I had time. But Rafe wants to have another child, and you know how he is about getting what he wants. He took my birth control from me.”

Ricardo scrubs his hand over his face, breathing in a long sigh before he speaks again.

“I can help you with that. Just tell me what you need. My brother’s wife is a pharmacist.”

Every word he speaks echoes grief.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, my gratitude is so overwhelming that I could hug him and never let go, but I have to question what has made him turn against his friend.

“Because I vowed to protect you from any threat the day he brought you here, and then I vowed to protect your son too.

I always stick by my word.”

“You think he’d hurt me?” I ask, fearing the answer to his question.

“I think he’d do anything to keep you,” Ricardo answers sadly. “Write down what you need, and this will be the last we speak of it. I’ll make sure you get your birth control, and I’ll figure out something for when I get you out of here.

“My brother. Find my brother. He can protect us. I know he will.”

Something about the way Ricardo looks back at me makes me nervous.

“Just focus on keeping the boss happy, *Briga*. He can’t suspect anything, or we will both have no hope.” He takes the suitcase from my hands and empties Gabriel’s stuff from it before leaving the room with it.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I’m alone. I have no idea how long Ricardo’s plan will take to come together or if he’s even got a plan that will work. But I do have an ally, and I have to trust in him.

Mine and my son’s future rely on it.



I burst through the doors of my home, desperate to see my family. It's only been a few hours since I fucked Riley in the shower this morning, but the need to be inside her again has taunted me the whole journey home. It's been a month since we started trying again, a month too long for a man as impatient as me. I've been working hard to close everything down these past few weeks. It's meant I've had to be away from home a lot more than I wanted to be. I haven't been giving her, or my son, the attention they deserve. But I keep reminding myself that it will all be worth it.

"Raphael?" Sylvia looks nervous when she greets me at the door, and her tiny legs have to almost run to keep up with me as I march toward the stairs.

"Where's Riley?" I ask. I'm not in the mood for small talk. I'm in the mood for fucking. She can talk to me about which of my guards pissed her off this week when I've shot my load inside my girl, and I've seen my son.

"It's um... well..."

"Spit it out, woman," I snap. I seem to have zero patience these days for anyone other than Riley and my son. I put it



down to the amount of pressure on my shoulders, but it's not an excuse for being rude to Sylvia.

"It's your nephew. He's in your office," Sylvia informs me timidly. She knows I've never been very fond of Danato. The boy may only be sixteen, but he's the spawn of his father for sure.

"What does he want?" I ask, immediately changing my direction and heading toward my office door. I don't know why I bothered to ask. Danato never had a relationship with his father. When he's in trouble or needs money, he always comes to me. I guess that's what he's here for today.

"I don't know what he wants. Ricardo dealt with him. He told him to wait in there."

"And where is Ricardo now?" I ask.

"With him, of course." Sylvia sniggers. She knows how much I dislike my nephew. I don't trust him in my home, and I certainly don't trust him around my family.

"Go to Riley, tell her I'm home and to wait for me in our room." I feel my cock start to stiffen just at the thought of seeing her again.

Sylvia gives me a knowing nod before she heads up the stairs on her task, and I pull in a deep, calming breath before I go and face my nephew.

Danato sits in the chair opposite my desk, tossing and catching the paperweight that used to belong to my mother in his hand. Ricardo stands across the room from him, his eyes narrow as they drill into his, warning him to make just one wrong move.

"Ricardo, we have a new member of staff. Stefano traveled back from Sanina with me. He will be taking Luca's place.

Please show him around and make him aware of my expectations.” I dismiss him by gesturing my head toward the door, and Ricardo moves out, not releasing Danato from his stare until he’s left the room.

“Uncle Rafe.” Danato over pronounces the *f* sound in my name, just like his father used to.

“How much do you need?” I ask, stepping around my desk to take out my checkbook.

“I don’t want handouts anymore. I want to earn.” The boy smiles at me wickedly.

“You’re too young. Maybe when you grow some hair on your balls, I could find you a position in one of my offices.”

Danato laughs at me as if he’s the mother fucker in control here.

“I don’t want a job in one of your laundering businesses,” he chuckles. “I want to get my hands dirty. I want to train whores, and learn the family business the way Grandpa taught you.”

Now I’m the one who’s laughing.

“You have to be a man to train a woman,” I point out, pouring myself a whiskey from my decanter without offering one to him.

Danato looks a little embarrassed, but he quickly recovers.

“You’re watching the Souls, aren’t you?” he mentions casually, quickly earning my attention.

“How would you know that?”

“Because I know they stole from you and that Gioele has men watching them.” He shrugs, placing down the

paperweight on my desk where he took it from.

“You know too much.” I take a sip of my drink, watching him over the rim of the glass.

“Did you know they are moving in on Pueblo, taking the town? It’s only a matter of time before they run it. They will be in charge of what stock comes in and out of it.” He talks as if that’s a problem. Pueblo means nothing to me. I used to run an auction from there, and I have a small training place on the outskirts, but that will soon be shut down.

“The Souls can take Pueblo.” I shrug, acting unbothered.

“Just not her, right?” Danato’s eyes fall to the picture I keep of Riley on my desk. The one I caught of her with my phone the day Gabriel took his first steps. She looked so beautiful that I’d picked a rose and tucked it behind her ear.

“Nobody takes her,” I tell him sternly.

“I just came here to offer my services. I spend a lot of time in Pueblo. I could keep my eye on the place for you. You can’t trust anyone like you can family, right?” There’s something in his voice that suggests there’s more behind his words. “The Souls nearly have full control. It’s getting harder and harder to score there these days. It will be as clean as Manitou Springs by the end of the month.”

“I don’t deal in narcotics,” I remind him.

“No, you deal women, and these Soul brothers seem to want to fuck that up for you,” he shoots back.

“And you want to work for me?” I check, an idea suddenly coming to me.

“You’re my uncle. I’ve always wanted us to be close. I know of the bond you shared with my father. You should know

it didn't die with him." The knowledge in his tone slithers down my spine like ice. Adriano surely wouldn't have shared a secret as dangerous as ours with him, he's just a boy, and the pair of them never even spoke.

"I run my business a little differently these days," I start, deciding to keep Danato closer than I intended until I know how much damage he could do. "I actually have a client in Pueblo. Do you know Kenny Gutierrez?"

"Kenny, yeah, I know him. He runs a couple of crack houses. The Souls have hit his business hard."

"I have four girls that need to be delivered to him. You can arrange the exchange with him in Pueblo. I'll let you take control of this one and see how we go from there."

"Moving anything in Pueblo at the moment is sure to get the Souls' attention," Danato warns.

"Oh, I'm counting on it," I tell him, unlocking my top drawer and taking out one of the pictures I have of Liam Hayes.

"When you get that attention, I want you to make sure you kill this one." I slide the photo across the desk at him and watch him study it hard. "I believe they call him Storm. He's a Prospect. He will be shadowing them because he's learning. And I want you to put a Verretti bullet right between his eyes."

"He isn't the one who killed my father." The boy proves he knows a lot more than I gave him credit for on the details of his father's death.

"No. Brax Marshall is the man who killed your father. And I am the man who will kill him." I take out another photograph, one of the pretty blonde girl who belongs to him. Unfortunately for her, that's made her my primary target.

“I thought you’d be buying the man a drink instead of wanting him dead,” Danato laughs. He knows my relationship with Adriano was rocky at best.

“He took the privilege from me,” I explain, and anyone who fucks with a Verretti should be made an example of. Standing up from my desk, I make my way toward the door.

“I’ll send you all the details you will need regarding Kenny. In the future, I would appreciate it if you didn’t visit unannounced.” I open the door and hold it open for him to leave.

“And if I shoot this fucker, what will I get?” Danato asks as he passes me.

“More respect from me than you deserve,” I tell him with a bitter smile before gesturing for him to exit through the front door.

“What did that asswipe want?” Ricardo appears from around the corner.

“Family loyalty,” I snigger.

“How’s my girl been?” I ask, appreciating how closely Ricardo watches over my family when I’m not around.

“She’s been good— she seems much happier,” he assures me.

“Still off her food?” I check. I have a strong suspicion Riley’s pregnant again. She’s not eating, and that’s how she was at the start of her last pregnancy. She’s also progressively tired and moody these days.

“Yeah, boss, but she’s making the effort,” he tells me.

“You should take the night off,” I tell him, and he nods back at me gratefully. When he goes to walk away, I’m

reminded of something Gioele told me this morning that's been weighing on my mind.

"Are your family having money problems, Ricardo?" he suddenly stops in his tracks and looks back at me.

"No," he shakes his head.

"You know you would only have to ask if they were," I tell him.

"What makes you think that?" he asks, almost sounding defensive.

"Gioele told me you sold some shares a few days ago. It just seemed a little odd. You usually ask my advice on your investments."

"Good to know Gioele hasn't lost his touch," Ricardo sniggers, trying to change the subject. He's a proud man and I've probably shamed him enough by asking.

"I pay Gioele to know everything," I remind him.

"Gioele serves you well," he points out.

"As do you, my friend. Which is why, if you needed anything, I'd expect you to ask me."

"Gotcha, boss." He tips his chin at me before walking away. I can sense he's not telling me something, but I don't have the time nor the patience to dwell on it. I need to find my girl and ensure that if she's not already knocked up. She will be by the end of the day.



“Morning.” When I roll over, Rafe is watching over me. He licks his lips as his hand moves beneath the covers, and his finger traces the seam of my panties.

“Good morning.” I take in a deep breath as his finger slips lower, and pleasure seeps through my lace.

“I should check Gabriel.” I go to move, but he’s too fast and pins me to the bed.

“I already checked. He’s downstairs making pancakes with Nanny Sylvia. Which means I get you all to myself.”

Rafe seems tenser than usual. I know the fact I’m not pregnant yet is probably getting to him. Thankfully, Ricardo came through for me and managed to get me the pills to prevent that.

“Riley.” Rafe says my name in a whisper as he climbs on top of me, his hard cock brushing between my legs and setting my pulse racing.

“You know I’d never let you leave me.” He hooks my panties to the side and pushes inside me, and I hear myself moan at the sensation, wondering how it can feel so good.

“Yes,” I breathe, my insides clenching as I feel him fill me, and I hate myself for finding this pleasurable.

“No one, not even the devil himself, could take you from me. Especially not while there’s a chance you have my child growing inside you.” His thrusts become harder, and when I look up at him looming over me, I notice a trace of malice in his eyes.

“I don’t want to leave you, Raphael,” I assure him. The words I speak have a ring of truth about them. I don’t *want* to leave him. I *have* to leave him because of all he’s done and all the people he’s hurt. He’s not the man I thought he was, but that doesn’t mean a part of me doesn’t still love him.

“I think you lie to me.” He narrows his eyes like he’s in pain. All the heat in my body suddenly turns cold, and his hand fists my hair so tight to the pillow that I feel it tugging at my scalp.

“You talk in your sleep, *Briga*,” he tells me, biting at his bottom lip like he’s trying to regain control. “You called for him last night, for your brother.” His eyes scorch into mine.

“I must have been dreaming.” I make a nervous laugh, hoping he’ll buy it, and cursing myself inside for being so careless.

“I’d kill him, you know. If your brother came for you, it would be the end of his life. Do you understand that, Riley?”

I nod slowly against his restraint as he continues to fuck me painfully slowly.

“Nothing will ever keep me from you.” His words are a threat, one that makes leaving this place seem impossible. He leans his head forward, and his lips brush my ear.

“You’re mine, Riley Hayes, until death.”



His whisper travels through me, hitting my core at the same time as he pushes deep inside me, and it triggers an orgasm that attacks my body like tiny shards of glass.

I cling on to his shoulders as I ride out my pleasure against his firm body, and I feel him release too. His cum spills inside me as he groans his satisfaction into my hair and bites down hard on the pillow beneath it.

I wait a while for him to calm, my heart beating so fast he must feel my fear rattling at his chest. And when he eventually pulls back and looks at me, the hurt and frustration I see make it almost impossible to stop myself from crying.

I know he's not a good man. I know he's dangerous. But I've never doubted how much he loves me. How could I when I feel it tugging at my soul and crushing me from the inside out? He loves our son too, and despite all the bad that Raphael Verretti has done in the world, I don't feel good about having to be the one to pull his world from under him.

"Lay there for a while. I'll have Sylvia bring you up some breakfast." He gives me a sad smile as he shifts off the bed. And I wonder if maybe he feels the distance growing between us. Could he already know he's lost me, and that's why he's so mad?

I do as he says, turning on my side and staring at the wall. I don't know how long I wait for Sylvia, but when she doesn't come, I decide to get myself up and take a shower.

Moving into the bathroom, I check the coast is clear before I open the cupboard that's built into the sink unit and feel in between the pipe work for the sachet of pills that Ricardo keeps me supplied with. Pulling them free, I check the back of the packet for today's day and pop the pill out, placing it on my tongue.

“I didn’t know what you fancied, so I had...”

I swallow quickly and hide the pill packet behind my back when Rafe appears at the bathroom door, his eyes wide and fury all over his expression. He’s dressed now, too, looking sharp as hell in a navy suit and a crisp white shirt.

“Riley, what the fuck did you just take?” he asks rigidly, striding toward me and gripping at my throat. He reaches behind me to pry the pill packet from my trembling hand.

“Birth control.” He looks down at the packet. “You’re taking fucking birth control?” he yells at my face, his fingertips digging into my skin and making me feel like I’m going to choke.

“I...I...” I can’t give him an explanation, not without telling him everything I know.

“Who gave you these?” he asks. Crushing them in his fist and throwing them onto the floor. “Who?” he yells so loud it makes my body leap from my skin. And for the first time in as long as I can remember, I’m scared, petrified of what he might do to me.

His free hand grips tight at my hair, and I suck in a huge gulp of air when he releases my throat.

“Who gave you the fucking pills, Riley?” he shouts again, with all the control missing from his voice. I don’t answer him. I won’t do that to Ricardo, not after he’s shown me so much kindness.

“You tell me,” Rafe warns, shocking the breath out of me when two of his fingers force their way between my lips and ram into the back of my throat. He keeps them inside me until I wretch around them. When he pulls them away, I feel my

stomach rise into my throat, and he leans me forward so I can vomit all over the bathroom tiles.

“Riley, tell me right now who gave you the fucking pills.” His voice is shaken now, much more like he’s hurt, and I choke up more bile and shake my head at him. My eyes water when I feel his fingers press into the back of my throat again, forcing me to be sick for a second time.

“One more time, Riley, who gave them to you?”

“I did.” I hear so much sadness in the deep voice that comes from the bedroom, and when I look up from the floor and see Ricardo standing at the door, I fall onto my knees and sob.

“You?” Rafe laughs spitefully at him. “You?”

His eyes pull from Ricardo back to me, and for a few short seconds, he looks devastated.

Everything feels like it’s happening in slow motion as my world tips on its axis. Rafe’s hurt quickly switches to anger, and he reaches his arm behind him, his hand sliding beneath his suit jacket and pulling out something black and metal. His nostrils flare as he points what I realize is a gun straight at Ricardo, and without a single moment of hesitation, he stares right at me as he pulls the trigger. His dark eyes absorb my reaction as he offloads round after round into Ricardo’s skull without a blink or a single glimpse of remorse.

I don’t hear the shots. All I hear is Ricardo’s heavy body falling to the floor and the sound of my screams when I realize that Rafe just ended his life. He killed Ricardo, his best friend, and he killed him because of me.

Rafe pushes one hand through his hair while the other places his gun back into the holster he’s wearing under his

suit, and I watch in pure horror as he pulls in a long breath and manages to calm himself.

“How long?” he steps closer, looking down his nose at me. I see that pain back in his eyes again now, raw agony as it sinks in that I’ve betrayed him.

“Since I found out what kind of man you are,” I tell him bravely. There can be no more secrets between us now. Not after he just shot a man’s brains out of his skull in front of me.

“You lied to me.” He speaks so weakly like he can barely believe his own words, and I hate that I feel guilty for the tears forming in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper back, equally drained. I move my gaze behind him to where Ricardo lies. His eyes are still open, and a river of his blood spreads further and further across the floor. Almost touching the back of Raphael’s shoes now.

“But you lied to me too.” I look up at Rafe again, refusing to hide my tears from him. It’s him who has broken us, not me.

“I never lied to you, Riley. I protected you from the truth. There’s a difference.” His voice remains soft as he turns his back on me, walking calmly past Ricardo’s dead body and out of the room.

I scramble across the floor to Ricardo, not caring about the blood that stains my skin and seeps through my fingers as I climb over his body and press my cheek against his chest. I know how hopeless it is, but want to feel his heartbeat.

Rafe killed him without any warning and without mercy. The pain in my heart spills out through my tears as I hold on to the man who not only was my protector but also proved to be my friend. And as the hollowness inside me starts to grow

deeper, I fear what will become of me now he's not here to protect me anymore.



She hates me.

It's written all over her face. It's merged with her fear, and it torments me to the point of destruction.

I've left her alone. I've given her time, but it won't change. She. Hates. Me.

According to Nico, he had to drag her off Ricardo's cold, dead body before him and the other two guards could start cleaning up the mess I'd made of my bathroom.

He tells me Riley lay on the bed in silence and watched them bag him up and carry him away. That she stared blankly as his blood was bleached off the tiles and scrubbed from the walls.

I'm almost surprised when she steps into the dining room willingly. I sent a message up to Sylvia, who isn't talking to me either, requesting for Riley to join me for dinner, and I'm glad she's decided to comply.

She's even come in the attire I told her to wear. The plain white shirt that only just covers her delicate white lace panties. Seeing her like this reminds me of the time I fell in love with

her. I was gullible back then. I actually believed Riley didn't need to be tamed. That she might be capable of loving me despite all my sins. It turns out I was wrong, and her betrayal hurts me more than any physical pain I've ever endured.

What's worse is that I never thought to protect myself from it because I never saw it coming.

She steps closer to me, her ice-blue eyes raw from tears and refusing to look into mine. I look past her and nod to Stefano. He's new around here, and I notice the way he looks at her. His eyes linger a little too longingly at Riley's milky white thighs, and the way he wets his bottom lip when she takes a seat, and her shirt lifts higher over them, it forces me to stare him a warning.

"Where is Gabriel?" Riley breaks the silence first, and the tremble in her voice gets my dick hard. I wonder if it gets Stefano off, too, because he's brave enough to still be fucking looking.

"Leave us," I call across to him, waiting until he's shut the door behind him before I address Riley's question.

"He is with Sylvia. She is reading him a bedtime story," I explain, motioning my hand at the food in front of her, encouraging her to eat.

"I want to see him." She's trying to sound brave and failing. Her skin is white, proving she's still traumatized by what she saw this morning.

"You're not stable enough to be around him at the moment," I point out, reaching for my wine glass.

"Stable. I'm not stable? Rafe, you just killed someone. Your friend."

“I executed a traitor. Believe me, Riley, I am perfectly stable.” Placing down my glass, I hold out a steady hand flat in front of me to prove it. “You, on the other hand, are a wreck, and children pick up on those things. I won’t have you upset my son.”

Riley’s eyes widen as she stares down at her lap.

“Eat,” I order.

“I’m not hungry.” Her voice is so quiet that I hardly hear her, but I still have to tense my fist to hold in my reaction. I’m not in the mindset for Riley’s games. She shouldn’t test me when I’m like this.

“I won’t apologize for what I did to Ricardo. The man betrayed me.” I clear that up straight away for her. If she’s expecting remorse out of me, she’s heading for disappointment. Ricardo must have known what the repercussions of his actions would be. He’s worked by my side for eighteen years.

The defiant little bitch doesn’t respond. She’s still refusing to make eye contact with me too. Riley will learn that she can’t deny me a damn thing. She still belongs to me, even if she despises me.

“I want to know what you know, Riley.” I lean forward, expecting her to flinch away from me, but she doesn’t. Instead, she gives me what I’ve been desiring since she came into the room, and I feel the cold sting of her pupils right in the center of my chest.

“I know how you make your money. And what you do to women,” she answers, straining to hold back her tears. She looks broken, and it’s every bit as beautiful as I expected it to be. I just never expected it to hurt like this.



“Were you going to leave me?” I’ve had time to think things over, and I can’t help wondering what else Ricardo was helping Riley do. It certainly explains his sudden need for cash.

“Yes,” Riley admits freely, still attempting bravery despite the shake in her fingers.

I have to turn and look away from her for a few moments. My anger is ugly, and the fool in me still feels the need to protect her from it.

“And you really think you would have gotten away from me?” I find the strength to look back at her, and Riley shrugs her shoulders.

“You were going to run to your brother, weren’t you?” I question. It all makes sense now. It’s why she was calling out for him in her sleep. Ricardo was going to help her run to him. To them. The Souls.

“I told Ricardo that would be the easiest option. But I don’t know what he was planning,” she confesses, and pure rage surges through my body when I imagine the two of them scheming against me.

I stand up from the table, my chair scratching against the wood floor as I step toward Riley and take a clump of her pretty red hair in my fist. Her high-pitched squeal echoes around the large room when I use it to force her up to her feet and then drag her out through the door.

Stefano looks surprised at the sight he sees when I continue to drag Riley down the hall and into my office, and once I’m inside, I shut the door, release Riley from my grip and go straight to my top drawer.

“You want your brother, yeah? You think he gives a shit about you?” I question, picking through the photographs and finding the one photo I have of him smiling. He’s sitting on his bike outside the tattoo studio that the Souls run, and he looks so happy that I know it will cause her pain.

“Your brother has a new family now. Does that look like the face of a boy who’s searching for his lost sister?” I force the photo into her chest and watch as she looks down at it. Pretty tears wet her cheeks as she takes in his carefree smile. “He’s forgotten you. He’s moved on,” I tell her spitefully. Knowing that it will hurt her, I want her to feel the fucking agony of loss the way I do.

“I’m your family now, me and Gabriel. I’ve tried so hard to give you everything.” I hear the sound of weakness in my voice and have to rein myself the fuck in because she doesn’t deserve it. “I can’t believe you would do that to our son. You brought him into this world, and you were going to abandon him.”

None of this makes any sense. Riley loves Gabriel with all her heart.

“I would never have left him behind,” she bites back bitterly. And her words stoke the flame in my temper.

My hand reaches out to her, claspings either side of her jaw and squeezing tight, forcing her lips open into the perfect round hole. I hock back and aim a ball of saliva straight down the bitch’s throat. Then I take in the shocked breath she inhales and watch her eyes grow wild and scared.

“Rest assured that I would kill you before I let that happen,” I warn her, and I even think I fucking mean it.

Riley's eyes fall to the floor to deny me the hurt inside them. But I want to see her pain. I want her to suffer the way I am.

“So what will you do now?” I drag her face closer to mine, taking her bottom lip in my teeth and gripping it hard. I've always stopped before I made them bleed because I've never wanted to spoil them, but now she's ruined, and so I sink them deeper until the metallic taste slips through my lips onto my tongue.

I want to know if I've lost her forever. If maybe despite all she knows and the things she's seen, she might still be able to love me.

Keeping a firm grip on her jaw with one hand, I slide the other into the front of her panties. I'm relieved but not surprised when I feel that her juicy little cunt is wet.

I want to taste her, mix her desire with the taste of her blood. But she doesn't deserve to be pleased by my tongue. Not after what she's done to me.

From the second she came into my life, she's been my weakness. I need to prove to her and myself that I'm unbreakable.

“Tell me what you want, Riley?” I whisper, pressing my thumb tight against her throbbing little clit. She shakes her head defiantly, showing that despite her fear, her pride won't be compromised.

“Admit it, and I'll let you have it.” Sliding my hand from her jaw down to her neck, I squeeze tight. It sparks terror in her eyes but causes her to soak the tip of my finger. She's the monster I've created, and I'll ensure that I'm the only man to ever be able to fulfill her desires

“You fucked up. And I’m so angry at you,” I scold her, pulling my hands away from her. Her forehead creases with disappointment. She wants my touch, even during this fucked up time and despite her fear... She needs me.

“What will happen now?” she asks. The quiver in her voice makes me want to give in to those needs of hers and fuck her needy cunt raw. But I won’t. A man without control is a man without a conscience.

“I don’t know, Riley. I just know that I can’t trust you anymore.” I take a few more paces back from her. Wondering how I never saw the real threat in her until today, when my whole world feels like it’s come apart.

I always thought I was in control of my life, but I can’t control my love for her, regardless of what she’s done to me, and the fact she hates me now, I just can’t bring myself to hate her back.

My chest feels too heavy to take breaths, my insides feel torn, and I need time to think about how we move forward from this.

“Stefano,” I call for my new guard, and he enters within seconds, his eyes scanning for Riley straight away. It makes me want to take out his eyeballs with a blunt instrument. “Have Nico take Riley down to the wine cellar,” I command.

I received Nico’s text about an hour ago to say the room was ready for her. I could have Stefano take her down, but I have a feeling Riley isn’t about to go willingly, and I don’t want his hands on her.

“Don’t do this,” she begs, her chest starting to move rapidly with panic. Stefano leaves to get Nico, and I take a

deep, calming breath and scratch my jaw before I allow myself to get close to her again.

“You left me with little choice.” I try my best not to sound wounded.

“I’m sorry, Rafe.” She drops onto her knees, clutching at my legs. I want to believe that she means it. I don’t want to lock her away from me. I want to take her upstairs to our bed and forget any of this has happened. I want us to go back to normal. But how can I when I know she was prepared to take so much from me?

Riley Hayes needs a lesson. One that, right now, I’m too weak to teach her.

Nico arrives, and I nod at him, then watch as he reaches down and wraps his strong arms around her waist, dragging her away from me. She fights against him, of course. Trying to wriggle her slender body free of his grip while her limbs attack him. She begs me to let her stay, but I don’t respond. I just stare back at her as she’s removed from my office and try to numb the pain inside me. I’ve got the crushing urge to go after her and order Nico to let her free. But that would only show my weakness, and I’m not a weak man.

Not anymore.

When I look out into the hall, I see Sylvia standing watching her too.

She may not be speaking to me now, but I know that won’t last long, regardless of what she’d tell you. The old woman was fond of Ricardo. I’m sure she will understand why he had to be eliminated from my life when I take the time to explain to her what he did to me.

To us.

Sylvia shakes her head toward me before she moves on, and I'm left alone with just the sound of Riley crying my name, getting fainter and fainter as she's dragged further away from me.

"The girl is asking to see you, boss," Nico interrupts me from my thoughts a few minutes later. I shake my head back at him and ask him to fetch Sylvia instead.

While I wait for her, I think about my next move. I don't know how to be around Riley, not now that she knows who I really am. I'm struggling to see how we can ever come back from this. Or how I'll ever trust her again, knowing she was going to deceive me.

"You summoned me." Sylvia arrives quicker than I expected and stands in front of me with her arms folded across her chest.

"I want you to arrange live-in care for Gabriel," I tell her, watching the shock stretch out her wrinkled skin. "Ask Gioele to put out the job description and do all the background checks necessary. I'll want to meet the candidates myself, of course. But I want this taken care of urgently."

"Gabriel doesn't need live-in care. He has a mother," Sylvia reminds me, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I only want people I can trust around my son, Sylvia. Are you one of those people? Or are you to let me down like every other person I've given my fucks to recently?" I grab a glass and fill it half full from my decanter.

"I'll see to it," she answers me back sharply, "but I think you're making a great mistake, Raphael. To keep a mother from her son is the lowest form of cruelty." She doesn't wait for a response before turning around and leaving the room.

I agree with her. Keeping Gabriel away from Riley will crush her, her heart will feel empty without him, and the sadness will swallow her whole. That's the lesson she should learn first. To have the slightest inclination of what she's done to me is the least she deserves.



I t's been two days since I've seen Raphael and three since I've seen my son. My heart is breaking.

I became hysterical when I got dragged down here and saw that one of the large wooden wine racks had been emptied and was now serving as the anchor for my chains. Nico hadn't looked me in the eye as he shackled me by my wrists and ankles, and I don't know if that was because he knew what he was doing was wrong or if he's just heartless. I cried when I was left alone in the dark room, and it suddenly dawned on me that this was exactly how Raphael first saw me.

Since then, I've been unable to sleep. I've only been released a few times to use the bathroom, and I've taken a few sips of water but had nothing to eat. My stomach is so empty that it growls, but it still doesn't feel as hollow as my chest.

I hear the door creak open, and light pours into the room. It's followed by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and when I see that they belong to Rafe, my heart leaps into my throat.

He looks broken, his eyes red and heavy, and his hair rough and unkempt like he's been pulling at it. He's not wearing a shirt, just sweatpants that hang loose on his hips,



and the sheen of sweat on his torso suggests he's been in the gym. In his hands, he carries a large, antique porcelain bowl which he places carefully on the table in the center of the room before moving to stand in front of me.

The dim light above us illuminates the pain in his face, and as hard as I try, I can't help feeling guilty for it.

"I had a nightmare, and you weren't there," he tells me, his voice croaky, despite the sternness of his face. My stomach flutters, and I scold myself for still being able to find a monster so desirable.

"How is Gabriel?" I ask, my voice hoarse from screaming and my mouth dry from dehydration.

"He's been well taken care of." He nods sadly.

"I want to see him. I miss him, Raphael. Please!"

Rafe smiles back at me, but not a happy smile. A sinister one.

"Did you consider how I would have felt after you'd taken him from me?" He steps closer. My arms ache from being cuffed above my head, and my feet burn from having to hold me up for so long.

"Are you suffering, Riley?" he whispers inside my ear, his lips touching the hair that's stuck to my face from the humidity down here. His breath against my skin brings comfort that I know doesn't belong there anymore.

"Yes," I admit bitterly. I don't see the look on his face because he's too close, but I feel the sag in his chest and wonder if it's out of relief or guilt.

My body suddenly jolts when he unexpectedly tears open the shirt I'm wearing, and his face remains blank while he

slowly steps away from me. His eyes study the naked flesh he's exposed before he turns his back on me and places his hands in the bowl he brought with him.

I notice the wet sponge in his hand when he turns back around, and he keeps his eyes focused on mine as he steps toward me. The sponge is dripping wet, and when he raises his hand and touches it to my neck, I welcome the warm water against my skin. The droplets trickle down my body as Rafe cleanses my neck and moves the sponge beneath my shirt to wash my shoulders and under my arms. My nipples pinch tight with pleasure when the water drips over them, and my pussy clenches despite the horror of my situation.

Rafe takes his time to assure every inch of my skin is attended to, his eyes focused on my body as he moves the sponge across my skin in tentative yet mechanical motions.

When he gets to my chest, he crushes the sponge tight to my skin, taking a handful of one of my tits and squeezing his fist tight around me. It causes a gush of water to cascade over my stomach, and I moan at the sensation. My body cries out for him to have mercy on me like he has the power to summon my pleasure... and I hate him for it.

Rafe doesn't react, he just continues to move the sponge lower, cleansing my stomach as his fingers take their time to brush over the few pink lines that have remained on my skin since Gabriel's birth.

His eyes flick up from focusing on them to mine, and I feel his anguish radiate through my body like a laser.

My whole skin tingles as he drops his hand lower and squeezes the sponge between my legs. Water soaks through the lace of my panties, and I cry out and tug on my restraints. I

want his mouth on me. I need his hands to touch me where I crave him. And I want him to fill the emptiness inside me.

“Why?” he asks me, his face scrunching up with hurt. “Why were you going to take him from me, Riley?” Despite his gentle touch, I feel so much anger radiating from him. I’m taking a risk being honest with him, but it’s all I have.

“Because I found out who you were, and I didn’t want him to turn out the same,” I admit, knowing that my truth will hurt him. His head drops sorrowfully, and when he eventually lifts it back up, he looks back at me like I’ve reached into his chest, pulled out his heart, and crushed it in my palm.

“Please don’t hate me, Raphael,” I beg. Call it fucked up, call it twisted, but I’ve missed him while I’ve been down here alone. And if I somehow manage to survive this, I know I couldn’t live with the burden of his hatred.

“Hate you? Hate you? I don’t hate you.” He almost laughs at the accusation. “I don’t have words for how I feel about you, Riley. Because what I feel for you is fucking painful. It twists me up inside and fucks with my head, but I never want that feeling to go away.” His hands are on me again, snatching at my jaw and squeezing my cheeks together.

“I was going to give it all up for you.” The smile he’s wearing looks dangerous. “Everything I’ve ever known. My family legacy, the money I could make for us. I was prepared to give it all up for you.”

“You deceived me,” I sob.

“I wanted to protect you from who I am because I loved you, and I thought you deserved better. Do you hear that, Riley?” He laughs to himself. “I, Raphael Verretti, didn’t feel good enough for an orphaned little street girl.”

There are tears in his eyes now, but he doesn't shield them from me. Perhaps he knows how much they hurt me, and this is all part of his torture technique.

"Yet you took me anyway. You cut me off from the world, and you stole my soul, just so you could keep me like a pet. I had a life out there." My own tears start to blur my vision.

"I am your life, Riley." His grasp becomes firmer, so much so that I fear my jaw might snap under his fingertips. He fists the sponge between my legs so more water trickles down my thighs and then crushes his body into mine. "I tried to give you the best. I tried to keep you happy, and I couldn't let you go because you ignited a part of me that I thought I'd buried years ago."

"You're scaring me," I tell him when the tension in his muscles turns rigid.

"You've been scaring me since the day I first set eyes on you," he confesses. "You've stripped me down and made me weak, and you were going to finish me by taking away my family."

"Rafe, we can fix this," I promise him. I don't know how right now. But maybe if I can get him to believe it, I can get out of this basement.

"How? How do you piece a heart back together, Riley?"

He steps back from me and drops the sponge to the floor. My skin crawls for him to touch it again, and I feel the emptiness grow inside me like he's the only one who can fill the void. He's the only one who can cure my hurt, despite being the creator of it.

Rafe's eyes roll over my body, his nostrils flailing before he pushes his soaking wet hand through his hair, then turns his

back on me and leaves.

I call out his name, begging for him to come back to me, but he doesn't.

I don't know if I've become sick in the head or if what I feel for Rafe is simple, pure, undiluted love that holds no bounds. Because I want to believe my own lie. I want to fix this.

I'll show him that I mean what I say. I'll take his torture and torment and love him through the pain he causes me. Because Rafe has made it very clear that he won't let me go, and now I have to focus on survival.



Gabriel looks up at me from the paper he's decorated with scribbles and smudges of crayon, and

his big, innocent blue eyes riddle my conscience with guilt.

"I miss her too," I admit, picking up the yellow crayon and drawing a sun in the corner of the page the same way Riley always does when she colors with him.

"Would you like me to take Gabriel for some fresh air, Mr Verretti? We could try out the new swing set," Natalia, the new live-in nanny, suggests. She's professional, and Gabriel seems to like her. But she isn't Riley.

I miss seeing Riley sit and watch our son with such contentment. I miss the looks she would give me every time he did something cute, and most of all, I miss the sounds of them giggling together.

"Yes, I think Gabriel would like that very much." I stretch up from the tiny table I'm sitting at with him and let Natalia take over. I know that Riley will be able to hear them playing on the swings through the air vents in the wine cellar. It will

torture her to hear someone else stealing all her precious moments. The same way she was prepared to steal all of mine.

I kiss Gabriel's forehead and give him a guilty smile before I leave him with his nanny and head for my office.

"Miss Riley has been asking for you, boss," Nico tells me as I pass him in the hall. It's been over a week since I last gave her any of my attention. It's killing me to be apart from her, but I find that being away from her helps me to forget her treachery. I've made sure she has been treated well, despite what she deserves. The cellar has been better secured so she can roam free down there now, and Sylvia provides her with decent meals, which she seems to be eating.

I just can't face her.

"She can wait until I'm ready," I bite back at Nico impatiently. My cell starts to vibrate as I open my office door, and when I see Gioele's name, I immediately accept his call.

"Raphael." There's an urgency in his voice.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Danato..."

"What's he done now?" I sigh. I don't have the energy to deal with his bull shit on top of everything else I've got going on.

"He's dead. The Souls stormed a crack house in Pueblo, and he was shot in the process."

"*Fuck!*" I rage, picking up the first thing I can get my hand on and launching the chair angrily across the room.

"I need them taken care of, Gioele. I can't sit here waiting for them to make a move on me."

“I understand that, Rafe, but you can’t be rash about this. The Dirty Souls are a big club. They have other Charters. We can’t just go to war with these men. You’ll need to hire manpower.”

“Then hire, and if the Souls want to find me, maybe we should let them.” An idea suddenly comes to mind, one inspired by my own feeling of helplessness.

“That’s suicide, Rafe. They’ve killed your brother and your nephew. They’re mad at you about having the girl. The Souls don’t want to negotiate. They want you dead.”

“I’m not suggesting that I turn myself into them. What I’m suggesting is that I let them think they’ve been clever enough to find me.”

“And then what?” Gioele asks, sounding intrigued.

“Then, we make them suffer by taking what really matters to them.” Opening my top drawer, I pull out the photograph of Brax Marshall’s girlfriend.

“That sounds awfully like starting a war to me,” Gioele points out.

“Hire the men. We will leave a trail for their tech girl to follow. And while they are making their move, we will take the Souls’ women. Love is a weapon, Gioele. The threat of losing it can make the most ruthless of men weak.”

“I’ll see what I can do and get back to you by the end of the day.” Gioele cuts the call, and I almost crush the damn thing in my hand when I think about the Souls’ persistent attempts to ruin me.

Maybe I’m as much to blame for Danato’s death as they are. I sent him to Pueblo, knowing that they were a danger. Who sends a kid to do a man’s work? I set my own flesh and



blood an impossible task because I was too blindsided by my fear of losing Riley. Little did I know then that I'd lost her anyway.

I sit and think through the details of my plan. It takes a few hours and a lot of phone calls, but eventually, I have something in place. And then when I receive an unexpected phone call I realize that fate, for once, is on my side.

After setting things up with Gioele, I make my way out of my office and head toward the wine cellar. Stefano is on guard by the door, and it's obvious the guy spends far too much time on his appearance. That and the fact he never makes proper eye contact with me all contribute to me not trusting him. I don't like the way he looks at Riley. I also don't like being able to read the thoughts in the sick fucker's head when he looks at her. But as Gioele keeps reminding me, good men are hard to come by.

Stefano nods courteously as he opens the door for me, and I descend the narrow staircase, preparing myself to see her again.

Riley is sitting at the table in the center of the room with her head in her hands, and she looks up when she hears me approaching. Seeing her look so broken is like taking a knife to the fucking chest, and I wonder if I'll ever be able to forgive her for putting us through this.

She stands up from the table and takes a step back. She's wearing the clean shirt that I ordered Sylvia to bring down, with a bowl of water so she could wash this morning. And I can smell the lingering of her vanilla soap in the musky air surrounding us.

"Why are you doing this to me? I could hear Gabriel playing out there earlier." She wipes the tears from her eyes as

she takes another defensive step away from me.

“You say you love me, Rafe. If that’s true, why would you want to hurt me like this?”

“You ruined our family, Riley.” I make up the distance between us.

“I discovered the truth, and I got scared. I’m sorry.” There’s honesty in her voice, and those big blue eyes of hers glisten with tears, begging me to trust what she says.

God, I want to believe her.

“Would you still be sorry if you had gotten away from me?” I tilt my head and search for the slightest trace of a lie.

“I love you, despite all your secrets. I know that now, Rafe. Let me prove it to you,” she begs

“You love me?” I laugh her words back at her.

“Yes, Raphael. I love you so much that I want to see past all you’ve done. If you truly mean what you say and you are giving all this up, we can make this work. We can be happy again.”

I shake my head slowly. Riley doesn’t know half of the secrets that burden me. If she thinks soliciting women and killing a man who deserved death is the worst thing I’ve ever done, she’s wrong. And if I’ve learned anything just lately, it’s that the truth always finds a way of coming out.

If I tell Riley everything and she still wants to try to get back to being us, we might stand a chance. If my real sins cause her to hate me, then I guess we’ll have to figure something out.

Riley Hayes will never be free of me, but she gets to choose if I’m her lover or her tormentor.

“Do you really mean that, Riley?” Pressing my body into hers, I force her back against the empty wine rack.

“Yes.” Her soft voice sparks a surge of energy through my body that screams for release. Her shackles still hang above us, and I’m surprised she doesn’t fight me when I take one of her wrists, raise it above her head and detain it. Instead, she wets her lips with her tongue, and I feel her hot breath flit against my jaw when I can’t hold back temptation any longer, and I touch my lips to her cheek. I’ve deprived myself of her for far too long. I need to be inside her one more time before I open up old wounds and reveal to her what a monster I really am.

Cuffing her other wrist, I let the arch of my hand travel down her stretched-out arm and then cup her pert little tit through her shirt in my palm. As I squeeze her tight in my fist, her chest pushes out at me, her body writhing for more. She is the product of my own destruction. My very own little monster. It gives me a little hope that she might be able to handle what I have in store for her.

“I need for you to see the worst version of me before I can believe that,” I whisper in her ear. My hand travels lower, so my fingertips brush over her ribs and then skim across her stomach.

“Stefano,” I call out to my guard. The one who’s been eye-fucking my girl since the moment he stepped into my home. What I have planned will be a testing lesson for both of them.

He comes down the stairs eagerly and does his best not to stare at the position Riley’s in. Pulling myself away from her body, I take my knife from my belt and tear it through Riley’s cotton shirt, ripping it open and revealing her beautiful tight body to a lustful-looking Stefano.

“I don’t tolerate liars. So make sure you answer my questions honestly, Stefano.” I keep my eyes focused on Riley, despite addressing him.

“Do you like what you see?” I ask first, and there’s a long, tense silence while Stefano thinks carefully about his answer.

“I do, boss,” he admits. I detect the nerves in his voice. He’s right to be nervous.

“She’s a rare beauty,” I agree, with a wicked smile on my lips as I watch Riley’s face crease with confusion.

“And tell me, Stefano, have you ever thought about what it would be like to fuck something so precious?” Riley’s eyes grow wider at my next question, shock and panic stretching her beautifully constructed features.

“That would be disrespectful to both you and Miss Riley, boss,” he answers tactfully.

“That’s not the question I asked. I asked if you’d ever thought about fucking her?” I repeat, this time with far less tolerance in my tone, and I turn my head toward him, daring him to lie to me.

“Yes.” Stefano’s eyes close as he lowers his head in shame, and my nostrils flare as I take in a slow, calming breath.

“Riley, would you like Stefano to fuck you?” I turn my attention back to her and notice her panic increase.

“No!” Her head shakes frantically as she stares back at me in horror. “It’s only ever been you. I want it to always be you.” Her pitiful pleading sounds like angels singing. Maybe she’s fucking with my head, telling me what I need to hear to save herself from punishment, and maybe, I want to believe what she’s saying is true badly enough to actually feel her sincerity.

I bite my lip as my eyes roll over her perfect body. Looking at her in front of me is like seeing her again for the first time, and it still sparks that possessive desire inside of me that causes physical pain.

“Come closer, Stefano,” I order, and wisely, he does what I say willingly. “You see how perfectly round these tits are.” I trace the sharp point of my knife over the mound of her pale, delicate skin. Stefano nods his head as he admires them with me, and when I slide the knife lower Riley closes her eyes. Her full, pink lips tremble, and I wonder if it’s from fear or pleasure.

“Take in for yourself how perfectly flat her stomach is. Those marks on her skin she earned carrying our son. It’s all what makes her so perfect, don’t you agree?” My knife moves over her body, careful not to pierce her skin.

“I do, boss.” Stefano swallows nervously, and I make sure those are his last words, moving so swiftly that he doesn’t see what’s coming. The knife in my hand quickly changes its direction and punctures through the muscle in his neck. I withdraw the blade and watch him clutch his hand over the open wound, knowing I’ve been accurate enough to hit an artery when blood starts pouring through his fingers, and Riley’s scream deafens my ears.

Stefano drops to the floor and manages to scramble a few feet away before blood loss causes his body to slump, and he loses consciousness.

I turn my head back to a terrified-looking Riley and smile.

“Did you really think that I would ever let another man touch you?” I ask, feeling splatters of Stefano’s blood dripping down my cheek. There’s a huge pool of it gathered at our feet,

and yet Riley's focus remains fixed on my eyes. She knows this is a test, and I pray to God that she wants to pass it.

Dropping the bloody knife from my hands, I press my body into hers, my heart beating wildly as adrenaline pumps through my blood and a week's worth of desperation takes over.

I'm fast and uncontrolled, rolling her panties down her thighs and releasing myself from my slacks. My cock is painfully hard, desperate to feel her tight little channel clench it again, but I manage to hold steady before I enter her. The tip of my cock pulses for that first touch of her sensitive flesh.

"All you have to do is tell me to stop, Riley." I'm still holding on to so much anger for what she was going to do to us. I will be rough. I'm going to hurt her. It's a sick reality, but I need Riley's pain to ease my own.

Riley shakes her head back at me, her eyes begging me to give all of that to her. She wants everything that I've been holding back from her. She wants to prove to me that she can take it.

"I mean it, Riley, this is your last chance. I intend on fucking your unprotected pussy so hard you'll feel me inside you for days."

"I know," she whispers, gripping her bottom lip with her teeth as her pussy spills its juices over the thick head of my cock.

It's all the confirmation I need, and I give her no time to brace herself before I fill her up in one hard, punishing motion. Her cry of agony sends a relief smashing into my chest, and I lift one of Riley's legs and hook it over my forearm, granting myself better access. I fuck her drenched pussy so hard that I

feel the racks, bolted to the walls surrounding us, shake. Priceless bottles of vintage wine fall from the racks on either side of us, smashing to pieces. The deep red merlots and malbecs mix with Stefano's thick blood on the floor beneath us.

"You can't defy me again, Riley," I warn, my hands stretching out over her skin and gripping at her painfully while I fill the empty space inside her that belongs only to me.

"Do you know what you do to me? I can't lose you. Tell me you understand that?"

"I... under... stand," she manages breathlessly. Her throbbing walls hold me tight inside her, sucking me deeper as an orgasm crashes through her body and releases from her throat in a feral scream.

I feel myself starting to brim, the intensity of being back inside my girl too much to hold off. I release, gripping harshly at her hips and pushing as deep inside her as I can manage. Riley hasn't taken a pill in over a week. Her womb is just as defenseless to me as she is.

I growl loudly. Scraping my hands over her body until I get ahold of her face and tug her onto my lips. She kisses me back, her tongue rolling around mine as we share each other's oxygen, and I hold on to her so tight I fear she might shatter in my hands.

"Rafe," she breathes my name, and it puts a crack in my heart to hear her sound so wounded. "Please tell me this is over, and we can get back to being us."

I force myself away from her, pulling my still hard cock from her fucked sore hole and looking down at the red marks

I've made on her body. She's going to bruise so beautifully for me.

She watches me uncuff her from her restraints, and I try to forget that her next test will be the biggest of them all.

“Soon.” I give her a sad smile, lifting her into my arms and cradling her tight to my chest. “But first, I need to tell you a story.”





**M**y body feels exhausted as Rafe lifts me up, and I manage to wrap my tired arms around his neck before resting my cheek against his chest and allowing myself his comfort. I close my eyes so that I don't have to look at the body on the floor when Rafe steps around him and carries me toward the stairs.

I wonder why I don't really care that he's dead. Maybe it's because I never got to know the man, or perhaps Raphael has put such a blackness inside me that nothing he does matters anymore. The only emotion I feel as I'm lifted up the stairs is relief.

Relief that I survived his test and we can go back to being a family again.

He carries me into his office and places me on his desk. I think for a moment that he's going to fuck me again, then I vaguely recall him saying something downstairs about telling me a story.

When I look up at him, there's still so much anguish left inside him. It fills me with concern for what's coming next. He

takes a seat in his chair, taking my legs and stretching them so he can rest himself between them.

“I want us to start fresh. I don’t want to keep secrets from you anymore,” he tells me softly, and I wonder what other secrets he could possibly have. “I’m going to tell you about something that happened. Something that only myself and Adriano know about. Then once you’ve heard it, I’m gonna ask you if you’re still capable of loving me.”

I nod my head back at him, hating the weakness in his voice. Raphael doesn’t do weak. He’s always so strong and demanding. Whatever it is he wants to tell me must be bad to warrant this reaction.

He scrubs his hand over his face in frustration, and I quickly take it in mine and squeeze it inside my palm.

“Tell me everything. I love you, Rafe.”

He smiles back at me gratefully, but he doesn’t seem at all convinced.

“I always wanted what my father had,” he starts. “He had a woman who loved him unconditionally, a family, a fortune, and everyone’s respect. Where we lived, my father was the town’s version of a messiah. He took care of everyone, fixed church roofs, and put his money into education. To everyone who thought they knew him, he was generous and kind. I always wondered how Adriano and myself would ever precede his reputation.” Rafe smiles to himself as he squeezes my hand a little tighter like he needs it as a reminder that I’m still with him.

“When I was fifteen, I found out what my father really did to make his money. By then, Adriano was already letting him down. He’d been arrested for drug offenses and was always

mixing with the wrong people. Father was furious at him for tarnishing our family name. And so it was me who he decided to educate about the family business.”

“Did your mother know what he did?” I interrupt, wondering how a woman can be okay knowing her husband exploits women to pay for her earrings.

“I’m told my mother knew, but she pretended that part of my father’s life didn’t exist. I guess I wanted you to do the same.” He looks at me regretfully.

“You never gave me that choice, Raphael,” I remind him.

“I didn’t want to lose you,” he confesses.

“I’m yours. I have been from the start. You’ll never let me leave. How could you have lost me?”

“Because I felt myself starting to earn your heart, and I liked the way it felt. I wanted every single piece of you to be given up to me willingly, not stolen or snatched.” I blush at his raw honesty. “That’s what I stood to lose and why I couldn’t tell you.”

I decide I like honest Rafe, even if he does make me conflicted.

“My father was great at pretending to be a good man. At first, I wondered how he did it, and then in time, I learned to do it too. I smiled at people during holy communion on the same day that I went to my father’s properties and watched how his trainers manipulated women into needy little fuck-toys.”

I try to hide the shock on my face, hearing that a fourteen-year-old boy would have ever been subjected to that.

“There was a lot of pressure on my shoulders back then to be the Verretti heir my father wanted. Adriano was always letting him down. He was already close to disowning him.” Rafe’s hands slide over my thigh as I nod back understandingly.

“Then there was a girl. She lived in our town, and my parents liked her family because they were Italian like us.” I shift uncomfortably, feeling pathetic for suddenly being jealous of this girl.

“Gina was a good person. When things got too serious at home, she showed me how to have fun. With her, I did all the things that teenagers should do. We built a shelter in the woods together. Stole booze from my parents’ cabinet and snuck out at night to be together.” He smiles to himself as the memories play themselves out in his head.

“Then I made a mistake that would shape the rest of my life.” His smile quickly drops, and all his pain is back again. “One night, me and Gina drank far too much of my mother’s vodka, and I told her about what my father did. Then things got more serious. I’d seen what my father’s men did to the women they trained. Gina had a sheltered upbringing. Her parents were strict and never spoke to her about sex. She was intrigued and begged me to show her. So I did, right there in the woods. I took her virginity, and I’ve regretted it every day of my life since.” He hangs his head, and I feel the tension in his fingers when they grip at my thigh.

“What happened, Rafe?” I whisper, fearing that he won’t have the strength to continue.

“It was three months after that we found out she was pregnant with my child. She’d been getting sick a lot and felt tired. Her mother was trying to get her to see a doctor, but

Gina knew what it was and was too scared to tell her. She told me when she'd run out of ways to keep it a secret. I swear to you, Riley, I've never been more scared in my life. I knew my father would be furious. That our actions would ruin his reputation, and I couldn't bear to have him hate me the way he did Adriano."

"What happened to them?" I ask, my curiosity reaching a new high. Surely Rafe would have told me about something as important as having another child.

"Gina wanted to keep the baby. She actually believed all the religious crap that our parents preached to us. She thought that if she got rid of it, she would be damned to hell. And so that left me with only one option."

"What did you do, Rafe?" I hear the quiver in my voice when I think about the man I've been exposed to lately, the man who I fear is capable of anything.

"I asked her to give me time. I needed to get the money together for us, enough for us to leave town and set up somewhere new. Fate had decided that I was going to be a father, and so I was going to be one. But I wasn't going to bring my family's reputation down in the process. I knew losing me would hurt Dad, but I'd have preferred that over bringing shame to his name."

"That's really sad, Rafe." I bring his hand to my lips and kiss his knuckles.

"We ran out of time." His voice breaks with hurt. "Gina managed to hide her pregnancy from her family. They were hardly ever home, and she avoided them when they were. I gave her hoodies so she could hide herself when she couldn't. She managed to keep our secret while I worked for my father whenever I could. He even let me make my own investment."

“When you say investment, you mean...” I shudder at the thought.

“Yes, my father released money from my trust fund so I could purchase my first woman.” He shrugs like that’s not incredibly fucked up.

“And when you say you ran out of time...” I try to get away from the subject of how Rafe makes his money. Knowing about it and hearing about it are two different things.

“Gina went into labor way sooner than we expected her to. We couldn’t go to a hospital or ask for any help because we were both too scared. And I was still too fucking worried about protecting my father’s reputation.” The anger in his voice starts to build again.

“She was so scared when she called me. I was too, but I had to be brave for both of us. I remember that night so vividly, Riley. The memory of it is what haunts me in my sleep.” His eyes are full of tears when he looks up from the spot on the inside of my leg that he’s been stroking with his thumb.

I want so badly to comfort him, but I don’t want him to stop talking to me. I need to know what happened to Gina and their baby.

“She asked me to meet her in our shelter in the woods, and I rushed to get to her, having no idea what the hell we were gonna do with the baby when it came out of her.” He’s shaking, reliving the trauma. “I heard her screaming like an injured animal, and when I found her, she was in so much pain. There was nothing I could do to make it go away. It was so dark, and all I could do was hold on to her hand and watch her agony.”

“That must have been so scary for you both,” I sympathize, thinking back to the pain I felt giving birth to Gabriel. I had Rafe, his doctor, and Sylvia there, and I was still petrified.

“It was, especially when the baby finally came out of her, and it was quiet.” My eyes widen, and my heart starts to sting.

“He was so still I didn’t know what to do with him. So I wrapped him up in my hoodie, and I rubbed at his tiny little chest. He was limp and lifeless and so small I knew I couldn’t save him.”

Tears stream down his cheeks, and I hold him close to my chest so I can comfort him. It must have been so tragic for him, and it explains why he was so protective of me during my pregnancy.

“I didn’t know how to tell Gina, but I didn’t have time to worry about that for long because she was bleeding so much, and I had no idea how to make it stop. She just kept screaming at me to help her, and I didn’t know what to do. I panicked. I should have called an ambulance and tried to get her help, but I was too busy trying to stop all the bleeding so I could save her.”

“What happened to Gina?” I ask, clutching him tight and feeling my own tears start to drip into his hair.

“She stopped screaming and got weaker. I put our child in her arms, and I held her tight. Then I kept promising her that she’d be okay until she fell asleep. For hours after that, I sat with them both and cried while she turned cold.”

“Rafe.” I stroke my hand through his hair, trying my best to soothe him.

“I didn’t know what to do with them. So I called Adriano.” He looks up at me, full of regret.

“Your brother?” I question, unable to imagine Adriano being a shoulder to cry on at such a sad time.

“He came, and he saw what had happened. I was surprised at how sympathetic he was. And it was him who helped me think clearly about what we had to do next.”

“And what did you do next, Rafe?” I ask, fearing his answer.

“Me and Adriano buried them together in the woods. We covered our tracks well enough because, to my knowledge, that’s where they still lay today. Do you understand now why I could never shut down my brother’s agency? What he knew could have ruined me.”

“No.” I shake my head at him. “When you were still a kid, sure, but not since you’ve been a man. Adriano could never have gone to the cops. Surely you knew that. You break the law every day with what you do. I don’t understand why you let him have that over you.”

“It wasn’t the cops I feared him going to?” he tells me.

“Your parents, Rafe, they have both been dead for years.”

“But hers aren’t.” He looks back at me with fresh tears. “And after my father died, I couldn’t risk losing the one person he had trusted.”

“Rafe, you’re not making any sense.” I try to decipher what he’s telling me.

“Gioele.” He whispers the name weakly. “He’s Gina’s Father.”



“What!” I pull back in shock. I’ve only ever met the old man a handful of times, but I know he’s important to Rafe. He runs most of his business and is his confidant.

“I couldn’t risk losing him. He was too valuable to me,” Rafe explains.

“What does he think happened to her?”

“I’m sure he tortures himself every day wondering. She was reported as a missing person, and that’s how she’s remained since. Our families were close, so I saw the effect it had on them. Gina’s mother was heartbroken so bad it couldn’t be fixed, and they separated. The man lost everything because of me. I carry the weight of that guilt every time I look the man in his eyes and let him help me, and over the years, it has turned me to stone.

I thought I was numb to emotion, that I’d become indestructible, and then I saw you.” He strokes his thumb over my cheek to catch my tears, and his eyes are so full of the sorrow of his past that I don’t know how I should feel.

“I had to have you, Riley. I wanted more from you than just sex. I wanted everything. A family, a life, and I was prepared to give everything up once again in return. I still will if you can promise me that you can love me despite all that I’ve done.

I’ll be the man you deserve. I want us to start again. We can move to Italy and raise our children away from all the bad.” His hand strokes over my stomach as if I’m already carrying a child inside me.

“I’m sorry I was going to run from you,” I tell him, knowing I have no choice but to go along with his plan. What Rafe has been through makes him easier to understand, but it

doesn't make him any less dangerous. "I'll go wherever you want us to go," I promise, taking his face in my hands and forcing his eyes to look into mine. "I belong to you, Rafe. We're a family." I hope my words sound convincing because they are the only thing that can save me now.

"There's a safe house a few miles from here. I want you, Sylvia, and Gabriel to go there and wait for me." He suddenly switches back to his demanding self, reminding me I can't drop my guard around him, even if my heart wants me to.

"And where are you going?" I ask.

"I'm going to take care of shit, so my past doesn't follow us."

"Don't do anything dangerous," I tell him, meaning every word. I may be unsure who the man in front of me is, but I know I'd be devastated if any harm came to him. His hand slides behind my ear softly, and he cradles my head the way he used to before I broke his heart. "Riley, I would never put myself at risk. Not when I have so much to live for." His dark eyes glisten with hope, and I feel like I'm betraying him.

"Nico will take care of you all. He knows the plan. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but we will have our new start, Riley. I will make you happy."

He stands up from his chair, his body tight against mine and his lips crashing over my mouth. The kiss is so forceful and intense that it makes me want him to take me all over again, and I could cry from how messed up that is.

"You need to leave tonight." He drags his lips away from mine.

"And Riley, never deceive me again." He pulls away and heads toward the door of his office.

“Rafe,” I call out his name, stopping him before he can leave.

When he turns around and looks back at me, I even wonder if maybe there could be hope for us.

“I want you to tell me more about Gina someday. She shouldn’t be forgotten about.”

He allows a small, sad smile to grace his beautiful face and nods his head before turning around and leaving me. I quickly rush to get some clothes so I can find Gabriel and finally hold him in my arms again.



I hate being apart from them. I hate having to trust Nico with everything in the world that's precious to me, and I hate the Souls for causing enough shit that I've been forced to leave her and deal with them.

It turns out the Souls weren't as clever as I gave them credit for, and like some kind of vigilantes, they took that girl they stole from me back to her family. To the low-life father who sold her to me in the first place.

And now they are heading in numbers toward one of my abandoned houses, where they will expect to find me, thanks to the trail Gioele's laid for them.

Gioele had negotiated a contract with Murray Cutler's crew, and they are waiting on my order, watching the club compound from a safe distance and willing to kill whatever stragglers they've left behind to protect the women that I will take. The Souls will pay for the inconvenience they have caused, and they will suffer the fear of loss for tormenting me.

"I want the tech girl and Brax's bitch," I tell my trainer, Pablo. He has a thing for the girl the Souls took from one of my auctions. He kept her far too long and got himself attached.

Now that she's no doubt been broken by one, or maybe all of them, I know he's going to want some time with her once her drugs have worn off.

"We will have work to do when Murray arrives with the Souls' bitches," I inform him, sitting back in the chair of my office in Peyton.

This one is my best-kept secret. It's secluded and surrounded by woodland and so pretty from the outside.

"I'll go see the girl now." Pablo rubs his greedy hands together as he leaves my office. I think about messaging Murray for an update. I want to know that the Souls are far enough away before I make my move. Then once the women have been taken, I'll have the tech girl forge the documents I need for Riley's new life. She can clear the system of her name too before I offer her a choice, her loyalty or her life.

Gioele has people who are good at what they do, but apparently, this girl who is owned by the Souls is on another level. She can make people vanish and would be an asset in helping Gioele tie up my business. But first, I need to erase Riley Hayes from existence so we can leave our pasts behind us.

Instead of calling Murray, I pick up the burner phone and call Nico. He answers on the second ring, and I hear the most satisfying sound in the background. Laughter.

"I thought I'd phone and check in." I smile to myself, wishing I'd been able to stick around to see Gabriel and his mother reunited.

"All good here, boss. Miss Riley and Gabriel are well."

"It sounds like it." I imagine their happy faces. They are going to love the house I've brought for us in Italy.

“Would you like to speak with her, sir?” Nico asks.

“No, do not disturb them. Just make sure they are ready to leave on my command.”

“You got it, boss,” he assures me before I cut the call. Something on the security screen has caught my attention, and if it’s what I think it is, I’ve just been handed the Souls’ demise on a golden platter. Of all the outcomes I expected today, I never once imagined that instead of being taken against their will, the soul bitches would come right to me.

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Not once in the whole time since I took Riley have I considered fucking another woman, but the blonde feisty little bitch who threatens to bite my guard’s cock off and fuck my throat with it is the closest I’ve come to being tempted. She seems to forget that I have the advantage. She’s tied up and regardless of what she believes, is completely at my mercy. Despite her being more than deserving of a lesson from my cock, I have more important things to proceed with. Now that I have a substantial collection of Soul pussy, tied up in front of me, I call Murray and his crew off the job and set the tech girl to work. Maddy Summers is her name, and she looks far too innocent to live up to her reputation. She’d make a fortune at an auction, but I have only one use for her today.

Gioele has his tech guy Marco set up, waiting in my study with a list of all the things I need from her.

I stroll along the line of women who hold the hearts of the savage Souls who thought they could destroy my family. All of them are beautiful in their own way. The feisty one snarls at

me, and I wonder if I got her pussy wet after I told her how pretty she'd look with me fucking her.

It was a mind game, of course. I have no desire to be with another woman, not when I have a lifetime of perfection with Riley to look forward to.

“Boss...” Pablo hangs up his phone and approaches me. He's still pissed that he hasn't had a chance to fuck his little protégé yet. He came close when I wanted to flush out the tech girl and used her as a bargaining tool, but in the end, after a few heroics, we found the one we were looking for, and Pablo's dick remains dry, for now.

“That was one of Murray's men— they still have eyes on the Souls' compound. He says there has been some movement there. The ones that returned from your old place are riding out again.

“Does he think they are heading here?” I ask, concerned.

“How would they know about this place?” Pablo questions. The fact that these women are here is evidence that they do, and I remember the promise I gave to Riley that I wouldn't put myself in danger. Not while I have her and my son waiting for me. Verretti men have never been known to fight with their fists. God gave us brains as our weapons.

“I'm leaving,” I tell a stunned-looking Pablo. “You are in charge. This place needs to be watertight, no one in and no one out.”

“I don't have enough men,” he tells me, a sudden panic masking his face.

“Then use them wisely,” I snigger, moving across the room to the demonic little slut who I can't help but admire for being brave enough to threaten me.

“I must leave now.” I fist the front of her T-shirt and raise her up to my level. I’ll bet that threat makes this one’s pulse race with lust.

“Running scared, are ya?” She laughs at me. “And here I was thinking you actually had a dick to fuck me with.” She rolls her tongue around the inside of her cheek and looks down at me. “Turns out you’re all pussy.” Her voice is seductive, and I grip the biker whore’s throat in my hand, noticing the thrill in her eyes when she feels me crush her air supply.

“In another life, I might have taught you the lesson you deserve. I’d make you submit, and you’d enjoy it so much that you’d thank me for it,” I assure her, and she responds to me by slowly rolling her tongue over her glitter-glossed lips and kissing them at me.

She is the devil.

I rapidly release her from my grip, ensuring that she falls back onto her ass before I walk out the room and leave them all behind me.

Having no time for goodbyes, I fire a text off to Marco as I get into my car, telling him to keep me updated on the tech girl’s progress before I nod at my driver to leave.

I have no idea if the Souls know that their women are here. All I do know is that I need to get back to mine.





I wait up all night for Rafe to return home. When I hear the car pull up and footsteps approaching the small cabin where we have been residing, I don't know if I'm nervous or excited.

I swing open the door and race out to greet him. Throwing myself onto his body and anchoring my legs around his hips.

"You shouldn't have opened the door. How did you know it was me?" he immediately scolds me, but when I pull back and see him smiling, I know he isn't mad at me. He carries me inside and places me down, his hands grabbing my face as he kisses me like we've been apart a month instead of a day.

"Did you get everything done?" I don't want to know what he's been doing. I know I won't like it, and I don't need to make things any harder for myself.

"Sort of. There are still some loose ends to tie up, but we are safe here, for now. Where are Sylvia and Gabriel? And where the fuck is Nico?" When he notices our bodyguard's absence, he looks pissed as hell.

"Sylvia is sleeping with Gabriel in the bedroom. I thought it best she takes the bed," I explain.

The cabin where Nico drove us to is small and basic but cozy. There is only one bedroom, and it's hardly luxurious, but I can see why Rafe calls it a safe house. We practically had to go off-road to get here.

"Nico is sleeping too. On my orders." I gesture my head over to the couch, where he's fast asleep.

"So you have taken to giving my staff orders now?" he teases... I think.

"Yes. Will you punish him for it?" I suddenly remember Ricardo, and the smile falls off my lips. Rafe must notice my sudden shift in mood because he quickly kisses me again.

"We can leave in a few days. I have a plane chartered to take us to Italy. I purchased a house there a few months ago. You will love it." Lifting me off my feet again, he rests my ass on the small worktop that's used as a kitchen.

"Shhhh." Pressing a finger to his lips, he dips his other hand into the front of my jeans. His finger triggers a cool trickle down my spine when it slips between my folds and teases my entrance.

"What are you doing?" I remind myself to breathe. "Nico is right there, and the walls are thin. Sylvia might hear." My hips completely contradict my mouth, wriggling for more than the tip of his finger as it enters me.

"I don't care. I've been away from you for too long." He pushes himself up to his knuckle, and I have to bite on his shoulder to stop myself from making any noise.

"Rafe," I sigh, trying to sustain the need inside me for more.

"Riley?" he teases before dropping to his knees and pulling my jeans down with him. His tongue presses against my

center, and his warm breath heats my sensitive flesh before he skillfully licks a trail to my clit. I grip his hair and take full advantage of the pleasure he's offering, closing my eyes and riding against his face as he licks, nips, and sucks me in all the right places.

Raphael knows my body too well, and just as I'm about to scream out an orgasm, his hand lifts up to my mouth, and he fucks it silent with two of his fingers. I gag and choke around them as his tongue continues to work between my legs. My mouth wets his fingers, and he waits until I've finished my high before sliding his body back up mine, taking his spit-soaked fingers and fucking my pussy with them, too.

"I've missed your tongue," I confess as he unbuckles himself, taking his thick cock in his hand and guiding it to where I need it. I grip tightly to his shirt as he fills me, and Rafe's strong arms wrap around my body, cupping at my shoulders and forcing me down onto him. A deep moan escapes my lips, and he moves against me, hard but slow. The controlled rolls of his hips burn me inside until I feel like I'll burst from the pleasure.

"I want you knocked up before we leave," he tells me, his forehead pressing into mine as he continues to feed me his cock.

"I want so much more than I deserve from you, Riley, but never question that I'll take it."

I shake my head because I would never underestimate Raphael, not now that I've seen what he's capable of.

"We leave here, and we leave everything behind. Old pasts, old families. Our world is all that matters now."

“Yes,” I agree, another orgasm rolling through my body, bringing me almost to a breaking point.

“You wanna cum for me?” he growls, his thumb pressing the perfect pressure against my clit and tipping me over the edge.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper, feeling all the weight that’s built inside of me release as I flood his cock and try not to make a sound.

“Good girl,” Rafe responds, gripping my skin tight enough to leave a mark and then looking between our bodies to watch his cock pump me full of the hot, sticky cum, that he wants to take its hold.

“You’re perfect, Riley Verretti,” he whispers, holding himself still inside me. His teeth grip at his bottom lip while he waits for my reaction to what he said.

“Riley Verretti?” I look back at him in confusion.

“Riley Hayes no longer exists. You have my heart, you have my child, and you’ll give me many more.” His hand presses against my lower stomach, and he smiles to himself. “And now you have my name, too.”

“But how?” I ask. “You can’t change a person’s name without legal papers.”

“You’re my wife now,” he tells me proudly, “No one will take you from me.”

Despite all the wrong this man has done and the pain he’s caused me, there’s a part of me that likes the sound of that. Or at least the girl who believed the man in front of me was her savior does. Being happy about his gesture is my only option because I’ve come to realize that I’m never going to escape

this man. And if by some miracle I did, he would never allow me to take his child away from him.

This is going to be my life from now on. Riley Verretti must learn to love the monster inside her husband because she will never be parted from her son. She will raise him to be a good man and know right from wrong.

I pull Rafe tighter to me and show him my gratitude with a kiss. It was so easy to fall in love with him, so much easier than it is to hate him. The man may be far from perfect, but he's proven to me that when he loves, he loves with all his soul.

"You need to get some sleep. Go and join Sylvia and Gabriel. I'll try to get a few hours in the chair," he orders me, pulling himself out from between my legs and making me feel empty of him already.

"Goodnight, husband." I slide myself off the counter and kiss his cheek before pulling up my jeans and making my way to bed without an argument.

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One week later

It's just me and Gabriel in the bed when the sun peeps through the pretty lace curtains, heating up my face enough to wake me. I kiss him gently and carefully slip out of bed, and when I make my way to the door, I hear voices coming from the living area.

Sylvia sounds angry, and I decide to listen for a while before I interrupt.

“So nothing is resolved. In fact, you’ve pissed them off more. We should have left days ago,” she scolds, and when I peep through the crack in the door, I see her standing with her hands on her hips and a stern look on her face.

“There was a problem. The tech girl didn’t finish working on the documentation, so Marco is working on it. I want a fresh start when we leave. Riley needs to have a new identity — so I don’t have to keep her hidden.”

“Documentation isn’t going to change who she is, Raphael. She knows who you are and what you do. Changing her name isn’t going to take that back. They know you have her, and they will come after you. Gioele warned you these people were dangerous right before he got his throat slit by one of them.”

I slam my hand over my mouth and try to contain my shock. Gioele can’t be dead too.

“We’ll be out of here in less than twenty-four hours. They won’t find us in Italy. They will move on and find another person to bother.”

“Do you really believe that, Raphael? Because if you do, you’re letting your heart lead your head.”

“I won’t risk losing her by sticking around. I have people who can bring the Souls down in my absence. I pay well.”

“You can’t buy loyalty, Raphael,” Sylvia takes another swipe at him.

“I pay you to stick around, don’t I?” When he bites back, the old woman’s hand moves so fast that Rafe doesn’t have time to block the sharp crack her palm makes against his

cheek. I watch in shock as he rubs his jaw where it landed. It looks like it felt as hard as it sounded.

“My loyalty to you comes from love, Raphael Verretti. There was a time in your life when you had none at all. Your mother was a drunk, and your father was a pimp. Any goodness that’s inside of you came from me, and you’d do well to remember that.” She heads for the front door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he calls after her.

“Into town. I promised Gabriel chocolate milk with his breakfast, and I need to visit a pharmacy to get him some anti-sickness pills for the journey. Unless you’d like to spend an entire flight to Europe with a child vomiting in your lap.” She grabs the keys to Nico’s truck from the table.

“Take Nico with you,” Rafe calls after her, despite still being angry at her.

“I’m not the one who needs protecting, Rafe.” She looks over her shoulders before she leaves, slamming the door behind her.

I wait until she’s been gone a few minutes before I step out of the bedroom, and Rafe puts on a brave face as he pours a coffee.

“Here, drink this,” he orders, handing me the mug in his hand.

“We will be okay, won’t we, Rafe?” I ask, still troubled by Sylvia’s concern and wondering if the Souls are the people my brother was in the photograph with. I’ve taken in so much information lately it’s hard to remember.

“It’s not your place to worry. That’s my job.” He places a kiss on the top of my head, and before I have a chance to say anything else, our little boy toddles into the room. The biggest

beam lifts onto his face when he sees his daddy, and Rafe rushes to scoop him up, lifting him high into the air and blowing a raspberry onto his tummy to make him laugh. Watching the pair of them together makes my heart overflow with love, and tears fill my eyes.

How can something so beautiful be so destroying? Why did I have to get out of the car that night? I could be sitting here in ignorant bliss, looking forward to a future with the man I love.

I've been through so much, but this is the closest to crazy I have ever come because I can't stop myself from loving him.

Despite who he is and what he's done. I'm starting to wonder if, deep down, I want everything Raphael Verretti has promised me. My morals will be the sacrifice I make to keep this family together because, as Rafe said, this is our beginning.





I sit in the back of the car with Riley and Gabriel while Nico drives us toward the hangar where my plane is sitting, ready to take us to the country my family originally came from. Sylvia sits up front beside him. She's calmed down since her outburst yesterday morning. Despite how angry she made me, I know all she says comes from her heart, which helps me to forgive her.

She worries about me; she worries about us all, and this is a stressful time for everyone.

Especially me.

Those bastard Souls killed every guard at my training house. They even killed Gioele, which pissed me off more than anything they'd done to me previously.

I couldn't stay in this country, even if I wanted to. The authorities will be on to me now. It's a good job Gioele had purchased my house for me in Italy with cash. I have fake IDs for my family, which for now will have to do.

Leaving here on my plane couldn't come any sooner.

“It’s a long flight. Do you think he will be okay?” Riley asks, looking at Gabriel with concern.

“We have to make a fuel stop—”

“I have anti-sickness meds,” Sylvia interrupts, looking over her shoulder and smiling at us all adoringly. The old woman never could stay mad at me for long.

“I’ve never been on a plane before.” Riley threads her fingers through mine and smiles excitedly.

“I hope you like it.” I manage a smile back, despite all the anger inside me. I hate leaving unfinished business behind. Sylvia is right, of course. Money can’t buy loyalty. I will have to work on a way to make the Souls pay. It may take me a while, but it will happen.

Nico pulls up inside the large hangar, and I watch Riley’s eyes pop out of her head when she sees my jet.

“You own that?” she checks, looking overwhelmed.

“I do.” I nod back, unstrapping Gabriel from his seat and lifting him out.

“You’re super rich.” Her stating the obvious makes me chuckle. And from the happy look on her face, I’m starting to believe she can forget how I became so rich.

“Yeah, super rich.” I shrug casually before ordering Nico to board the luggage from the trunk onto the plane. I step out of the car with Gabriel in one arm and hold out my other hand to help Riley out. Her hand touches mine again, and the small gesture reminds me just how lucky I am to have her.

“I’ll take Gabriel and get him strapped up.” Sylvia takes my little boy from my arms.

“Give Mommy a kiss, darling,” she tells him. Sylvia knows how much being away from him hurt Riley. She didn’t agree with my form of punishment and has been overcompensating for it ever since.

“Mommy will be right with you, angel.” Riley’s lips press against our little boy’s cheek, and he wrinkles up his nose adorably.

I watch Sylvia refuse Nico’s help as she carries him up the steps to board the jet, and Nico throws me a look of annoyance before he picks up the cases again and follows her on.

“Are you ready for your new life, Mrs Verretti?” I press my body against hers, touching her lips with mine and wondering how the hell I’m going to survive a long-haul flight with her beside me without fucking her.

“Yes.” Riley’s lips stay touching mine as they raise into a smile.

“Come, I need to talk to the pilot before we take off. I lead her up the steps to my plane, and Sylvia rushes to greet us at the door looking flustered.

“We left Raggy bear in the car.” Her voice is high-pitched and panicked, and for a second, it has me thinking something is actually wrong. “I stuffed him in my purse—he must have fallen into the footwell,” she explains.

I roll my eyes and go to grab him, but Riley stops me.

“Go speak to your pilot. I’ll grab Raggy bear.” Her lips press into my cheek exactly the same way they did Gabriel’s before she skips back down the plane steps toward the car to retrieve Raggy bear for Gabriel.

I’m about to enter the cockpit to check everything is ready, but when I hear the screeching of tires, my heart drops to my

stomach. I race back toward the door to see what's happening and when I see the black van that's pulled up beside Riley, I feel the rage inside me multiply.

I don't have time to count the men that pile out of the side door, but all of them are armed, and all of those weapons point toward me. The only one I take the time to recognize is the one who has his arm wrapped around Riley, dragging her toward the van.

The scream she makes pierces through my body and makes my blood heat. I have at least six men all pointing various models of guns at me, and I'm forced to watch as Riley fights with her brother to be free. He restrains her, taking care not to hurt her. I don't hear what he says to her, she's screaming too loud, but whatever it is, it's not enough to convince her that she should go with him.

"Fuck, it's the Souls." Nico draws his gun, and Sylvia holds her arm out in front of him to stop him from going through the door and opening fire.

"Rafe, you have to think straight. We don't have a chance. There are too many of them."

I look back to Riley, who's still putting up a brave fight to be free from her brother's grip and come to me.

"Rafe, listen to me. They want you dead. You are no good to Riley, or Gabriel, if you let them kill you."

"I can't let them take her." I reach into my holster for my gun but the one with blonde hair, who looks straight out of a fucking Calvin Klein commercial, shakes his head at me warningly.

I doubt the handsome son of a bitch would think twice about putting a bullet in my skull. In fact, I'm surprised he

hasn't done it already.

Sylvia steps forward bravely and tugs at my arm.

“We can get her back, but we have to leave. We'll go to Italy and come up with a plan. Please, Rafe. You know they won't hurt her. They think they're saving her.” There are tears in the old woman's eyes, and I have to make a split decision. I could run and try to snatch her from them, drag her into the plane and have a hail storm of bullets fired at me, perhaps even risk some of those shots hitting her. Or I can take our son to safety and spend every waking second plotting each of these men's deaths.

A lump wedges my throat when it becomes clear what I have to do.

I let Riley see the tears in my eyes as I press the button on the side of the door to raise the stairs and close the door. She's not screaming anymore— she's sobbing. Her brother tries to break her fall as she drops onto her knees and tries, weakly, to crawl away from him. He holds her, his arms trying to comfort and restrain her at the same time.

What's happening in front of me now is Riley's destruction. It's the ultimate test of her love for me, and she's passing it with all the fight still left in her body. I hope she knows that I have no choice. I have to protect our son. I hope she knows that this is the worst pain I've suffered, and I hope she knows that this isn't goodbye.

I will come back for her.

The door lifts higher, taking her and the betrayed look on her face slowly out of my view, and the last vision I see of the woman who changed my life for the good is her beautiful, tear-filled eyes as she watches me leave her.

I drop to the floor and fist at my hair in agony. Nico orders the pilot to take off, and as we start to move, I expect the sounds of gunfire and bullets to ricochet off the plane. They don't come, or maybe they do, and I just don't hear them... because all I can hear is Riley screaming my name, and all I can feel is the pain of us being ripped apart.

Nico somehow drags me onto a seat and buckles me up as my plane lifts off the ground. And as I leave the best part of me behind on the tarmac, I realize that I didn't break Riley Hayes at all.

She broke me.



“I had a clear fucking shot. I could have ended him.” One of the men drops the arm he was using to point a gun at Rafe when the plane takes off.

“That wasn’t part of the deal, Jess,” The old man standing beside my brother shrugs. His voice is so deep I feel it vibrate in my chest.

I can’t stop shaking, my throat feels raw from screaming, and my limbs ache from the tight hold Liam has on me. He still hasn’t let me go, even though the plane has lifted from the ground, and there’s no hope of me escaping.

“You’re gonna be okay, Riley. I gotcha,” he whispers to me again. It’s all he’s been saying to me since these people drove into the hangar and grabbed me against my will.

“You don’t understand what you’ve done,” I sob, clutching at Raggy bear in my hands. Gabriel can’t sleep without him. How is Raphael going to explain all this to him? He’s too young to understand.

My body stops struggling. It’s too weak from fighting so hard to get to Rafe.

I don't blame him. I understand there was nothing he could do to save me. All these men were pointing a gun at him. Our son was on that plane, and he had to protect him. He did the right thing, leaving me behind. But it doesn't make it hurt any less.

"You're safe now. We saved you." Liam forces me to look at him properly, and the relief on his face turns to confusion when I shake my head. He seems so different. So grown. He's a man now. His arms have almost doubled in size since I last saw him.

"I've been looking for you for so long. I never gave up... These people are my friends. We're gonna take you home and take care of you." He tries to comfort me, but how can he when he's just ripped my whole world away from me?

He clutches me tight to his chest, his strong arms wrapping around me the way he used to when we were living on the streets and freezing our asses off in the tent. I find no comfort in them like I used to. They feel suffocating and unfamiliar now.

"I didn't need rescuing, Liam." I find enough energy to fight my way out of his hold, and when he releases me, I wobble back onto my feet, wiping the tears from my eyes. Taking a better look around me at the other men, I notice all of them wearing the same leather vests, and all of them look dangerous.

"It's okay. Grace told me you might feel that way. Verretti had you for a long time." Liam speaks to me as if he's talking me off a fucking ledge, and I hate it. "Get in the cage. We'll go home, and we'll get you better. It's going to be okay."

"Cage? I'm not getting in no fucking cage." I stare back at him, horrified. Who are these people, and what have they done



to my brother?

“He means the truck, darlin’.” The blonde guy who wanted to shoot the love of my life takes a few steps closer to me and smiles.

“I’m Jessie, a friend of your brother’s. No one here’s gonna hurt ya,” he assures me, and though his kind eyes force me to trust him, they don’t make me hate him any less.

“I need to get back to Rafe.” I try my best to speak clearly despite feeling hysterical.

My brother scrubs the frustration off his face with his palm before attempting to talk to me again.

“You’ve got Stockholm syndrome, Riley. It happens. Victims become emotionally attached to their captors.”

“I haven’t got Stockholm syndrome, Liam. I’ve got a son, and he was on that *fucking plane!*” I scream, breaking into tears as the pain of saying the words out loud seeps deeper into the pit of my stomach.

The shock on Liam’s face matches everyone else’s surrounding me.

“No one mentioned anything about a fucking kid!” The guy standing beside the truck door slams his fist down on the hood. He only looks a few years older than my brother, but he’s huge and covered in tattoos.

“Calm down, Nyx, nobody fucking knew,” the old man orders him before turning his back and kicking his boot into the truck tire.

“I... I didn’t know that, Riley.” I hear a tremble in Liam’s voice as his blue eyes fill with guilt. “If I did, we would have planned this differently and rescued you both.”

“Is Verretti the father of your kid?” Jessie asks me sympathetically before his eyes shift nervously to the old guy who I assume is in charge.

“Yes,” I nod, the combination of pain and anger becoming too much to contain.

“Then we’re gonna figure out a way to get him back,” he promises, nodding at Liam before he disappears inside the back of the truck. He’s followed by the others, and the older guy is the last one to leave us and get in the front passenger seat.

Liam stands beside me, patiently waiting for me to watch the plane get smaller and further out of sight.

“Riley. I’m so sorry. All I’ve been focused on is getting you back. I swear none of us knew you had a kid.” The plane is gone now, and my heart is in tatters. I can’t imagine how Rafe must be feeling. The destroyed look on his face before the door closed broke my heart.

“I love him,” I whisper as more tears stream over my cheeks.

“Of course you do, and we will get him back, I promise,”

“I love Raphael Verretti.” I turn my head to look at my brother, and the horrified look on his face as he stares back at me only makes me angrier at him.

“We were a family, and you and your friends have just ruined my life,” I tell him as calmly as I can manage. The empty feeling in my heart is all the evidence I need to tell me that I belong with Rafe. Despite the man he is, he’s the man I love, and I’ve come to learn we don’t get a choice in who holds our heart.

“You didn’t love him. He just made you think you did. You were his prisoner. He’s a woman-whoring cunt, Riley, one who has fucked with your head for two years. You’ll recover from this. We’ll get your boy back.”

I turn my body and raise my elbow, crunching up my fist and then landing it on his jaw, the way he taught me to years ago.

“You don’t know shit about my life, Liam.” I leave him rubbing his cheek and strut my way toward the side door of the ‘cage’ or whatever the fuck these people call it.

I have little choice but to go with them, but with God as my witness, I will not allow these people to tarnish what me and Rafe have. I will prove that I’m not crazy and then demand that they give me back to him.

“It’s not Liam anymore. I’m Storm now,” my brother calls out at me as I’m about to get inside, and I turn to look at him over my shoulder.

“And I’m Riley Verretti.” I show him a proud smile despite feeling destroyed. To get through this, I’m going to need to be brave and bide my time.

I don’t fear these people. I fear what will become of them. Because I know what Rafe is capable of... I’ve seen it with my own eyes.

It’s only a matter of time before he comes for me, and may God have mercy on all these Souls when he does.

The End

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To Sarah, Yvette and Kerry for all your hard work and being so easy to work with.

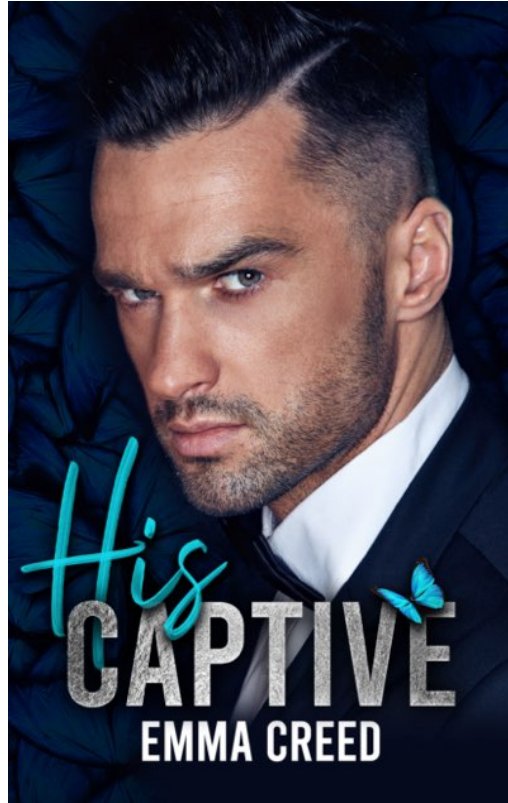
Kate, Apryle, Lucy, Amo, and Jess, my amazing buddies who remind me to take days off from writing, talk nonsense with me and never fail to make me giggle.

And to my incredible tribe at home. I'm so proud of each and everyone of you and love you with all my heart.

Lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank *you* for coming on the Dirty Souls ride with me. Sorry for the cliffhanger ending, I promise you won't have to wait long for the next instalment...

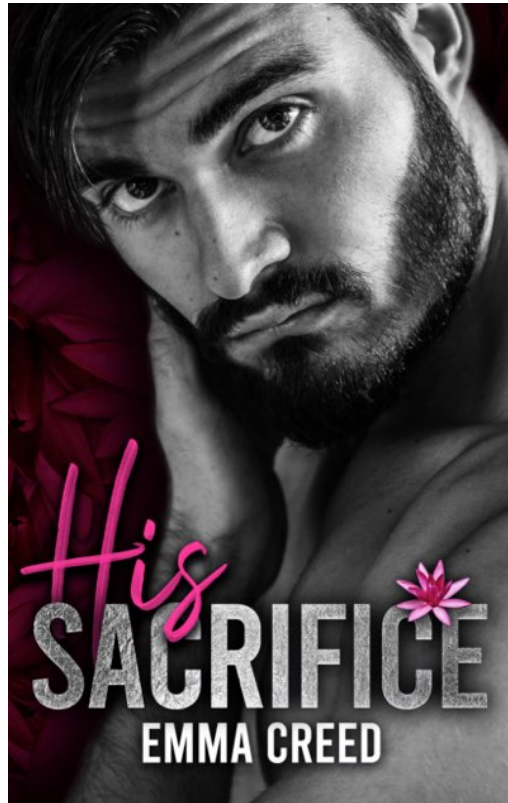
Em x

HIS CAPTIVE



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HIS SACRIFICE

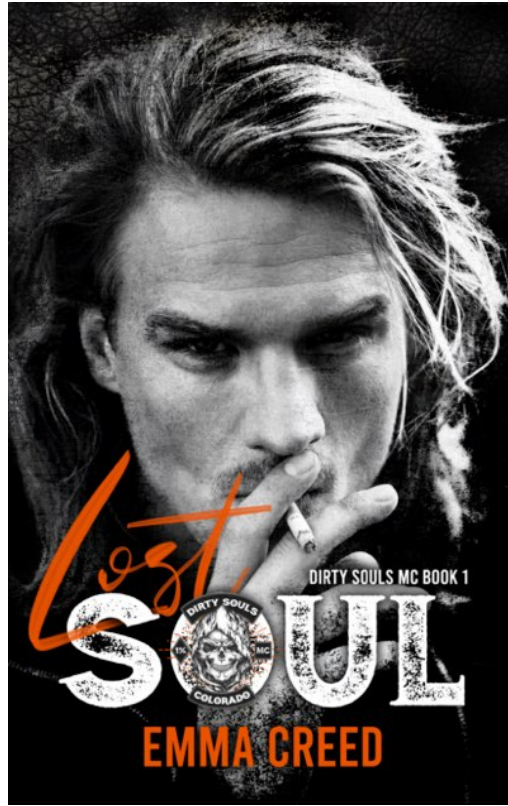


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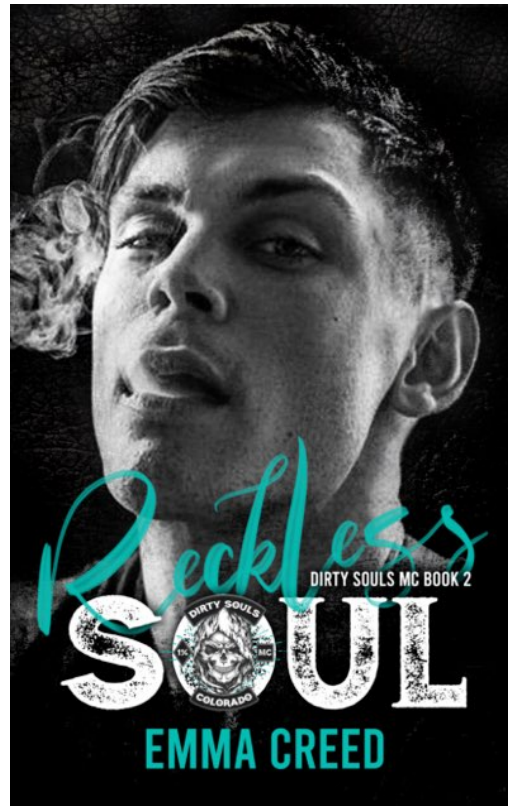
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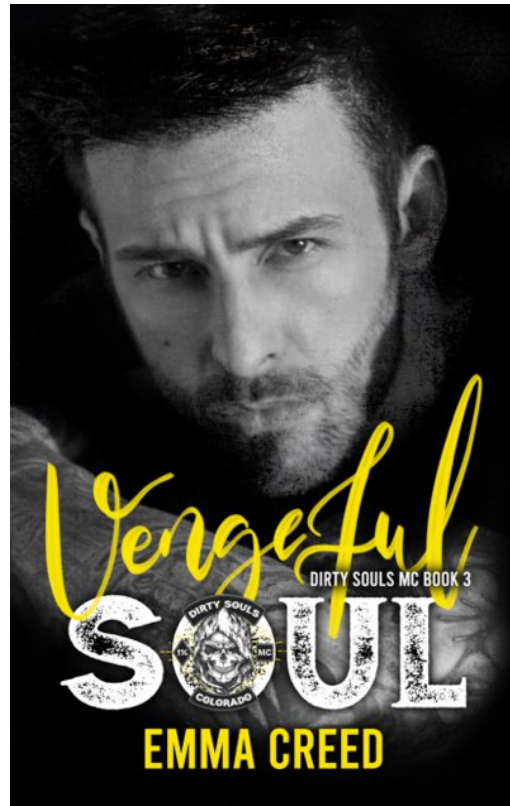
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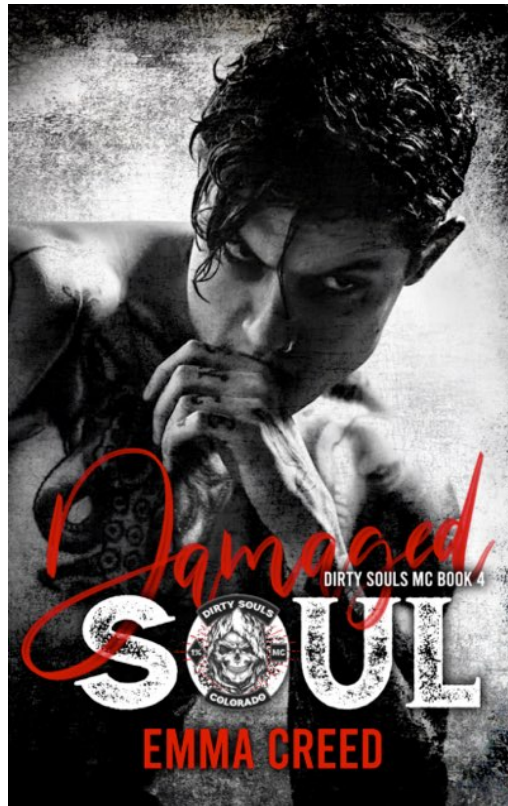
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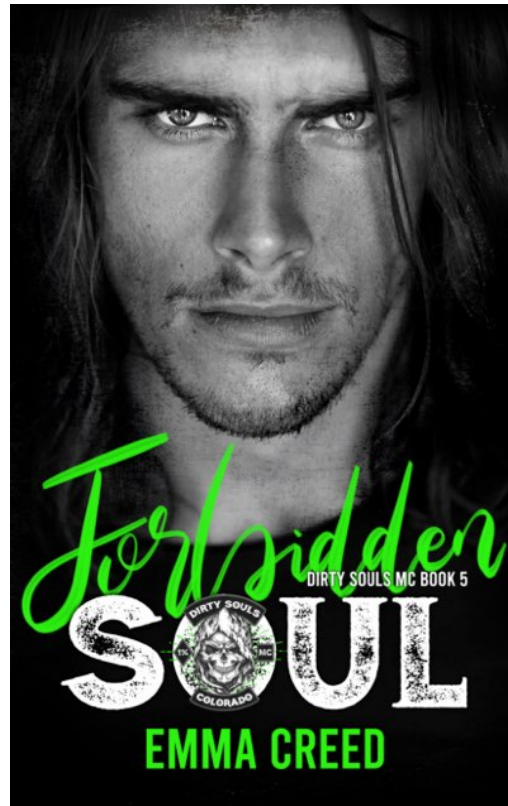


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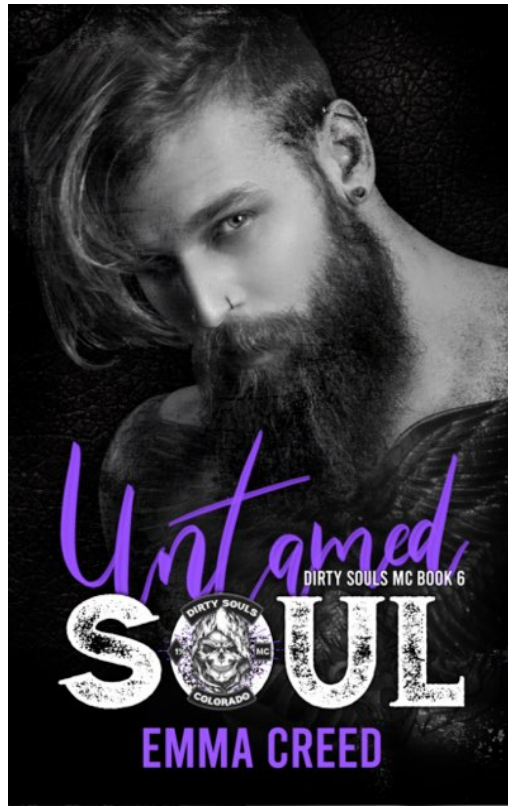
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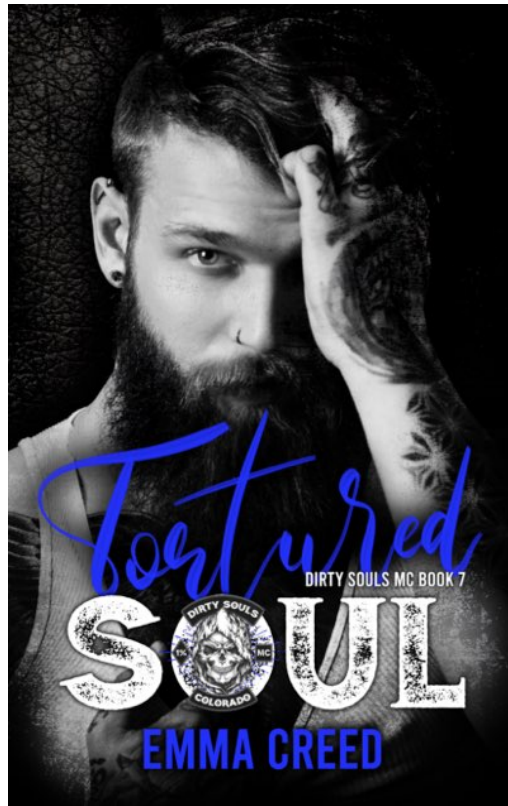
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