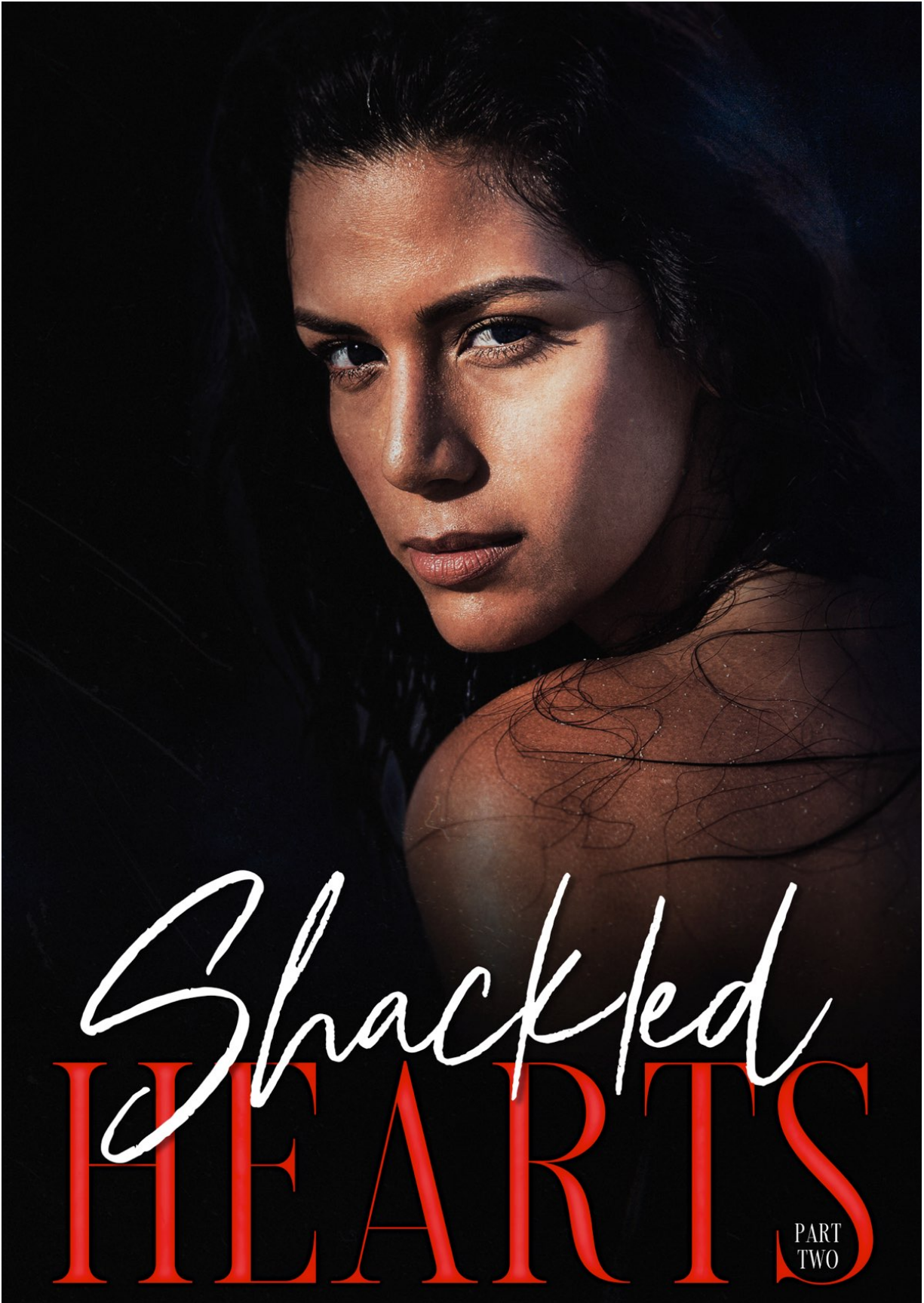


Shackled HEARTS

PART
TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
T. L. SMITH



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Cover – RBA Design

Photographer - Miguelanxofoto

Edited – Swish Editing

Editor - Ink Machine Editing & Nice Girl Naught Edits

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Betrayed, deceived, broken.

They are the only words used to describe who I have become.

Make no mistake, I let this happen.

But do you want to know the thing about letting someone into your life?

It can be undone.

Lucas Rossi may think he has won this round.

But I have news for him.

I'm going to win every other one he sends my way.

My heart may be in shackles, but my head has perfect clarity.

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Variety Gossip

The City's Bad Boy

The word is the bad boy of all bad boys has done something unforgivable.

Does anyone happen to know what it is?

Because his pretty new toy is mad.

So, so mad.

Will he be able to recover from something so... bad?

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Chapter One

CHANEL

Those eyes that are made in the depths of the woods stare back at me.

How could you not want those eyes on you in all aspects of life?

Even when it comes with the bad.

So, so much bad.

Hands touch me, and I feel it in my core.

Why is it the bad always feels so damn good?

It's a trick.

One I willingly fall for every single damn time.

And I will keep falling.

Just like she did.

Unless...

"Mia per sempre." There are those words again, whispered into my ear and sending shivers over every hair follicle of my body.

I hate him.

But I don't.

"Mia per sempre."

My hand moves to touch him, only I get nothing but air.

"What do we say when we are a good girl?" His breath tickles my face.

"Daddy." Each side of his sinister mouth lifts into a smirk, and he nods in approval.

“That’s right, *mia per sempre*.” He reaches out like he’s going to touch my face, but his hands skirt around it. “Now, tell me, have you been a good girl?”

I bite the inside of my cheek.

And something pulls at the back of my head.

A memory.

What is it?

“I only reward those who have been good.” His voice sounds... strained.

“What...” My head starts shaking. What is he talking about? He rewards me and then punishes me. Doesn’t he? But I like his punishments.

“*Mia per sempre*.”

Again.

Why does he keep on saying that? What is wrong with him?

“Lucas.”

I watch as his lips purse, and he tsks me.

“I think it’s best you don’t speak unless asked to.”

Ha.

That’s a no.

I am not that kind of woman.

And I never will be.

“Do you plan to kill me?” Something cold hits me, and a shiver racks my body.

“You’ve asked me that before, *mia per sempre*.”

I have, but why can I not remember the answer?

“Brody,” I say, stepping back from him. Looking down at my bare feet, I see blood on the floor. “I need to go to Brody.”

“Why?” His single word hits me hard.

“Because he is my brother.”

“But what am I?” His voice rings through the fog in my mind.

I shake my head.

What is Lucas to me? I don't even know.

How can I not know? He is the only man to have given me pleasure.

Does that count?

One of the only men to defend me who isn't related to me. He is the only person who sees me. Even in the bad, I know he sees something different in me.

Something I don't even see.

He's morally in the gray area.

And I want him.

But at the same time, I don't.

The internal struggle is next level, and it's hard to work through the conflict in my mind.

"It wouldn't be hard if it was simple," Lucas whispers.

I look up to see my brother standing there. How did...

"This is a dream," I breathe out, realization hitting me. Lifting my hand to touch the back of my head, I feel wetness. Shifting my hand in front of my eyes, all I see is red—blood.

Lucas's father, that fucked-up man, who also created another fucked-up human, hit me?

"I wonder, *mia per sempre*..." He pauses. "Can you wake up?"

Hands that once provided pleasure now push me roughly.

Over the edge.

I feel myself falling.

Then I see my mother, the way her dull hair, the same as mine, seems to float in the air. She is twirling with Brody in her arms, spinning him to the point where I know when she stops, he'll be sick, and I'll have to clean it up.

Then I see my father, sitting at the table, looking at the bills with a bottle of whiskey in his hand and a sneer on his face.

Both sets of eyes fall to me.

Both stop.

And then...

... I wake.

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Chapter Two

CHANEL

Have you ever woken and thought, *Is this my life? How did I get here? What put me here?*

Okay, that last question I know the answer to.

Lucas Rossi.

That asshole.

Was this his plan all along?

What a fuckhead.

Squeezing my eyes shut tightly, I still see them—my parents.

“You’re awake. No need to hide it. Your breathing has changed.” I open my eyes. *Malik*. He’s sitting in a seat opposite of where I lie on a bed. Glancing around, I have no idea where we are, but it’s a nice room. Much more than I can afford, that’s for sure.

My head hurts, and my hands are tied together in front of me. I’m able to sit, so I scoot backward and push myself up against the headboard.

His eyes track every one of my movements.

Every last one, tracing every inch of me.

I can see the resemblance to his son now that I look at him. Lucas is better looking, though. Absolutely no doubt about that whatsoever.

But where they differ is...

... Malik gives me creepy vibes. Ones where I would go the other way if I were passing him on the sidewalk.

Where Lucas just gives straight-up fuck-off vibes. He doesn't want your company unless he seeks it out. The natural appeal is there for Lucas. If you walked past him, you couldn't help but glance, no matter how risky it was.

He is beautiful.

What on earth he saw in me, I will never know. But he did see something, and my hope is that he never does again. I've learned my lesson. I always knew to stay away from dangerous men, and calling him a dangerous man is an understatement. And yet, I willingly walked straight into his place, knowing who owned it.

I wonder...

... I will always wonder.

But wondering can be a dangerous thing.

What if I'd let Brody be a man and work as he wanted with no interference? What if I hadn't been so protective of him? Would things have been different?

Would the now be different?

Rough hands grasp my head and turn it to face Malik. I keep my eyes closed, which pisses him off even more. He slaps me, hard, across my cheek. Still, I don't open my eyes, even though they're watering behind the lids from the harsh sting.

"If I knew you would be this much of a difficult bitch, I would have killed you. That would have made my life so much simpler."

My eyes spring open at Malik's cruel words.

"Or, you know... you could have *not* wanted someone who doesn't want you in return."

Malik's grip tightens on my face, his fingers sure to leave bruises in their place.

"You want me."

I spit in his face, but he doesn't relent as I watch the saliva run down his cheek. I force my next words out through a clenched jaw, "I put a protective order against you. On what God's green earth would make you think that means I want you? I never wanted to be around you. You are filth."

"If I'm such filth, then why did you give it to my son for free?" His eyes go wider, a fire burning in them that's aimed directly at me, the intensity so strong I can feel the burn.

"Does that bother you so much? That I like the way he fucks over you?"

His hand drops away from my face.

"That I prefer him over you?" I taunt again. I'm not afraid of this asshole. Silly, I know. But when I look at him, I don't see a scary monster, I see someone who needs help. Fucked-up help, and lots of it.

"I could bring him in here. Maybe I could make him fuck you, and then you'll be begging for me. You say I'm filth, but my son is worse than me. I have a fascination with hookers, you see."

I don't answer his taunts. There is no point.

He nods to me and stands, leaving me on the bed. At least he hasn't tied me to it like his son did.

"Ah, so that makes you quiet. Maybe that's what you want? A little father-son action. I hear you call him Daddy. Do you want to call me that?"

My eyes lock on to his, my brows pulling together, but I don't move nor do I say anything else.

He doesn't deserve my words.

Because he is filth.

Worse than slime on a putrid lake.

"I don't kill my fucks, but he does, yet you still want him?" Malik's head drops to the side. Again, I choose to remain silent. He huffs and walks to the door, looking back at me before finally pulling it open. "If I see you walk out this door, I will put a bullet in you, then I will fuck you after. No matter if you enjoy it or not. No matter how much pain you are in."

Nothing.

I have nothing.

No words can leave my mouth.

My jaw is locked tight.

He huffs again, then leaves.

Goddamn asshole.

Managing to sit up farther, I look around the room.

It appears I'm in a bedroom.

Is this *his bedroom*?

No artwork decorates the walls. Clothes are neatly hung in a walk-in closet. It's small, but it is full of men's clothing. Putting my feet to the side, I reach up and touch the back of my head once more with my hands tied. It hurts. The blood is still on my hand from before, but the bleeding has now stopped.

Did he hit me?

I hear mumbled talking, and when I stand to check it out, my head goes dizzy. I sit back down and close my eyes for a moment, waiting for the nausea and overwhelming light-headedness to dissipate. And manage to untie my hands.

I have to take it slow. And I have to find something to protect myself with and hopefully help to get out of this situation.

I need out.

Now!

Standing slower this time, I manage not to feel like I'm going to fall and take a few breaths before I walk to the other door. Pushing it open, there's a bathroom with only a shower and sink. I wet my face and push my hair back over my shoulders. As I look down at my clothes, I'm pleased to take in that he didn't touch me when I was out.

How would that even make me feel?

Dirty?

Violated?

How do I get out of this without lowering myself to his level? The last thing I want to do is let that man touch me.

I don't want to be touched anymore.

Not unless...

Goddamn! I shake my head again.

There have to be other men out there who can make me feel as good as Lucas can. I can't want *only* Lucas. Not just for the mind-blowing sex, but for...

Goddammit again! I hate to even think it, but in the back of my mind, I know I like him.

I like how he cooks for me, and it's all the things I like. Even if before or after the meal it accompanies something bad.

It's like he says, "*Hey, sorry I killed someone. Eat,*" or, "*Oh shit, sorry he touched you. I shot him. Eat.*"

But we all know Lucas doesn't say sorry.

Glancing up, there's a window, and it takes a second to do the math in my head to know I can get through it. And as soon as that realization hits me, I'm climbing onto the sink and reaching for the window, but before I can open it, I hear the outer door open. And I know, I just know, I won't have enough time to get the screen off and climb out before the bastard finds me. So I step back down, dropping my head on the counter where my feet were as the door opens.

"You have a visitor."

Quickly, my head spins to Malik, who's standing there, his eyes on me, roaming every inch of my body. *The sleaze.*

"I don't want to see anyone," I bite back.

"I don't care. Now, fucking move before I make you move."

Well, okay then. I stand straight and step to walk out the door, but half of his body is in the way. He doesn't move, I guess, so I have to squeeze

past him. He smiles, or should I say more like leers as I do, getting pleasure in the fact that I have to touch his body to get past him. Venomous words wait on the tip of my tongue to spew at him, but I keep them to myself. He's right behind me as I exit the bedroom, and the first thing I see is Merci.

She's on the floor, her body bare as she moves slowly. I run over to her and place my hand on her shoulder. She shivers and flinches back at my touch as if it burns her, so I stand, careful not to hurt her again.

"She couldn't quite fuck like you." Malik's voice is right near my ear, the heat of his breath fanning across my skin. "But that's no matter. She can scream like the best of them."

"What have you done?" I ask. While looking down at Merci, my hands bawl into fists, and all I want to do is kill him in any which way possible. Her braids—her long, beautiful braids—are cut off near her neck. Her skin is burned in places, and dried tears mark her cheeks.

"You slept, and I needed someone to play with." I spin around to face the complete asshole who's standing right in front of me and take in his face. How he looks pleased to have shocked me. How his brows raise with unabandoned excitement. How his tongue dashes out to wet his bottom lip. My feet stay still, shocked. Damn! I should know better because this man is fucked up. I don't want to show him my outrage, but the look of smugness on his face makes me want to slice his face off with a knife. I couldn't hate this man more if I tried.

"You are sick, you know that?"

"Have you told my son the same thing?" He's trying to taunt me, but two can play that game.

"You're jealous of Lucas?" I smirk for no other reason than to piss him off.

I get it now.

His lips form a straight line, then he puckers them, biting the bottom one.

“I am jealous of no one, least of all someone who does my bidding.” He scoffs.

My feet move fast as I move closer. “But you are. Why, though?”

Merci groans and I look down. She’s clutching at her stomach, her face now white with pain.

“I’m *not* jealous,” he states, his expression unmoving.

I see cigarette butts near Merci. He was burning her with them.

What sort of fucked-up fuck does that to another person?

Turning my attention back to him, I stare as he gets bored with my conversation and walks over to a pack of cigarettes before lighting one and sitting on his sofa.

“Take a seat. We have things I wish to discuss.”

Merci groans again, and my chest aches in response. I drop to comfort her, but he hisses from where he sits, bringing my attention back to him.

“Leave the bitch and sit, or I’ll throw gasoline over her before I burn her with my cigarette.”

Biting my cheek, I stand and move to sit on the sofa opposite him. He crosses his legs, and his brown eyes lock on mine.

“Tell me... what made you run from me? I would have given you everything.”

“Is that really what you think?” I ask, somehow without rolling my eyes. “How could it have worked? You were a client? I wasn’t with you because I wanted you, Malik. I was with you because *you* paid *me*. You know the difference, right?”

“That’s what they all say until I offer to give them more.”

“You could have offered me a house and the fanciest car, and I still would have said no. You have nothing I want.”

His fingers grip the side of the sofa, and I watch as he holds it tight, his knuckles turning slowly white.

“I find that hard to believe,” he says through gritted teeth. “Considering my son is the only one who seems to have caught your eye.”

This man—he’s missing several brain cells.

How does he not get it?

At all.

“If you say so.”

The asshole stands quickly at my words and stomps over to me.

“Lucas isn’t going to save you. He collected you for me. It’s what my son does. He has a reputation for collecting. Surely, you know this?” I keep my mouth shut. “But what most people don’t know is he collects for me. Granted, he doesn’t fuck them all. Actually, none of them, so you must have been *really* special.” His finger traces my jaw, and my spine locks tight. “How did he make you come?” he asks. “Teach me. I will fuck you into tomorrow and show you I can give you everything you want and more.”

“Do you really want to know what he did?” I ask, and he leans in eagerly to hear more. His breath is all over my face, and I want to vomit. “He took a knife...” his eyes go wide at my words, interest piquing him, “... then he slit his throat. You should try it.”

Boom!

My head slams back, and I’m thankful I’m sitting on a sofa as my head bounces off the back, but blood instantly covers my face, running into my mouth, and I know he’s just hit me, and just not a slap this time.

No, this time, it’s worse.

It hurts so much more.

I see stars and blackness.

Hands grip my already raw face, and he pulls at my sore jaw.

“You asked for it, remember that.”

I try to pull away, but he lifts me under my chin and forces me to a standing position. I can’t do anything but follow him, although shakily, as I go to where he wants me, his hands holding firmly. He forces me to a stop

when he gets to Merci, who's still lying on the floor. I watch in horror as he lights a cigarette and then takes a long draw, blowing the smoke in my face, before he lowers it to her skin. He forces it into her shoulder, where her skin is bare, and pushes it harder into her flesh.

The smell of burning flesh hits me before her screams do.

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Chapter Three

LUCAS

“The kid has been asking where she is,” Sergio says as he walks into the back room of the bar.

After my father took her, I came here. It’s better that I’m not where I can smell her. And believe me, her smell is everywhere in my place. It’s on every surface as if it’s teasing me that I willingly gave her up, but she wasn’t mine to begin with.

When did that ever stop me, though?

“You still give him a lot of power,” Sergio comments.

It takes me less than two seconds to get out of my chair and into his face. My hand wraps around his throat, and I push him back, squeezing. He doesn’t fight me because he knows if he did, I would end him.

“Have I taught you nothing?” I bark. His face goes white, and his eyes are large. “You may be my second-in-command, Sergio, but do *not* forget your position. Do not think because you are a friend that you can step into the subject of *the family*. You should know better.” I squeeze harder before I release him with a push and step back. “Do you understand?”

He rubs his neck as he catches his breath, and for a second, I think about what would have happened if I had killed him. What would that mean for me?

Sergio is by far my most trusted man. No one else knows about my father other than him. I guess it's why he thinks he can comment on the relationship.

He can't.

I don't want him to.

The subject is taboo.

He knows this.

"Of course, sir. I get it."

A loud knock is heard coming from the door.

Sergio steps past me to get it.

"Tell whoever it is, I'm busy."

He doesn't say anything more as he leaves.

Opening my phone, the first thing I see is her.

"Fuck off, Sergio."

I know that voice. So I stand as the door is pushed open, and my father now looms there with Sergio behind him, shaking his head.

"You think your men can stop me from seeing my son?" I sit back down. I already know what mood he's in before he says anything further. "Sergio, get me a fucking drink." He pulls out a chair, and as he sits, the air from the door hits him, and I can smell *her* all over him. Everything in me straightens as my father relaxes back in his chair with not a care in the world.

Does he even care? No. Because if he has an issue, I solve it.

It's been our dynamic since I was a teenager and started working with Keir.

Keir also knows this—it's why he asked me if I'd heard from him.

I lied.

And I never lie.

Unless it's about my father.

I hate that fact more than I can say because lies are sour, and they taste bitter off the tongue. Just like this man sitting across from me. Why do I do it? Fuck knows! I'm still trying to work that out.

I have no qualms about killing people or about those I know being killed. After all, I do most of the killing. But for some reason, my father has a grip on me I'm not sure how to conquer.

"Sergio is not *your man*. Do not tell *my men* what to do," I bite back.

He raises a brow at me. "You angry at me?" he asks. But he doesn't say it as someone who actually cares if I'm angry, he says it as if he's surprised and wants to know why. Because, clearly, he could never do anything to upset anyone, now could he?

"I gave you what you wanted yesterday, so why are you here?" I ask, leaning forward and breathing through my mouth heavily. If I breathe through my nose, I may jump over the table and strangle him to get to her.

She is still my favorite thing.

"She's feisty, that one. If that's what you're upset about, you can have her."

My tongue slides over my teeth as I try to remember not to kill my father. "You no longer want her?" I ask.

He pulls up the sleeve of his shirt and shows me a cut on his arm. "The crazy bitch did that. Got a kitchen knife and fucking cut me."

I hold back my smirk because that sounds like something she would do. I know, as I've had a knife to my throat as well. "So, you made me go through all this for what?" My voice is dropping, and he sits straighter when he hears the anger starting to form in the words spewing from my mouth.

"It wasn't for nothing." He stands, heads to the small refrigerator, and pulls out a beer, popping it open before he turns back to me.

"I even got that friend of hers. Fucked her, then beat her to get her to listen. Do you think she did?"

The door opens, and Brody enters. Sergio runs behind him, holding his stomach.

“Where is my sister, and Merci?”

My father turns to look at him. I remain seated. If I stand, I may very well pull out the gun in my pants and shoot every fucking person in this room.

Maybe then my life would be easier.

No, that’s simply wishful thinking.

“Lucas... I mean, sir.” Brody shakes his head, and I can tell how upset he is.

But do I really care? Not sure I want the answer to that.

“I don’t know where she is,” I respond evenly.

His body drops.

Motioning to my father, I add, “But he does.”

All eyes turn to Malik. He doesn’t care that this kid knows. He does care that I said something, though.

“You have some cheek,” my father snaps at me.

“You know where Chanel is?” Brody asks, stepping farther into the room and closer to my father, his eyes now pinned on him while my father brings his beer to his lips and takes a long drink.

“And *who* are you?” he finally asks, pulling the beer away from his mouth.

“I’m her brother, and I want to know where she is. Chanel always checks in, and she hasn’t.”

“Seems to be a *you* problem,” my father barks back with a smile on his face. He lifts the beer as he says, “Good luck finding her.” Then he proceeds to place the bottle to his lips once more.

Brody glances at me. When I do nothing, I watch it click in his head. It’s a slow process, but one I recognize all too well.

Despair.

Frustration.

Then anger.

He grinds his teeth before he looks away.

“Little boys should never play with the big boys,” my father comments, which sends Brody over the edge. He reaches forward, produces a gun, and raises it to my father’s head. I sit back farther in my chair, excited to see how this comedy in action will play out.

“Where is she? This will be your *only* warning,” Brody snarls.

My father places his beer on the table, careful not to move his head as the gun stays pointed into his skull.

“You are going to let this *boy* point a gun at me in *my* establishment?” I look behind Brody to Sergio standing there, his arms crossed over his chest without a care.

“He asked you a question.” I smile at my father.

When my father chooses not to answer, Brody surprises us all by taking the safety off.

Sergio’s arms lower from his chest, and he pushes off the wall.

“Last time I’m asking.”

“Boy, you have no idea who you’re fucking with,” my father says calmly.

“Where. Is. My. Sister?” Brody’s voice rises with each word.

Who knew this kid could be hard? It’s always the quiet ones.

“Who taught you to hold a gun?” I ask Brody.

When he answers, he doesn’t look at me, “Chanel.”

“What else has she taught you?” I ask him.

“How to shoot.” Then he moves the gun from my father’s head and shoots him in the leg. Everyone, and I mean everyone, goes dead silent. No one really thought he would do it. It even takes a second for my father to register that he’s been shot and for the pain to hit him.

Sergio moves quickly, removing the gun from Brody's hand and pinning him to the wall while my father wails in his seat like a damn baby.

"It's best you tell the kid where she is," I tell my father, at which he returns a sharp look.

"You want her." He's baiting me. He should know better. I did learn from him after all, but I've out-mastered the master.

"Where is she?" I prompt him again.

My father looks to the kid, who's still against the wall with Sergio holding him there before glancing back to me as he grips his leg. "Still at my place," he finally answers. "Do you plan to tell him where I live?" My father's voice is not shaky, but I can hear the concern. He isn't used to someone protecting the ones they love—he witnessed it but has never been a victim of it. And let's be clear, my father is far from a victim. He's always the villain, or should I say asshole, in every person's story.

"Yes, I do. As you said, you don't want her anymore. You offered her back to me."

"I was testing you, and it seems you have a weak spot, my son."

I nod to Sergio to let the kid go and rattle off my father's address. Brody listens intently then runs out the door before I can say another word.

"Do you plan on ever calling me a doctor?" he asks as I go to walk out.

"No. Would you like Keir to find out about you?" I stare down at him and get no response, then I nod to Sergio. "He can dig the bullet out." I slide my bottle of whiskey to him. "Drink up, old man, you're going to need it," I say with a grin before I walk out.

Chapter Four

CHANEL

Merci's head is in my lap. Malik left and locked us in his room, which I am grateful for. It has given me some time to think about what to do. I've banged, kicked, and tried to smash the door down to no avail. The old idiot has locked us out of the bathroom as well, he's been gone for hours, and I need to pee.

"You sure do know how to pick them," Merci says, finally waking up. She's been out for quite a while.

Malik? Well, let's just say he's a fuckhead who gets off on hurting people.

The number of burns that litter Merci's body right now...

... it's inconceivable how someone could do that to another human being.

"I didn't pick him," I tell her, stroking her face. "He was a client."

"I figured as much. We always knew you got the crazy ones. I guess crazy is always drawn to you." She goes to move, to sit up, but lets out a small cry when she does.

"I'm sorry, Merci." I try to help her while being careful not to touch her raw skin. When she is finally able to get up, she turns to face me, and her eyes go wide in shock.

“Chanel...” I bite my lip but release it quickly. It hurts. “What did he do to you?” she asks in a whisper.

I pulled a knife on him and cut him after he took his fists to my face repeatedly. I’ve become numb to it all, and I forgot it was there until she’s said something.

“It’s not as bad as what he did to you,” I whisper, reaching out to touch her ever so carefully. She recoils at my touch and looks at her skin. I’ve managed to put some clothes on her, so she isn’t naked anymore, but it’s only a t-shirt, and it is incredibly loose-fitting. I doubt she’d be able to bare anything else close to her skin right now.

“How are we going to get out of here?” She stands, and her legs are shaky when she does. Malik never said where he was going, just that he was leaving. Then he locked us in here and told me if I found a way out, he would find me.

Fuckhead.

He totally suffers from old-man dick.

“Okay, so maybe if both of us ram at the door?” she suggests.

“You’re covered in burns. That will hurt you so much more than me,” I reply as my eyes roam her. The wounds need to be dressed with antibiotic lotion or something before they become infected, if they aren’t already.

“It’s worth it. Would you rather stay and wait for that bastard to come back?”

My shoulder is already sore from trying so hard when she was passed out.

“Maybe if we...” I manage to stand, and Merci comes back and stands next to me, then leans forward.

“Okay, on three, run at it. If it’s anything like the movies, it will open.”

I chuckle, knowing it probably won’t budge, but I answer with, “Wishful thinking. My shoulder is on fire after so many previous tries,” I tell her, dropping down to a run squat.

Merci starts to count...

One...

Two...

Three.

We both run at the door shoulder first, but as we get to it, I turn my head, not wanting my face to smash into the wood. Then instead of connecting with it, I'm falling. Hands grab for me, but I still drop to the floor.

"Fuck."

Shit! I know that voice.

"Get up, Chanel." Merci is standing over me.

I'm lying on someone, and I can feel every inch of them underneath me. I know who it is before I even look. But when I do, those dark wood-colored eyes lock onto mine, and despite everything—and I mean *everything*—I sigh in relief at the sight of him.

"Didn't expect this welcome," he says, and his voice is sickeningly comforting.

I hate that!

As I push up, I feel his cock between my legs. His nose scrunches, and I know he's smelling me. When isn't he? But before he can move, I slam my palm into his nose and jump off him. I see Brody with his arms around Merci, holding her up in his firm grip.

"Fucking hell, Chanel." Lucas gets up from the floor, his hand on his nose as blood pours from it like a tap has been turned on.

I look to him, then to Brody, and then Merci. "I think it's best we leave. *Now*," I say to them, eyeing the doorway.

Right now, I don't see any sign of Malik, and for that, I'm more than thankful.

"You..." Lucas points at me with the hand that isn't holding his nose, "... are coming with me." Then he really looks at me, his hand dropping

away from his nose as he stares at my face. I watch as his eyes scan me from head to toe. Blood continues to leak from his nose and drop to the floor, but he has no care.

Lucas Rossi is mad.

“Merci,” Brody calls out as she collapses onto the floor.

Lucas sighs and turns around, glancing down. “Seems my father didn’t like this one.”

“Sir,” Brody says, but Lucas bends down and picks Merci up as if she were a child and starts power walking out with her in his arms. Brody looks back at me, unsure of what to do before he follows him out. “Where are you taking her?” Brody asks as Lucas walks to his car, places Merci in his back seat, then shuts the door.

“To a doctor.” Lucas walks around to his side of the car and addresses both of us. “Get in.”

Brody doesn’t hesitate as he slides in the back with Merci, which leaves me to get in the front seat with Lucas. I bite my inner cheek, not wanting to do that at all. I don’t even want to reach out and touch the door, let alone think about getting inside the car with him. The passenger window slides down, and I hear his voice without seeing him. “You can stay here and wait for him to come back, or... you can get in. I would suggest you get in.”

Turning away, I look down the street. It’s dark. There’s not a cloud in the sky or anyone to be seen. *How come no one came when we screamed?*

Taking a deep breath, I turn and walk away from the car and head down the street. I’ve made my choice, and it’s never *the better the devil you know*. I should know this. My feet are bare, and my clothes are covered in blood, but I don’t care. I keep walking until I hear his car come up next to me. When he parks, I hear the door shut and then his footsteps as he comes to a stop in front of me, blocking me from going any farther.

“Get in the car, Chanel.”

“You are just like your father. Both of you think you can tell me what to do as if I am your property. I don’t belong to either of you. Do you understand?” I scream. “I belong to no one. No one can buy me, sell me, or give me away as you thought you could. I am a person, not a belonging.”

“Mia per sempre.”

“Don’t call me that!” I scream at him.

Lucas doesn’t move away, but his hand reaches out to touch my face. I move back, afraid of his touch and what it will make me feel for him.

“The pain I would inflict on you will always be for your pleasure.” He pauses. “This...” his hand waves around my face, “... I would never do.”

“Ha.” I roll my eyes. “Next, you’re going to tell me you fart unicorns.”

His lip quirks at my words.

“Get in the car... please. I need to get you both checked out.” Looking back to the car, I shiver as the cold air assaults me. When I turn back to Lucas, I glance at his trousers before locking my eyes to his.

“Give me your gun, and I’ll get in.”

He wants to say no.

I can see it written all over his face.

But if he doesn’t give me that gun, I will be going absolutely nowhere with him. Not a hope in hell.

“No one touches my gun,” he states plainly.

“Well, guess I’m not getting in that car with you then,” I tell him and try to move around him, but he sidesteps me and blocks my path yet again. “Move, Lucas. I am not getting in that car with you ever again unless I have a weapon. And right now, I want it to be your gun.”

“No one touches my gun,” he repeats, his gaze boring into mine, willing me to concede.

“Fucking move, then.” This time I push around him, and he lets me. I take a few steps before he’s back in front of me with his gun in hand. He isn’t looking at me, though. He’s looking at his gun.

“I’ve killed for less.” He holds the weapon out for me to take.

“Big bad Lucas,” I say with another eye roll.

“Do you want the gun or not?” he growls out.

With one hand, I take it from him, and he heads back to the car. I contemplate lifting it, shooting him in the back of the head, then stealing his car, but I am unsure if I would be remorseful at all with my actions.

But right now, he has a doctor, and doctors here are hell expensive.

“Even think about shooting me, I’ll kill your brother.” He opens the passenger door for me, and I walk over and climb in as he hovers. “You smell...” he comments as I get in, then he shuts the door behind me without finishing.

Or does he actually mean I smell?

Of course, I fucking smell.

I’ve been trapped in some asshole’s house for two days without a shower.

The dickhead.

Lucas starts the car, and I turn to the back seat. Brody is trying to calm a crying Merci, who’s in obvious agony as she lies across the seat. Facing Lucas again, I hold his gun up and aim at him.

“If you pull that trigger, we all die,” he grumbles.

“I’m not *that* stupid,” I tell him, then smirk. “I would at least wait until you come to a full stop.”

His head turns toward me, and those eyes that haunt and are in my fantasies lock on to mine. “You would be wise not to do that.”

“Why? What’s the worst you can do? Give me to your father again?” I laugh, throwing my head back. It hurts, but I don’t let him see the agony on my face.

“That was an error in judgment.”

“No takebacks, Lucas,” I say.

This man thinks he can just say *it was an error*, and I will what? Forgive him?

Yeah, how about hell to the fucking no.

That will never happen.

“When I look at you now, I see him. That’s disgusting to me on so many levels.”

Finally, he stops the car in front of the bar’s back door. Sergio is waiting. Lucas nods to the back, and Sergio opens the door, grabs Merci, and pulls her out somewhat carefully. Brody follows, leaving Lucas and me in the car.

“You won’t forget this, will you?”

He was careful not to use the word *forgive*.

But forget.

“No, *never*. It’s hard to forget such a vile human being. Someone who thinks because he once paid me to fuck him that he has some sort of claim over me.”

“He had none.”

Just then, I hear a menacing laugh, so I twist my head in the direction of the sound to see Malik walking out of the bar’s back entrance.

It happens slowly.

I feel it in every piece of me as I turn around to face him.

This is it.

This is the part where I will ruin my life.

But nothing will stop it.

Quickly, I get out of the car, the gun still in my hand. I hear Lucas’s voice but don’t register what he says as I raise the gun, then shoot into the eyes that have haunted me for days.

The asshole drops to the ground like a sack of shit, blood flowing out in a glorious pattern from the wound.

“What did you do?” Lucas bellows as we both stare at his father, who lies dead at our feet.

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Chapter Five

LUCAS

My father lies there on the ground in front of a building I walk in and out of every single day. Yet, instead of walking in today, I'm standing here next to Chanel, who's holding the gun she just used to kill him.

Blood doesn't faze me, it never really has, but as I see father's blood pool around him, I wonder, is it meant to be so dark? Or is it just the concrete? Or perhaps it's because his soul is so much darker than a normal person's?

Licking my lips, I face her.

Chanel takes two steps back from me, the gun still in her hand but now raised and pointing at me.

"Did you really think I wouldn't have done that after what he did?" she asks, her hands trembling. If she shakes too hard with her finger still on the trigger, will she shoot me as well?

"Give me my gun, Chanel."

She backs away from me, the gun still in her hand, and shakes her head. "That's not going to happen."

"That's *my* gun, Chanel."

"Chanel, Chanel, Chanel," she mocks me. "Fuck you and the way you say my name, asshole." Her eyes skate to my father, and if I look down at him again, I know I'll do something I'll regret.

She killed him.

Granted, he is—no was—an asshole, and I did more than expected for him.

But she killed him.

Lights shine behind her, and we both look in that direction.

“Fuck,” I swear, stepping closer to her. She lets off a shot, and it just misses my ear. “Fucking hell, Chanel.”

“Back the fuck up, or you’ll end up like your father.”

“Malik is here?” Keir’s voice comes from behind Chanel.

We both turn toward him and Joey. Keir barely spares us a glance before he looks past us to my father on the ground. “What happened here?” Keir asks, anger clearly evident in his voice.

“I shot him... the people-thieving asshole he is.”

“People thieving?” Joey asks, confused, his eyes narrowing in on her.

“Yes.” Chanel’s eyes lock on mine. “Seems Lucas here was buttering me up all along to give me to his father,” Chanel says.

Then all sets of eyes fall to me.

Joey raises his brows in surprise, and Keir gives me a hard stare.

I lied to him.

He’s just worked that out.

And the look on his face tells me he is not happy about it.

“What happened to your face?” Joey asks Chanel, ignoring the tension between Keir and me.

“His father.” Her eyes are pinned on me.

“So... what? You killed him?” Joey asks, confirming, wanting more information that I have no doubt she will provide.

“He not only took me, no thanks to Lucas, but he took my friend, who is in there with burns all over her body and God knows what else.”

“That’s why I’m here. I heard my doctor was called,” Keir says.

Fuck. He's mad. His voice is calm, but if you know him, you know he's anything but.

"I'm leaving. And, Lucas..." Chanel calls out to me, and I face her again. "If you so much as lay a hand on my brother or friend, I will come back and put a bullet in your head the same as your piece-of-shit father lying over there in the gutter where he belongs." She spits at him, and I snap, taking a step in her direction. She raises the gun to my head, but Keir puts a hand out and stops me from going to her.

Was I going to hurt her? I don't know.

But I had to be near her.

"Go inside, Lucas."

I grind my teeth.

"Lucas." Keir raises his voice.

"She needs to be seen by a doctor," I say, nodding toward Chanel.

"No, I just need filth like you to leave me the fuck alone."

"I'll drive you. Where do you want to go?" Joey asks.

"You aren't taking her anywhere," I yell, Keir's hand still holding me back.

"Take her to Sailor," Keir tells him.

Joey nods and goes to reach out for Chanel, who still has the gun raised.

Keir turns back to Chanel and says, "I would lower that gun in my presence unless you intend to use it. Because, unlike Lucas, I will not hesitate." She lowers it straight away, and Joey takes it from her and passes it to Keir. He studies it for a moment, then says to me, "You gave her your gun?" He knows it's mine because he was the one who gave it to me. He was also the one who taught me to shoot when I was a teenager.

"She wouldn't get in the car without it."

Keir nods at my words. "She also used it to kill your father," he points out. I look behind him at Joey and Chanel walking off to his car before I focus back on Keir. "Who, I might add, you lied to me about."

“I had to.”

“You know that displeases me,” Keir says before he strides into the building. I stand there as the rain starts to fall, and Chanel slides into the car. She glances at me, and her eyes tell me so many things, but the main emotion that radiates from them...

... is hate.

I suck air between my teeth and smile at her. She turns away from me and looks at Joey. Something passes between them before they take off.

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Chapter Six

CHANEL

“You can just take me home,” I tell Joey as I turn away from Lucas’s glare.

“No can do. You’re injured, and you probably need to be watched all night. Sailor will help you.”

“Sailor is about to have a baby,” I complain while shaking my head. “She doesn’t need me around the place annoying her.”

“She’s been asking about you, so I think she does.” I stay quiet until he speaks again, “Can you tell me what happened? How did you know Malik?”

“He was a client of mine. I had to put a protection order out on him to stay away from me because that man would not leave me alone. And we were taught that if a client becomes even the slightest bit obsessive... to end it before it starts,” I tell him honestly.

“Lucas is obsessive,” he points out.

“That he is.”

“You don’t feel the need to protect yourself from him?” Joey is digging, and I simply stare. “You *do* know about him? I know all the people from the streets do. You would be stupid not to.”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve seen him do?” I ask.

I have to know.

Maybe if I do, I'll know to be better. It may help me to stay away from him.

"I watched him a few years ago. Keir and I were sent to retrieve money that was owed. It wasn't a small amount either. The guy had been talking shit about us, saying that soon we would fall now that Keir was in charge."

He rubs his hand over his jaw before it goes back to the steering wheel, and he grips it quite tightly at the memory surfacing.

"Lucas doesn't let anyone talk smack around him unless he does it or it's family. This guy was far from family, and as soon we walked in, he pulled Lucas to the side, wanting him to join him. But you see, once Lucas is loyal, it's impossible for that loyalty to be challenged." He glances at me. "It's why Keir will never get rid of him or kill him. For the sole purpose that he will do anything Keir tells him to... with no whys, ifs, or buts."

"What about his father? Did he know about him?"

"No. Lucas lied about him to Keir. I'm not sure what's going to happen there, but it won't be good."

"Will they try to kill me? You know... for killing him?" I lift my hand and chew on my nail. I taste blood and dirt on my finger away before I look back at Joey. I was stuck on autopilot when I shot that monster because I didn't think about the consequences of my actions. The problem is, I simply didn't care. All I wanted was for that monster to be far away from me, so there could be no more hurt, no more harm, and no more damage inflicted by a madman in a suit.

"Keir has no allegiance to him, so you are fine."

Releasing a heavy breath, I look out the window.

"Lucas, though..." My spine straightens, and I close my eyes. "If he is willing to lie to Keir about him, which he never does, I think it's best now if you see him, you run the other way."

"I don't plan to bake cookies with him or to tell him my secrets. I would prefer not to see him again."

“You may not have a choice.” He slows down and stops in front of Sailor’s brownstone. “Lucas sliced that man up with his own knife that he pulled on him,” Joey tells me, continuing our previous conversation. “Right in front of his men. Took finger by finger, each time he woke up, then would do it again until he passed out. It took him hours and hours. By the end, the guy died from blood loss. Then he had one of his men get a machete and chop the body up. When that was done, he proceeded to kill every one of them point-blank with a bullet to the head. Lucas has always had a dark soul.”

The front door slowly opens, and I watch, waiting to see who’s behind the door.

“We had a cat once. A stray. Took it to the vet, and he said it was in so much pain that it was best to put it down.” He glances back at me. “Lucas didn’t hesitate, and he liked that cat. Do you think he likes you?”

I don’t get a chance to answer before Sailor is opening my door. When she sees me, her eyes go wide, and she pulls me out by my hand, then up the stairs and into the house.

Once inside the door, I quickly glance back at Joey, who gives me a wave before he drives off.

“Where is he going?” I ask.

“Back to Keir,” she replies, somehow knowing the answer. As soon as the front door is shut behind me, she has a first-aid kit and is assessing all my wounds. She makes me sit on her pristine sofa in my dirty, stinky clothes and starts carefully putting antiseptic on them all.

“I’m sorry to bring this to you,” I tell her.

She stops wiping my brows and looks down at me. “This is not your fault. Never apologize for *their world*. You got dragged into it.” She eyes me up and down. “Literally.”

My eyes move to my legs covered in blood, then up to my hands that look like I’ve been trying to claw my way out of a burial plot.

“Do you think you need a hand showering?” she asks.

My attention is drawn to Piper, who comes in holding two towels. “I’ll help. You are way too pregnant.”

“I can do it myself,” I respond to them both.

“And have you risk falling and cracking your skull? Nope. Piper will go in with you, and I’ll cook you some soup.” Sailor walks off, and Piper offers me her hand.

“Let’s get you out of those smelly clothes.”

I offer her a shallow smile as I stand, accepting her hand and following her to the shower stall. She immediately turns on the faucet and steps back over to me. Her hand comes up to my shirt, and she cuts it away from me. “This will be burned.”

I couldn’t agree more.

I don’t have a problem standing in front of her naked—we all know I’m not insecure about my body. But with all the marks that currently mar my skin, I feel like I should cover all the blemishes to stop her from feeling sorry for me.

“I hope you shot him in the fucking eye for what he did.” I don’t say anything back as I slip into the shower. The warm water stings at first, but then it feels amazing. “I heard your brother already shot Malik before he found you.” Through the shower door, I can see her sitting on the closed toilet with a nail file scrubbing across her nails.

Brody, oh my god, Brody.

He shot him?

I taught him years ago how to use a gun but never, ever wanted him to have to use it. Especially not for me. When I say nothing, she looks up at me. “Did you not know that?”

My mouth opens, but no words come out.

Her phone rings, and she looks away to answer it.

“Your brother and friend are on their way,” she says, finally hanging up the phone call. “Sailor said it’s best they stay here in the spare room since you will be here.” I finish washing myself, then get out, drying my face carefully. Not dragging the towel over it is harder than I thought. “Do you want me to kick him down the stairs when he arrives?”

“Lucas is coming?” I ask.

“That was Lucas.” She holds up her phone. “I’m not opposed to doing it, just so you know.” She shrugs. “I do have these beautiful heels on and all, so it will be relatively easy.” She glances down at her heels and smiles.

I take the offered clothes from Piper, which will thankfully be loose on my skin, and dress before heading out the door. “Maybe you should go upstairs. This is the one place he won’t start on you.” Her voice is smaller now, almost a murmur.

“I’m not afraid of him.”

“That’s stupid,” she states, shaking her head.

“Why?”

Piper pushes past me and heads toward the door, and I follow her. “Because Lucas Rossi should be feared by *all*.” She accentuates the word then pulls open the door.

Goddammit! Lucas is standing with Merci in his arms and Brody next to him, and my emotions run riot as I stare at him. I hate that his presence gives me comfort, but also bubbling away at the surface is hatred and fear. How can one person provoke such emotions all at once?

Lucas’s eyes latch onto mine as he holds my glare. I look away first, my gaze falling to a passed-out Merci in his arms when I say with a little panic in my voice, “What’s wrong with her?”

“The doctor gave her something to help her sleep,” Brody replies, walking in and wrapping his arms around me. I let him, even though it hurts.

Sailor’s there to show Lucas where to put Merci.

“You shot Malik. Keir and Lucas have been yelling at each other ever since,” Brody whispers to me.

“He deserved it.”

“I wish I’d done it,” he says, then looks up the stairs after Lucas.

“You can go with her. I’m fine.”

“Even with *him*?” He nods up the stairs.

“Yes. I’ll be okay.”

“Ha,” Piper says, listening into our conversation. “Come on, kid, since she doesn’t want me to kick his grubby ass out, let’s go and get you cleaned up instead. Now, are you opposed to me sitting on the toilet while you shower?”

Brody glances back at me with drawn brows for help, but I look back to the stairs where Lucas has reappeared.

It feels as if everything goes quiet, and it’s just the two of us left in the space.

How is that possible?

Lucas takes the steps one at a time, ever so slowly, until he reaches the bottom, his eyes never leaving mine once.

What will he say?

What *can* he say?

Nothing will change the fact of what happened. I had thought I could see something between us, then it was torn away by a vicious lie.

The Viper.

He strikes.

And he did just that with me.

Collected me for his father, then handed me to him as if I were nothing.

I should have known better.

A normal person would have run.

Maybe that’s the issue? I’m not normal.

I wait, but Lucas says nothing. He simply stands there staring at me. I can see him clenching his jaw, and a vein is popping in his neck.

Does he want to kill me for what I did? Well, he can damn well try, but I know his shit of a father deserved it. Actually, he deserved so much more than a single bullet wound to the skull.

“Chanel.” I turn to Keir’s voice as he walks in the house and stands between us but enough that I can still see Lucas watching me. “The doctor is here to check you over.” I didn’t even notice the person behind Keir.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Just need some rest.”

The doctor clearly doesn’t take orders from me and steps closer. He gently runs his hand along my head, then my face before moving to the rest of my body. He presses on my ribs, and I flinch at his touch. He pauses, looks at me, and does it again. The tears that threaten to fall thankfully stay put, but I know my eyes are glassy.

“Fractured ribs, possible concussion. It’s best you’re supervised. And... get plenty of rest. Put ice on your ribs, and you should be good. Take these...” He hands me some pills and looks me in the eyes. “One every night. They will assist with the pain and help you sleep.” Then, just like that, he nods to Keir before he leaves.

“I’ll stay,” Lucas finally speaks.

“It’s settled,” Keir says.

I go to open my mouth, but Keir turns to Lucas. “If I so much as hear her screaming or know you hurt her in my house, I *will* kill you. Then I will kill your mother for pissing me off.”

Lucas nods once before Kier walks off, leaving us standing in a staring competition, yet again.

“I don’t want you *anywhere* near me,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Which bedroom?” he asks, looking over my shoulder.

“Top one on the left,” Sailor’s voice rings out from behind me.

“Ladies first.”

I turn to find Sailor, who has a sad look on her face as she hands me a glass of water. “For your pills” I take the glass, then swallow the pill. “I’ll come to check on you soon.”

“I won’t kill her, Sailor,” Lucas grumbles.

“Can never be too careful with a Rossi man,” Sailor replies, winking.

I don’t say another word, instead opting for the stairs to the room I’ve been allocated, with Lucas following close behind.

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Chapter Seven

LUCAS

All Chanel has on is a baggy shirt and underwear. I'm sure it's considered a dress, but it reminds me of a baggy shirt. I watch, not ashamed to do so, as she takes each step.

"Stop staring at my ass," she bites out as she reaches the top and turns around to look at me with a glare that would wake the dead.

"Why?"

"Because you lost your right to look when you gave me to your father without a second damn thought."

"I had a deal with him. What did you expect me to do?" I tell her honestly. Part of me wants to bend her over my knee and spank her. The other wonders if it would be smart to kill her now and save myself some of the misery to come.

I could do it fast.

No one would know.

I could make it look like an accident.

Again, no one would know.

Though the thought of killing her sits weird in my gut, and I'm not sure I like the feeling.

And that would mean lying to Keir again, which I do *not* want to do. He already wants to kill me for lying, and he still very well may just do that.

“Can you hear yourself? The words that just left your mouth?” She huffs, then shakes her head, opening the bedroom door and walking through the opening. She looks around and points to the single seat over in the corner. “That’s where you will be sleeping.”

“No. I much prefer the bed.”

“So did your father,” she spits.

Evil little bitch.

“I wouldn’t be able to ask him, as it seems you have put a bullet in his brain.”

“And I would do it again in a heartbeat.” She smirks, pulling down the duvet and climbing into bed.

The door opens and Sailor walks in with an ice pack and hands it to Chanel before she turns to leave.

“No need to come in every hour, Sailor.”

“Luckily for me, I don’t take orders from you, Lucas,” she says before she walks out.

“I like her,” Chanel comments, placing the ice extremely carefully on her ribs.

“Lord knows why. She’s a smartass.”

“Why? Because she doesn’t take your shit like the rest?”

I pull the gun from my trousers, and her eyes fall to it. “I wouldn’t even think about it,” I warn her as I place my weapon on the small coffee table in the room.

“Oh, you know for sure...” she nods with an all-telling grin, “... I was absolutely thinking about it. Putting a bullet right where I put your dad’s... you could be twins at the morgue.”

I move quickly, without thinking, the gun back in hand and my body over hers.

“Do you plan to shoot me, Lucas?” she goads, but it sounds more like a tease. My gun presses into her temple, but she doesn’t care. She simply lies

there staring up at me as if she's ready to meet her maker.

Maybe she is.

I like the fact she isn't afraid of me as much as it pisses me off. She should be afraid after everything I've done. I'm unpredictable, she knows this. So why is she taunting me? Does she know something I do not?

"Last time you had a gun on me, you had it between my legs. This is a bit of a change of pace, wouldn't you say?"

I move, and I must bump a sore spot because she flinches, her hand falling to her ribs, and she bites her bottom lip, sucking in a deep breath—the grimace telling me everything I need to know.

"Where is it hurting?" Those chocolate eyes spring open and lock on mine.

"Are you really asking me that with a gun to my head?"

I pull it away, and she moves just a little.

"The pills are starting to kick in." She turns to face me as I stand at the side of the bed. "If you plan to kill me when I sleep, make it quick. I am done with your bullshit!"

"I don't plan to kill you, even though I know I should."

"Why, because I fucked your father?"

"No, *mia per sempre*. Because... you killed him." Those eyes that haunt my dreams lock onto mine, and I wonder what's going through them. Does she see the monster that everyone else sees? She should with what I've done to her.

"This is true." She looks to the window. "But I did fuck him, just so you're aware of that fact."

I move away, not wanting to hear any of those details. The thought of her fucking my father again makes me wild, furious, and deadly. And if she hadn't killed that old bastard, I'm sure I would have eventually.

"You are a better fuck, just so you know." When I look back at her, she has a smile on her face. It seems the drugs may have kicked in purely

because she is smiling.

“I’ll put on a movie and grab you some food.”

“You tend to do that, did you know?” She’s watching me, assessing me again.

“What?”

“Kill someone... *oh, here’s some food.*” She pauses. “I hurt you... *oh, here’s some food.* Talk to me like shit... *oh, here’s some food.*” She rolls her eyes. “Clearly, you need to learn romance and how to speak love languages. Not everything can be solved with food.”

I pause, taking a step back and peer at her intently. “Do you want the food or not?”

“Yes, food.” She nods and closes her eyes.

“Stay awake. I don’t think you’re meant to sleep.”

“So... damn... bossy.” She waves me off as I leave the bedroom.

When I open the door, Sailor is standing there with Piper.

“She’s still alive,” I tell them.

“She’d better be,” Piper replies.

Sailor just smiles before she heads off to her room.

“Lucas.” I stop mid-stride on my way to the kitchen at Piper’s stern voice. “What’s so special about her? She killed your father, and yet she still breathes. You know if anyone else did that, they would not be breathing.”

“What’s your point?” I ask, not looking back.

“You love her.”

“No such thing as love, Piper. That’s just something our parents want us to believe in.”

“You telling me you don’t love your mother?”

“No, I do not. Because it’s *not* real, and only a fool would think so. But if you ever threaten my mother, make no mistake....” I turn to face her. “I will end you.”

“Big bad Viper,” she mocks.

“You don’t want to test me. Not today.”

“And what would Chanel say about that?”

“She’d say nothing, like a good little whore,” I reply, then walk down the stairs.

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Chapter Eight

CHANEL

I heard him.

I heard every single word they said and replayed them in my mind, *“Like a good little whore.”*

He’s angry at me. I get it. I did kill his father. But he gave me to that man as if I meant nothing. So, fuck him!

The door creaks open, and Piper sticks her head in. “You heard that?” she asks, eyeing me on the bed.

My arms are crossed over my chest. “I did.”

“He didn’t mean it.”

“Lucas means everything he says,” I tell her.

“Okay, that’s true. I was hoping you didn’t know him well enough to know that fact.”

Whatever! I look away from her and glance at the television. Something is playing, but I’m not really paying much attention to it.

“Keir is going to punish him, just so you are aware.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Keir has let him get away with a lot lately. But lying about his father, knowing full well that he stole from him? I’m amazed Lucas doesn’t have a bullet in his skull already.”

“He would actually do that? Kill his cousin?”

“He killed my brother.”

I gasp at her words. “No,” I say, shaking my head. “Why?”

“Keir hardly ever gives second chances,” is all she replies.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, but she merely shrugs.

“It was silly of him to think, even for a second, he could get away with what he did.” I don’t push her for more, but she continues anyway, “He slept with Keir’s fiancée.”

My eyes go wide, thinking of Sailor.

“Not Sailor. Keir was arranged to be married, and it turns out Roberto, that was my brother’s name, was in love with her. That meant Keir had to choose Roberto or Sailor. He chose her. He will always choose her.”

I knew that. You can spot their love a mile away. The way he looks at her, it’s like he is fascinated with every small movement she makes as if her breathing alone makes him happy.

“I’m so sorry.”

“He was closer to my brother than Lucas. I just wanted you to know that.” She steps back out the door and closes it with a quiet click as she goes.

What does that mean?

Is this going to be the last time I see Lucas?

But Keir let Lucas stay in his house with his family. And even me.

Fuck. Is he going to kill me as well?

If he can kill his own cousin, what does that mean for me?

“Why do you look like that?” I turn, surprised I didn’t hear the door open. Lucas enters with a plate of food and places it on my lap.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re trying to work something out in your head.”

I’m not sure if I should say it, so I bite my cheek while considering my options.

I probably shouldn’t.

But the words fall out anyway.

“Do you think Keir will kill you?” I ask in almost a whisper.

Lucas strides to the window. He’s quiet for a bit, in some sort of thoughtful trance. I study his still form and remember all the ways that body pleased mine, about how good he makes me feel with each one of his touches. But on the inside, he is evil. We all know it. Except when I see those glimpses of him, the ones that make me want to stick around. The ones that make me think, *could this work?*

I know better, though.

It would never work.

We’re too different. The man is too fucked-up.

So am I. I know it. But we are different kinds of fucked-up.

Sometimes two fucked-up people can’t make it work, no matter how much attraction for each other they have. And believe me, my attraction to Lucas is above anyone else I have ever met.

The color of his eyes reminds me of getting lost in the woods. They meet mine over his shoulder, and he licks his lips.

Sometimes I wish I would let him kiss me. He may taint me for every other man, though. Kissing Lucas Rossi could be my downfall, one I may not be able to climb back from. Thankfully, he has never taken my lips without my permission.

“I believe so.”

Shit! His words shock me.

“No, you can’t let him.” My hands clench beside me with the panic running through my body. Adrenaline so strong pulsates and makes me feel woozy.

“You don’t get a choice in this life. I knew that going into it when I decided to help my father.” Lucas closes his eyes for a second and pauses after he says that last word. “That this could, no would be an outcome eventually. Yet, I chose to do it anyway.”

“So that’s it? You would just, what? Die?” I ask in utter disbelief.

“Yes,” he replies with no room for argument.

But that’s never going to happen with me because I will always argue with him. “So you’ll give up.” I throw my hands in the air with the disgust I feel right now.

“There is no fighting who we are and what will be, *mia per sempre*.”

“Maybe you’ve never tried,” I bite back at him.

“I would be a fool to do so, and I am no fool,” he says. Returning to the bed, he pulls his shirt off and pushes the covers back, then sits. He toes off his shoes one by one. “Now eat. I made it for you.”

I want to roll my eyes at him.

His stupid love language.

Tell me he’s going to die, *oh, but here’s some food*.

At least that’s a new one.

“Do you plan to strangle me later for killing your father?”

“I haven’t decided, but how poetic would that be? Knowing I’m going to die and that I should take you with me.” He gets in the bed next to me. “Though I have a feeling even if I tried, I probably couldn’t do it.” He reaches for the television remote and changes the channel as he lies back against the pillows. His presence is making me feel oddly safe.

“I heard you call me a whore,” I tell him after a moment of silence. “What does it matter if you kill the whore?”

“It matters. You matter. I’m angry... make no mistake about that.” He looks at me, and I can’t work out what I am seeing. Is it anger? Confusion? “But killing you is not on my agenda... for today.” He motions to my food. “*Eat.*”

And I do.

I eat every damn last bite.

And when I’m finished, Lucas takes the plate and puts it beside him, then pulls me to him. I try to pull away at first, but as my head touches his

chest, I know it's impossible.

Lucas is like a magnet I never wanted drawn to me. Yet, here he is, stuck to me even after the worst events of our lives.

Death is hanging in the air, but here we are. Together.

That is some fucked-up fairy tale, right?

Luckily for me, I don't believe in happily ever afters.

I'm a realist, not a sadist.

* * *

The sound of harsh, rushed voices wakes me. My body aches all over when I move. Lucas is no longer next to me, and his clothes are gone from the floor.

"Fuck." As soon as the word leaves my mouth, the door opens to reveal Lucas and Keir. "What's wrong?" I ask them.

Keir ignores my question and walks off, but Lucas enters the room.

"It's time to take you home." I feel lightheaded when I attempt to stand, so I go to sit back down, but his arm catches me. "Take it slow."

"Chanel." We both look up to find Sailor there, offering me a small smile as she comes farther into the room. "Just wanted to check on you and let you know I found a replacement for you." My heart sinks at her words. "But, plus side..." she offers me a kind smile, "... I also found you another job, closer to where you live, and they said you can start in a few weeks. It pays even better than me."

"Chanel," Lucas says my name when I don't say anything back.

"Are you firing me?" I ask her. "What did I do wrong?" Sailor's eyes flick to Lucas, and something passes between them before she looks back to me.

She moves closer and places a hand on my shoulder. "It's better this way... for everyone. But I would love to stay in contact. I really value you

and would like to keep our friendship if that's okay?"

"Okay." Honestly, I don't know what else to say right now.

She wipes a tear from her face and leans down to cuddle me, her arms wrapping around my neck, but she doesn't hold me for long, as she is heavily pregnant. She glances again at Lucas, and a look of pure unadulterated hate hits her features before she turns and walks out, shutting the door as she leaves.

"I was just fired." My tone is tinged with sadness, but it's nothing compared to the despondency I feel destroying everything inside me, eating away at my fragile heart.

I loved that job. I thought I had a chance at a semi-normal life and to improve my living conditions with that job. Now, it's gone.

"So it seems," is all he gives me in return.

Standing in front of me, fully dressed in his black button-up shirt and black slacks, he offers me his hand. "Let's go slow now."

I take his offered hand and allow him to help me up. When I'm fully standing, his other hand wraps around my waist, and he steps in closer, so our bodies are touching.

"Why did you do it?" I ask him, my head resting on his shoulder.

"I didn't know any better," he replies. His hand strokes my hair, and I hear him inhale deeply as he takes me in. "Now... I do." Then he pulls back and turns toward the door. "Your family is downstairs waiting for you."

My ribs ache with each step I take, but I keep going, following him down the stairs where Merci and Brody are waiting. They both smile.

"You look better," I say to Merci.

"So do you."

"I'm so sorry," I tell her.

And I do feel sorry—for absolutely everything.

This is my fault.

If I'd not taken Malik on as a client, this may never have happened. And I may not have met Lucas because of that reason. If I hadn't gotten close to Lucas, he might not have had the chance to give me to Malik. Even as I think it, I know it's a lie because, let's face it, Lucas always gets what he wants. And I was firmly on his agenda.

"A car is out front to take you home," Lucas states.

Brody and Merci make their way outside, and I look back at Lucas. He holds out the medication from the doctor but says nothing.

"I'll be seeing you, I guess."

Why isn't he saying anything? He's the one who should be groveling, shouldn't he?

"Hopefully not with a gun to my face," he finally says.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Someone in the house calls his name, but he doesn't make a move to go to them.

"I should have killed you when I met you. It would be easier than this," he states. The way his eyes lock onto mine makes me feel like he wants to say more.

"Easier than what?" I ask as my brows pull together.

His words make no damn sense.

"It's time for you to go, Chanel." He nods to where my brother and Merci are waiting for me with a driver. "Your brother has also been fired, but another job is waiting for him," he says as I step out the door.

"Why?" I ask.

Lucas doesn't have to do this. If anything, he shouldn't be doing this.

"I assumed this would make you happy." He licks his bottom lip, and despite everything, I wonder what it tastes like.

"That wasn't the question I asked. I asked why?"

He does that—deflects.

"He's no longer needed."

“Is it because your father is dead?” He flinches at my words but doesn’t answer. “I would do it again. I want you to know that, Lucas. I do not for one-second regret killing that vile man.”

“And what of me? If he is vile, what of me?” He steps closer, his eyes looking directly into mine. “I am his son. I was raised by him. Everything I learned was because of him.” He says the words to me not in anger, but more like he wants to justify them to me.

But I can’t accept that.

I won’t.

What he did was deceitful.

Atrocious.

Appalling.

He manipulated me.

He used me.

And just when I thought I might be seeing a new side of Lucas, one I quite enjoyed, it was torn from me and handed on a nice silver platter to his father.

“If you want to be like him, you will be, Lucas. No one can change that. It’s not unlike me... if I wanted to be like my parents—addicted to any and every substance—I would be. But I chose not to because I know what that stuff does to a person, so I know to stay away from what could be addictive. Yes, I may drink, but I have learned my limits. So, Lucas. What are yours?”

I don’t wait for him to answer as I’m not sure I care about what he has to say anymore. So I turn and walk down the front porch stairs and step into the waiting car. When I look back, he’s standing there, hands in his pockets, watching me leave.

And something about this feels so very final.

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Chapter Nine

LUCAS

“He’s gone?” Keir asks, coming up beside me at the front door. Her car left a while ago, yet here I stand, not having moved from this spot.

“Yes.”

“It’s time, then.”

I nod and turn around, finally looking away and following him to his office.

Keir shuts the door and sits at his desk.

I don’t hate Keir—I respect him. Always have. And the fact that I lied to him will not sit well. I’m known to always tell the truth, no matter how brutal, and he knows this about me as well.

“I have two options...”

I didn’t expect options.

Not from Keir.

He checks his phone, then tips his head back and looks directly at me. “Are you ready to listen to them?”

I want to tell him no, that I’m going to walk out this door, and if I die, I fucking die. What a glorious life I’ve lived. What sweet fucking pussy I’ve tasted. I’ve done more in this life than most will ever do.

“Lucas, words.”

“Yes,” I answer him.

“You know what the punishment is... death. But...” he looks toward the door, “... she asked me not to carry out the death sentence.”

She means Sailor.

“So you have two options...” He pauses. “I take you down the street, and I put a bullet between your fucking eyes for lying to me. And make no mistake, Lucas, our trust is gone.” His jaw clicks as he moves, his hands sit clasped in front of him. “Or second...” I sit waiting silently. “You cut off all contact with her, and you never to see her again.”

“Chanel,” I reply, and he nods.

“That could be a fate worse than death. If it were me, I would choose death. No way you could keep me from Sailor.”

“Chanel was simply a warm body.”

“If that’s all you have to say, you believe what you want.” His brows raise. “Which is it?”

“I will no longer see Chanel.”

He nods and stands, pushing his chair back. “Good. Now, get the fuck out of my office before I do shoot you for pissing me off.”

I get up from my chair then head to the door.

“Lucas.” I turn back to him. “No fucking contact. *None*. I mean it.”

“She knows where I work,” I tell him.

“No. Contact. Lucas. Do I make myself fucking clear?”

I nod, not much else I can do before walking out, shutting the door behind me.

As I head down the stairs, Sailor is waiting for me.

“I really didn’t want to fire Chanel.” I know this already. “She’s good, Lucas. You know that, right?” I do. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad he didn’t kill you.”

“He should have killed you,” Piper states from her spot in the sitting room where she sits with Joey. Joey looks my way, then back to the television. He’s the most obedient when it comes to Keir. Not just because

they're brothers, but because he trusts in absolutely everything he does. I do too but in different ways.

"But I guess now it's time for you to suffer. This way, it will be a long sufferance. Much deserved, I'd say." Piper laughs.

"Do you think he would notice if you went missing?" I ask Piper.

"You aren't his favorite anymore, Lucas." Piper laughs again.

She's really pushing me. I never was his favorite, even if he gave me more leeway than the rest. Joey is more responsible, therefore he will be Keir's preferred choice always.

"Fuck off, Piper." I don't want to hear anymore smack talk from her, so I walk out the door to find Sergio waiting for me.

"Time to get fucking drunk," I tell him. He nods, and we get in the car. Straight away, I can tell he wants to ask me something, so I grunt out, "What is it? Just ask already."

"What happened? Where is Chanel? Did you kill her?" He looks over his shoulder at the house. "And why aren't you dead for lying to him?"

"I'm never allowed to see her again. So if Chanel comes to our place, get rid of her."

Sergio's eyes go wide. "If she wants something, she always finds a way. You know this."

I do, and I remember it all too clearly—her up on the table with someone else—and it makes my blood boil.

"Maybe you need to get under someone to get over someone."

"You been reading those self-help books again?" I ask.

"They help. You should give them a go."

"That's a no." I shake my head.

"The wife has cooked up a feast. Want to eat and drink at mine?"

How Sergio has a normal life outside of what we do is beyond me, but he's been with the same woman since high school. He's only had one kid

and has always been content with just her. I've always wondered how a man can do that when there are so many fish in the sea.

That was until I met her.

She is everything.

I wonder if I'll find someone like her again?

Someone who smells like her.

I have a feeling that may be hard to find, though.

"What do you say? You know the spare bedroom is there for when you pass out."

"Just drop me at my mother's," I reply, and he nods.

We ride in silence, and I say nothing when I get out of the car. With quick steps, I walk into the house and spot my mother on the couch eating ice cream and watching some sappy soap opera she likes.

"Well, this is a nice surprise." Mom taps the seat next to her, and I sit beside her.

"I have to tell you something."

"I already know, honey," she replies. But does she? "Joey called." I take a deep breath at her words. Thank fuck he did because it's not a conversation I really want to have with her. "Here, have some ice cream. It always cheers me up." Mom places the bowl in my lap and lifts her hand to stroke my hair. "How is that nice girl of yours? Chanel, wasn't it?"

"You'll never see her again either."

"Well, that is a shame. You really took a liking to that one."

How right she is.

More than she will ever know.

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Chapter Ten

CHANEL

Two Years Later...

“No.” I shake my head as I put up my hair into a messy bun.
“Come on, just this once.”

“That’s what you always say,” I tell him.

“Sis.”

I spin around to face him. “Brody, no. Stop gambling all your money, then you might have some left, so you don’t have to borrow from me all the time.”

Brody’s gaze drops to the floor. “It’s only a few hundred,” he complains.

“What did Merci say when you asked her?”

He waves a hand around. “Oh, come on, you know she doesn’t know.”

“It’s time you tell her.” I lean down and pull on my shoes.

“You aren’t better than us, you know that?” He always does this, comes up with the holier- than-thou attitude when I won’t give him what he wants.

“I never said I was.” I reach for my bag and head for the door. “It’s time you go. I have to get to work.”

He storms out the door.

I tried to protect him from his addictions—it was one of my main goals in life. But after the day we left Sailor's house, I found out Brody got a job working in a cleaning company. It was good for him. But the money? Well, we never saw any of it. The guys he worked with bet, they gamble, and they wager big time. Eventually, Brody did the same. Except he never had any luck. He sucks at gambling and always seems to owe people money. Which in turn makes him come to me for extra money to supplement his addiction.

I got a new job that Sailor secured for me, where I met people who were doing their job at a local bar just for extra cash. My friend, Amanda, is a flight attendant for a private company, and she managed to land me a dream job. And I've been working there for over a year now.

And I love it.

It's so good to be able to fly around the country and even overseas at the request of some of my regular returning customers.

It pays well, and it's what I plan to do for as long as I can.

Merci? Well, she did leave the business, that was until Brody's paychecks stopped coming in. Because it went to everything else. So, she's back where she started. And I can tell it's slowly killing her having to go back to that life. Especially after everything that went down with Malik, it took time to heal the wounds he put there. And at first, she and Brody were strong, doing well, but now, not so much.

I left my old apartment, but Brody and Merci still live there. I try not to go back there unless it's to visit, but honestly, it is rare these days. That place holds too many memories, ones I simply want to move on from, so me visiting is way out of my comfort zone. So, when Brody wants something, he comes to my apartment, which is not too far away. The place I live in is more secure and safe.

Brody, however, always seems to find a way, and I've come home to him here, going through my things to find money or something to sell to

make money. Now, I've learned never to keep money here, making sure I bank any cash.

It has taken me a while to get to this place in my life, one where I realized I could not protect my brother from everything, even if I love him more than the air I breathe. He's an adult now and has to choose his own way. He knows what we've gone through, and if he still chooses to go down that darkened path, who am I to stop him?

I'm his sister, not his mother.

Overall, there is little I can do to help him anyway. All I can do is be there when he falls and hope I can help pick him back up. I am finding this is becoming more difficult the deeper he falls into the abyss that is his life.

When I get to my car, he's there. Waiting.

"So, when do I get to meet him? Or am I not good enough to meet your rich boyfriend?" Brody asks. He taps the car's hood in some sort of arrogant act of defiance. "I see he likes to spoil you, so why can't you spoil me? I'm family."

"I have twenty on me, Brody, and that's it. Go and tell Merci you're low. She's your fiancée." I hold out the twenty, and he snatches it from my hand without any form of gratitude.

"Who is he anyway? Too good to meet your family?"

Taking a deep breath, I stare at him. "Where did we go wrong?"

Brody sucks in a breath and walks away, never wanting to finish a conversation with me. As soon as I get into the car, I call Merci while watching as Brody slides into my old car and drives off.

"He just left me," I tell her.

"I don't know what to do anymore." I can feel the utter despair in her voice. "He's stealing from me, and I'm pretty sure he's using. And he's hardly home."

I'm lost for words because this is something I should be dealing with. But when I moved out of their place, they asked for space—Brody

specifically asked me to give him some leeway, so I did just that. I like having my own life, a new life that doesn't involve looking after someone else for a change. The only person I have to look after now is me, and I haven't done that before—look after just me.

"I'm sorry." And I am. I'm sorry she has to deal with this. I'm sorry he is using.

"What do I do?" I can hear her biting her nails through the phone, the sound of someone who is at their wit's end.

"I can't answer that for you, Merci."

"Will you hate me if I break his heart? Because after my nana's passing, I just don't know how much more I can take."

"If there is one thing I've learned, no one will look out for you better than yourself," I say.

Yes, I will feel the hurt for Brody, but I will never tell her that. And to be truthfully honest, I don't know if I want Brody to live with me, especially the way he is. The problem is that he will only have one place to go, and that's to me.

"You used to look out for him so well," she states.

"That's all I knew. To protect him. Maybe I didn't do a good enough job." I pull out and drive to the airfield.

"You did, Chanel. Never doubt that. You would have cut off your left arm for him."

"It just sucks..." I swallow my emotion and don't continue, but my shaky hands grip the steering wheel tighter, knowing what the outcome of this is going to be.

"I know. Imagine being in love with someone who isn't right for you." This time, it's me who sucks in a deep, stuttering breath. "Gosh, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking when I said those words."

"It's okay... it wasn't love." I tell myself that, and sometimes I believe it. Sometimes...

“Okay...” she finally replies, her tone not convinced by my words.

“You may want to call him. He was mad that I didn’t have enough money,” I tell her.

“Does he know I know yet?” Merci asks.

“No, but maybe it’s time he does.”

“I know you’re right. I do. But sometimes it’s better to live in denial,” she says because that’s what I do.

Denial.

It’s better for me that way.

“It’s not, trust me. Tell him you know. Maybe it’s the wake-up call Lucas needs,” I say.

“I love you, Chanel.”

“Love you too, Merci.”

I haven’t seen Lucas since that day. He never came to find me, and I never went looking for him. Never have I seen him in passing, nor have I gone out of my way to see him.

Not that he didn’t plague my thoughts.

My every waking moment.

He has.

He had.

But now I’ve moved on. It’s what people do, and I so badly want to be normal—any kind of normal. And I think after all these years, I have finally found my normal.

Arriving at work, I park the car, check-in, and do all the necessary things before take-off. The captain waves as we make our way out. I don’t always know who my passengers are. Some request me, some the airline rosters.

I wasn’t requested today, just managed to get an extra shift which I will always gladly take.

“You got plans for tonight? Las Vegas is the city of sin,” the captain jokes. He’s an older gentleman I’ve worked with a few times before. He’s married and has kids my age. He’s always bragging about his daughter, who’s in law school.

“No, I think I might just lie in bed doing absolutely nothing.”

“Sounds like a great plan. Room service and chill.” I nod in agreement as the first passenger arrives. I stand at the door with a plate of warmed towels, waiting for them to board. As I am looking down at the floor, I see red heels approaching, so I look up to smile.

“Hot towel?” I ask, but after I do, my mouth hangs open. “Sailor.”

She leans in and throws her arms around my shoulders. “Holy shit, look at you.” I touch my now red hair and smile at her. Her eyes skim me over, and before she can say anything else, Keir is behind her. His hand lands on Sailor’s hip as he stares at me.

“Fuck.” He looks behind him, and my eyes follow his. Lucas is standing on the top step, his brows pulled together, and sunglasses cover his eyes.

Well, fuck! I’m not sure what to say.

“This is going to be such a good flight. It’s my birthday, and Keir and the boys are taking me to Vegas,” Sailor cheers. “You must come out with us.”

Keir has stepped past us, and Lucas is now standing behind her.

I feel his stare penetrating through every cell of my body.

Setting it on fire.

I hate that his stare can still do that after all this time.

“I can’t. But thank you for the offer.” I hold out a warm towel, and she takes it before moving on. Lucas is next, but for some reason, he remains rooted to the spot.

Piper pushes past him, wrapping her arms around me as well.

“You look amazing,” I tell her. She’s dressed in a short skirt with heels that could rival Sailor’s, and that’s saying something since her life revolves

around the best heels money can buy.

“Me? Have you seen yourself?”

She waves me off and steps in.

Joey’s next, and he gives me a simple nod. I offer him a towel, and he takes it before moving on.

“Towel?” I ask Lucas.

He looks at it through his glasses, then back at me. I wait for him to take it or tell me no. He does neither and walks off into the plane, where everyone else is seated.

The pilot opens the cockpit door and checks on me. I tell him we are good to go as I pull the door shut and check, then I announce that everyone should remain seated.

Thankful my seat is behind a curtain so I can’t see them, we take off. As soon as we’re in the air, I somehow manage to breathe.

This is my job.

I’m good at my job.

This should be like any other day.

After fiddling around in the galley, taking far longer than I should, I carry a tray of champagne, which was requested for the flight, and start to hand it out. Sailor and Piper take theirs with no issue. It’s when I get to the men that they hesitate.

“Joey.” I remove a glass from the tray and offer it to him. He takes it, but his eyes fall behind me to where I know Keir and Lucas are seated.

Turning around, I offer them a glass, and Lucas gets out of his seat and moves to one at the back. I bite the inside of my cheek—well, I guess that shows that he really doesn’t want to see me.

“Don’t serve him,” Keir says.

I nod, and he shakes his hand at my offered glass.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware this was your flight,” I tell him.

“I’ll be fixing that,” Keir says abruptly, and I move back to the front of the cabin. I try to stay in the galley for most of the flight, only coming out to offer light refreshments and drinks, but they hardly take any. The only welcoming ones are Piper and Sailor, and even that grows more reserved as the flight continues on.

As soon as we land, I stand at the door as I always do, thanking them for flying with us.

Sailor tells me I must come out later, and Piper simply smiles as she leaves.

Keir doesn’t look my way, and neither does Joey.

Lucas is the last to leave.

He stays in his seat, and when I look back, I can tell he’s waiting for me.

“No more whoring for you?” he asks, his hands gripping either side of the chair.

“I haven’t done that in a long time, and you know it!”

Tension is rife, and I’m not sure if it’s hate or lust.

“I’m glad.” He stands and slowly makes his way to me. His scent is the first to hit me hard. I’ve almost forgotten how good he smells. “You look good. Red suits you.” He reaches up and touches my hair. I lift my hand to swat his away, but he grips hold of it and glances down, squeezing.

“Please let go of me.”

Lucas drops my hand instantly like it burns him. “You’re married?” he asks, emotion now gone and replaced with cold, deadly Lucas.

“Engaged,” I correct him.

“I see. So leaving me was good for you, then.”

“I’m sure it would be good for anyone.” I smile. It’s a sarcastic reaction, but the response I get in return is as if I’d slapped him hard in the face.

With that, he turns and walks down the stairs, not looking back.

Chapter Eleven

LUCAS

“Do not even think about it,” Keir warns.

“What?” I ask, annoyed.

“I can see it in your eyes. You’re trying to work out how to see Chanel again.”

“That was *not* my fault. I’ve held up our end of the deal.”

“It’s for life, Lucas. You know this,” he warns me.

Sailor pulls Keir’s face away and kisses his lips. She always knows how to calm him.

“I saw the ring,” Joey says as we drive. “You saw it, right?”

“I did.”

Everyone in the car is quiet.

“It’s time you moved on as well,” Joey says.

“What makes you think I haven’t?” I question.

“We all know you haven’t. There’s no denying that, Lucas.”

“I’ve fucked others.”

“You fucked one woman and then discarded her.”

“How the fuck would you know who my cock goes into?”

He shrugs. “I think everyone knows.” Raising a brow, he says, “Care to deny it?”

“No,” I grumble.

“That’s what I thought.”

I grab my phone and start searching for Chanel’s name, but nothing comes up, proving that she still doesn’t have social media. So I search her brother’s, which, of course, I find easily. Once I search through his page, I see photos of Merci and Brody engaged and an incredibly happy Chanel next to them.

Hold on.

It’s tagged.

Clicking on it, the name jumps out at me.

And it almost has my black heart crying out with joy.

Mia per sempre.

And it’s not a private profile.

It’s basically photos of different places as if she’s tracking everywhere she goes. But the one that stands out the most is her standing under the Eiffel Tower, a man down on one knee and her hands covering her mouth as he holds out a ring.

“Lucas.” I look up to Keir. “Enough!”

Somehow, he knows what I’m doing without even actually seeing. I slide my phone away but not before I send the link to Sergio, telling him to find out who he is. *Now.*

* * *

“So, he’s a doctor,” Sergio relays through the phone line.

“A what?” I ask, not believing what he’s just said. My little whore is engaged to a doctor. Who would have thought? I wonder if he appreciates the way she smells like I do? I wonder if he can make her come like I used to?

Does she love him?

And what even is love?

To women, it's such a big thing. But to people like me, those words, no *that word*, it's a burden.

"How did you even find Chanel? You said you weren't going to look for her."

"She was on my flight."

"What?" he asks, confused. "You fly private."

"She was a flight attendant."

"Well, fuck. Was Keir on the flight?"

"Yes."

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"You said it," I tell him, lying back on the bed.

"The doctor's in Vegas right now, staying at the hotel across from you. My guess is she is as well."

"You can track them?"

"No, the idiot is posting about it." He laughs. "Oh, look, just posted outside a restaurant."

"Which one?" I ask, getting up from the bed in a hurry and putting on my shoes. Sergio informs me of where, and I make my way out. I manage to miss everyone as I get outside the restaurant, then spot them straight away. She's dressed in a blue sequin snug-fitting dress with black heels. He has her pulled to him, his body melding into hers as her hands rest on his chest. He leans in, and I wait.

Will she allow him to kiss her on the lips?

At the last moment, she turns her head, and he kisses her cheek. She smiles at something he says, his lips still on her, and as she does, her eyes—those chocolate brown orbs that haunt me—lift, and they find me standing against a wall, watching them.

The smile dies down, and her mouth opens slightly.

He doesn't notice as he drops his hands from her waist and turns to speak to the group with them. She takes a step backward, and I stride

straight over to her, clutching her arm, and pulling her with me into the nearest bathroom, which isn't too far around the corner

"Lucas," she says, trying to tug her arm free. "How did you know where I was?"

"*Mia per sempre.*" Her eyes go wide in recognition of the name. "You use it as your handle. I see you've stepped up your game and now use social media."

"I had to evolve. I even have a TikTok account." She smirks. "Though, I don't do anything on it but watch."

"I'm sure a video of you shaking your ass would get millions of views. Pity I would have to kill everyone who watches it, though."

Chanel's mouth drops open in shock. Her hand waves between us since I haven't closed the gap just yet.

"Tell me, do you miss me?" I want to hear her answer badly.

Chanel's eyes close softly before they lock back to mine. "Should you even be here? I heard the rumors, Lucas. You had a choice... me or your life. You chose right. We would have never worked."

"Why, because you plan to marry a doctor?"

Her eyes close, and she shakes her head as I hear a small sigh escape her lips. "I don't even want to know how you found out that information, Lucas. But no, you know we would have never worked. Keir did us both a favor."

"No, he did not."

"You gave me to your father as if I were some sort of damn toy, Lucas. So Keir did the right thing."

"I didn't know any better," I tell her one more time.

Why is she bringing it up? Does she miss me?

"Oh, and now, two years later, when I've moved on, worked on my life, and am a better person... now, you know better?" She scoffs, rolling her eyes. "You can make any woman fall in love with you, just not me."

“Love. Why do you throw that word around so easily? I’m sure your parents used to say it to each other before they got fucked-up.”

She looks over her shoulder before she glances back at me. And with those subtle movements, I know I don’t like not having her full attention.

“They did get fucked-up, I agree. But I know love, Lucas. I have it for my brother, and I may have had it once for you as well.”

I step into her personal space. Our bodies are so close if I reached a finger between us, it would be touching her. I could put my face into her neck and smell her, holding that body I’ve missed so much close to me.

“You forgot to mention your fiancé.” I smirk.

“Go back to your sick life, Lucas. I want nothing to do with it.” She turns and walks out. Her ass moves so rhythmically in that dress, I wonder when I can get a taste.

The addiction never left.

It was on a hiatus.

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Chapter Twelve

CHANEL

He gets on every last nerve I have left. Walking out and away from him, I spot Farris still talking and not even noticing I'd left. I move up beside him and stay quiet as he talks. Only when he's finished does he turn around to find me. His hand pulls me into him, and the ladies he was talking to look down at me. I knew when I landed Farris, he was a catch—good-looking, a doctor, a bachelor. We've been together for over a year, and I still haven't introduced him to my brother. Brody doesn't even know I'm engaged to him, and Farris doesn't ask about family. He was raised by a normal couple, who only had one child and put everything they could into him.

Farris, the golden child.

I'm pretty sure his parents don't even like me.

Once, I overheard his mother say he should have married another doctor.

I am super proud of how far I've come, even if Farris doesn't know about my past.

I'm actually afraid to admit that time in my life to him.

Why would someone like him want to be with someone who sold herself to put food on the table? Farris would never have had a problem with putting food on anyone's table. His family is wealthy.

“My apologies,” Farris says after bumping into someone.

When I look up, Lucas is standing in front of us.

“Taken,” Lucas says at Farris’s words.

“I get distracted with this one’s beauty and don’t watch where I’m going.”

Lucas’s wood-colored eyes find mine. “She is the most beautiful.”

I look to Farris to see him smiling, clearly agreeing, and not even caring that someone is calling me beautiful.

“That she is,” Farris agrees. “I’m Farris.” Farris offers his hand. At first, I think Lucas won’t take it, but he holds out his hand and finally shakes it.

“Lucas.” He nods, then drops his hand from Farris’s. “Actually, we’ve hired out the VIP area tonight. You should join us. My cousin is the owner.”

“Oh, no, we couldn’t,” Farris says. But I hear hesitation in his voice. Is he considering it? And why? He doesn’t know Lucas from a bar of soap, but one thing I do know is that Farris likes power.

“We can’t, we have plans,” I manage to say.

“You sure? It’s going to be an eventful evening,” Lucas replies, looking straight at me.

Farris turns to me and raises a brow. “What do you say? Take on the town?”

I place my hand on his chest. “I’m awfully tired, and I figured we were just going to go back to the room to have some fun.”

Farris looks back to Lucas.

Fear bubbles up in me.

Could Farris work out who Lucas is to me, or should I say, was to me? How would he feel about that? That I was involved with someone like him. I chew the inside of my cheek as I wait for Farris to answer.

“Thanks again for the offer, but the lady has spoken. Nice to meet you, Lucas.” I turn and pull Farris away, but I hear over my shoulder, “*Mia per sempre*,” and glance back to see that evil glint in Lucas’s eye.

Lucas Rossi is back.
And I'm not okay with that.
At all.

* * *

Farris knows not to kiss me. I told him on our first date it's one line I won't cross until I'm married. He didn't understand it at first, but I let him kiss me anywhere but the lips. Not that he hasn't tried multiple times, even after I've asked him repeatedly not to.

His hands roam my body as he undoes my dress. I'm not really with it right now—my mind is elsewhere, and I can't seem to come back to this moment.

“Love.” That's his nickname for me. Farris's lips are skating over me once my dress has dropped. Farris isn't a bad lover, but he isn't...

No, I also choose not to compare, but it's hard when I can still smell Lucas lingering on my skin where he touched me. It burns with a passion I'm fully aware of and became accustomed to all that time ago.

And I have no one to tell.

Not only is he allowed never to see me, it could get him killed. Yet, Lucas went out of his way to find me again.

He should have walked away.

He should never come back.

He's done it before, so why not now?

It can't be that hard, can it?

Farris pushes me back onto the bed, and he's fast with removing his clothes. His eyes skim over my body with appreciation. It's one of the reasons I stay with him—he makes me feel appreciated.

But is that a lie as well?

If he doesn't know the real me?

It's not that I don't want to tell him. It's that I just can't.

No matter how hard I try.

Farris leans down over me, and I spread my legs to accommodate him as he positions himself. I wouldn't say he's my worst lover, but he isn't my best by a long shot, either.

Lucas holds that title.

Lucas will forever hold that title.

Though, I will never tell him that.

"Love," he says as he wets his two fingers and puts them between us. He brings them to my entrance then plays with my clit, trying to get me ready.

It's a pity my mind is elsewhere.

"Farris."

"Hmmm," he says, hovering over me.

"Degrade me," I tell him, and his eyes pinch together as his hand pauses.

"What?"

"Degrade me. Tell me what a bad girl I am."

He smirks as if he likes this game.

I need something other than what we have.

I need to feel something.

Any-damn-thing right now.

"Oh, you want to be my dirty little slut?" he asks, and I nod my head, smiling.

Farris moves forward, his cock near my entrance as he slides it between my folds, so close. "Tell me how bad you want my cock, slut," he barks.

I reach up and scrape my nails down his back until I get to his ass. "Fuck me, Farris."

"Okay, slut." Then he pushes inside of me. I yelp in surprise but take him in. He groans loudly as he does and then starts moving quickly. I keep

my nails in his back, dragging them down further and digging them in.

“Fuck me harder,” I demand, leaning up and biting his shoulder.

He grunts, and I grip him to me as he keeps moving. I feel he’s close, but I’m not, actually, nowhere near it. I’m struggling to get off, and I know why.

“You want to be my whore instead?” His words make me freeze, but he doesn’t notice because to him, it’s the time of his life.

My nails stop moving, and my head drops back to the bed.

“Whore,” he says again as he comes, collapsing on top of me, kissing my neck. “That was fun.” He pulls himself out and walks to our shower. “Maybe next time you can call me, Daddy. I hear that’s a thing,” he says with his back to me.

Oh, good God, I’m glad he doesn’t turn around because if he saw the look on my face, he wouldn’t be happy.

Rolling over, I reach for my phone. There are a few texts messages lighting up the screen. One from Merci, so I call her back straight away.

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s gone. Just grabbed his phone and said he ain’t coming back.” I hear her soft cries, and it breaks my heart.

“I’m sorry.” And I am, but she had to do something. Brody is going down a path I’m not sure we can support him through.

“It’s all your fault! You told me I had to do it!” she screams. Then hiccups. “It’s not... I’m sorry. I’m just...”

“Hurt,” I finish for her.

“He said he’s going back there. To *him*.”

I know who she’s talking about without even asking.

We only have *him* in our lives, and he is not pleasant to deal with.

But he is here.

Not back home.

“It will be fine. He won’t find him.”

“What?” she asks, clearly confused.

“He was on my flight to Vegas,” I tell her.

“Fuck! Really?”

“Yep,” I confirm.

“Did he speak to you?”

“Keir was on the flight. But Lucas found me after.” I wasn’t planning on telling her everything, but she needs a distraction. “I was with Farris.”

“Holy shit.”

“I know.”

Pulling my phone from my ear, I put her on speaker as I go through my messages.

“He messaged me,” I tell her. “Brody.”

“What did he say?”

“You put her up to this, I know you did.” I read the open message back to Merci. “Hold on, there’s another message.” I don’t recognize the number, but I open it anyway. *“Your brother is at my establishment.”*

“Who...” She pauses. “Lucas,” she says as we both try to work it out.

“What do I say back?”

“Tell him to kick him out.”

I write back straight away.

Kick him out.

“O kay, sent,” I reply. “Hold on, he’s typing.” We both go silent as we wait.

“Well...” There’s a pause. “What did he say?”

I f you meet me. Now.

I relay the message to Merci. “He did not say that, did he?” Merci asks. “It’s a death wish. Does he want to die?”

“Merci, what if I agree to meet him, and what we were told wasn’t true? What if it was me whose life Keir threatened?” I ask.

“No, Sergio told you it was Lucas’s.”

Merci and I ran into Sergio and his family not long after that night. Merci asked how he was, and he was standoffish. Then he told us never to contact Lucas again because if we did, Lucas would take his last breath and that it was his punishment for lying.

“Do I meet him? I’m with Farris,” I whisper, taking her off the speaker.

“So... Farris?” she asks, surprised.

“Yep.”

“So, it’s serious between you two.”

I should tell her the truth, but I can’t. “Yeah,” is all I manage to say.

“Okay, well, can you say you need to go get something?”

“I have a feeling nothing good will come from seeing him.” My phone dings in my hand, and it’s from Lucas. A photo of my brother through the surveillance camera at the club talking to Sergio. “He sent me a photo. Brody is there,” I confirm. “Shit.”

“Go. We can’t have him back in that life. I’m getting dressed and going down there now.” Then she hangs up.

Farris exits the bathroom, a towel around his waist, and walks over to the bed. I’m still lying there naked, reading my phone, when he walks over to me.

“I’m ready for round two,” he says, leaning down and kissing my neck.

“That would be amazing, but I gotta go and get some tampons,” I say, standing.

He backs away like I have the plague. How does a doctor hate the thought of a woman on her period? Makes no sense to me.

“Fuck, you bleeding? I didn’t see any blood?”

“Yep.” I go to my bag and find an everyday dress I can throw on and slip on my flats before grabbing my purse. “I’ll be back. I may stop and get some chocolate. You know, periods and all. Don’t wait up.”

He nods and climbs in bed. “I’ll be asleep anyway.” After he stops talking, he turns over and is asleep before I can even walk out the door.

As soon as I’m out, I bring up Lucas’s number.

Where?

He types back straight away, telling me his hotel and his room number, and I reply instantly.

On my way.

This could be the stupidest thing I have ever done, but I’ve never claimed to be smart.

And sometimes, we just don’t think clearly, right?

Today is one of those days.

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Chapter Thirteen

LUCAS

Keir didn't look happy when I said I was leaving, so I didn't end up going out for long.

Luckily for me, I don't care.

I had better plans.

Plans to see her.

And believe me, they were plans I didn't want to miss. It just so happens her brother rocked up at my work at the exact time I was working out what to send to her.

"He wants work," Sergio says. "I'm pretty sure he's using, and he has a big gambling debt."

Well, I didn't expect that. How did Chanel let this happen? She was always all over her brother, trying to save him. Yet, here she is in Vegas engaged. I wonder what happened in the two years since I've seen her?

"Just keep him occupied," I tell Sergio and hang up. I sit in my room, waiting for Chanel to arrive. She's taking her sweet ass time, and I'm becoming impatient. I'm almost ready to call her when a soft knock comes on my door.

I'm at the door and opening it in less than a second. Chanel's standing there, her phone in her hand and her lips pursed. She's wearing a blue dress

that stops short on her thighs, and I can smell her. Her scent is drifting toward me, and it's intoxicating.

"What's with the sour look?" I ask, waving for her to come in. It's best she doesn't stay in the hall drawing attention to herself.

"I'm not here to stay, Lucas. Tell my brother to leave. That you don't have any work for him."

"Get inside before anyone sees you."

Chanel scans the hallway, then walks in, and I shut the door behind her.

"Now, about your brother?"

"Yes. Tell him to leave," she says. "He isn't answering my calls."

I bring up her brother's number and press call. His voice comes through after the first ring. I watch as she bites the inside of her cheek—she's more than a little angry right now.

"Sir. Thanks for calling."

Chanel, being Chanel, steps straight up to my phone, which is on speaker, and starts yelling, "Oh, you *little... fucking... shit*. You thought you could go back there after everything that happened. After *everything!* With no consideration for *anyone*. You're just like our father." I hang up the phone as she grinds her teeth. "What?" she barks at me.

I have to tell my cock to lay low because there's nothing hotter than a worked-up Chanel.

"You're so damn hot when you're mad."

"And you're a dick," she replies, then looks down at her phone.

Brody's face comes on the screen, and she answers it on speaker, "Brody."

"I'm sorry," he starts.

"Go. Back. Home," she demands.

"Merci," Brody says, then the phone goes silent.

Chanel hangs up and looks at me. "You better not give him a job."

"Why?" I ask. "What will I get out of *not* giving him work?"

“You can’t have me anymore, Lucas. It doesn’t work that way.”

“You never answered my question earlier. Do you miss me?” I ask, reaching out to cup her cheek, but she pulls back quickly so I can’t touch her.

“No.”

“See, I hate it when you lie.”

“Oh, you mean how you lied to me about your father?” Chanel’s brows raise, and she gives me a sinister smirk.

I hold up a finger. “Technically, I never lied to you... I just never told you the truth.”

“Which is just as bad,” she says. “Won’t you be in trouble for me being in here?” she asks, looking around the room before rolling her eyes and continuing, “Trust you to have a room this size. Trying to overcompensate for something?” A brow raises with her question.

“Oh, come on, Chanel, you know better than to question me. If I can fuck, we both know I will.”

Words fail to leave her mouth. Instead, she sucks in a deep breath.

“Spend the evening with me, and I won’t give him a job,” I offer.

“I have a fiancé waiting for me.”

“What did you tell him you were doing?”

“I told him I got my period.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“I’d still fuck you, even if you did. Just so you know.” And I sure as fuck wouldn’t let her leave by herself. I would have gotten it for her or made someone else get what she needs.

“Good to know, but that will *never* happen.” She flicks her bright-red hair over her shoulder.

“Would you grace me with a cuddle?” I ask, testing my boundaries.

Her head swings my way. “Are you joking?” she scoffs. “A cuddle? You?”

“That’s what I asked for, wasn’t it?”

“Then I can leave?”

I look to the clock and say, “In two hours. And I will never let anyone from my side of the tracks hire your brother again. Or take his money for gambling, and I will pay off his debts.”

“You can do that?” she asks, surprised.

“I can. But, Chanel, that won’t stop him. There is always a way with a seasoned gambler.”

“You will do this for a cuddle, no other weird touching?”

“I swear.” Then I hold out my arms, and she steps into them.

That’s her first mistake.

Stepping back into my arms.

I drop my nose to her hair and inhale her scent before I wrap my arms around her waist.

How I have missed my little vixen.

She has shackled my heart and ruined me beyond repair.

I try to fuck other women, look at other women, but none, and I mean none, compare to Chanel. And now that I can physically feel her and taste her again, there is no way she is ever escaping me.

Even if she is engaged, I will end that.

Have no doubt.

Chanel is not meant to be with anyone but me.

I know it, and she needs to realize it.

“This is weird,” she says into my chest, but her hands lift and wrap around my waist. She’s tense at first but soon relaxes into my chest, and I can feel her breathing grow slower as she calms.

“I’ve missed you, *mia per sempre*,” I say into her hair. She doesn’t respond, and I don’t expect her to. “Tell me something,” I ask, still holding

her close.

“What?” she finally answers.

“Can he make you come like I do?”

She pulls away at my words, and I let her go.

Her face looks like I’ve slapped her.

“How dare you ask me that?” She scrunches up her nose in disgust as a knock comes on the door. I put my finger to my lips in a motion to be quiet. She nods before I walk over to the door and pull it open to find Piper on the other side.

“Did I hear a woman in here?”

“What do you want?” I ask, not allowing her through the door.

“I wanted to check in on you. You left early, and I have a feeling you only did that because you saw her today.”

“Who?”

Piper laughs.

“Oh, we’re playing that game. But Lucas...” She leans in. “Remember, if you play the game of sin, you’ll end up six feet under.”

“I’ll be sure to take advice from you when I am precisely six feet under.” I slam the door in her face and turn to find Chanel pouring herself a drink.

“They could kill you,” she whispers before tipping the drink up and taking a mouthful. “It’s the mafia, Lucas. They don’t play.”

“I know, considering I do most of the killing.” I smile at her.

“It’s not a game, Lucas,” she bites back.

“You care if I live or die?”

“Yes. And don’t ask me why. Neither of us will ever understand that reasoning.” She shakes her head and pours herself another drink. “Your time is ticking. Once the two hours are up, I expect never to see you again.” Chanel sits at the two-seater table, and I sit next to her and tap the table for her to pass me the bottle. “So, what do you want to know?”

“You didn’t answer me. Does he make you come like I do?”

“Like, tonight. Or...” She raises a brow.

“You fucked him tonight?” I ask, trying to keep my cool, but pretty sure I am failing not to show the anxiety on my face.

“We just finished when you messaged.”

“I could kill him,” I tease her, but it’s so *not* a tease. I should kill him, and I probably will. I don’t like things that are mine to be touched by others.

I don’t like to share.

“How many women have you fucked since you left me?”

“I didn’t leave you, Chanel. That would never happen.”

Her body goes still. “That’s avoiding my question, Lucas,” she bites back.

“Fair enough.” I reach for the bottle. “One.”

Chanel’s eyes go wide in surprise. “You’re lying.”

“I don’t lie to you, Chanel.”

“So, you’re telling me that you, Lucas Rossi, have only fucked one woman since me?” she asks, leaning in. I lean in as well, so our faces are closer, and I can smell her again.

“Yes, but now I have a question.”

She sits back and crosses her arms over her chest. “Hit me.”

“Okay. Have you kissed him on the lips?”

“No,” she answers truthfully, and it truly shocks me.

“Never?” I ask. “How does he feel about that?”

“We’re waiting until we’re married.”

I smirk. I can’t help myself. He isn’t anything special in that case, and I love that she hasn’t kissed him. It just means I’m in for the running, and those lips will be mine, mark my fucking words.

“That’s meant to be sex, Chanel,” I tell her.

Her hand lifts, and she flicks a piece of red hair behind her ear. “But is it?”

“I guess we all have our own rules.” I shrug.

“My turn,” she says, and I nod for her to continue. “How do you feel about me killing your father?”

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Chapter Fourteen

CHANEL

He's uncomfortable. I see it in the way he moves and positions himself.

I have a feeling not many people would ask about his father. It seems that bastard was liked by no one but Lucas.

"At first, I was torn between killing you and fucking you." He pauses. "Now, I just want to fuck you."

"That's not going to happen. I'm engaged," I remind him, holding up my hand to show him my ring. He reaches for it and brings it closer to him. "Bit small, wouldn't you say?"

"No, I wouldn't," I reply, pulling it back.

He's baiting me.

Why? I do not know.

"Have you told him about me?"

That's a hard fucking no! Lucas is not something or someone I would choose to discuss with any sane person.

"What is there to tell? You used me for your father. Not really something I should tell a man I'm going to marry, nor something I am particularly proud of."

Lucas's jaw tics at my words. "If I could take it back, I would."

A part of me believes his every word.

“Why haven’t you fucked any other women?” I ask again. “I fuck my fiancé.”

“Because...” he leans in, much too close, “... it’s you I want. It’s you I want to taste.”

“That’s never going to happen.” I turn away and stare at my phone. “Time is ticking,” I remind him.

“I could take you to Disney World again. Have you been back?” he asks, avoiding my questions. “Remember how hard you came on that plane? I do.”

Of course, I remember. I’ve even gotten off on touching myself with the thought of him. Now that’s something I will never admit to him—it will only make his ego even bigger when it comes to me. We don’t need to go back to where we were because the now is better.

“No, I haven’t been back. And don’t intend to, either.”

“Why?”

Because it reminds me of you,” I tell him honestly.

A lot reminds me of him.

And a part of me hates that fact.

A smirk ghosts his lips as he sits back, one leg crossing over his other knee. I clutch my phone like it will somehow save me from the situation unfolding right in front of me.

“Why do you want to leave? Have you not missed me?” he asks again.

Biting my bottom lip, I stare at him and blink a few times.

I can’t answer that question.

I won’t.

“I’ve missed you.” His honesty shocks me. I couldn’t imagine Lucas two years ago saying he *missed me*. Not in this tone, at least. It’s almost desperate without sex involved.

“I haven’t heard from you or seen you in two years, Lucas,” I bite back, sounding as bitter as I feel. “That is not how you *miss* someone.”

“If I saw you, both of us would have died. Are you telling me I should have been even more selfish and come to see you?” he asks. I look away, not wanting his stare on me. Those dark eyes are felt all over my body, even when they’re locked on my face.

“I need to go, Lucas. My fiancé will be expecting me soon.” He says nothing. “What do you need for me to leave?”

“I want you to tell me that you thought about me as well. That seeing me does something for you.”

I stand.

Why is he desperate for my thoughts of him?

Does he need confirmation?

Lucas? Of all people.

“Is that all?”

“Yes,” he says, remaining seated.

Taking a deep breath, I look down at him. “Lucas, I think about you. And seeing you again does something to me.”

“You’re just repeating what I said.” The smile does not leave his lips. He knows the game I’m playing. “You can do better than that, *mia per sempre*.”

Licking my teeth, I move my gaze away from him and to the window. The night sky is dark, and my hands are becoming clammy. How can I go from being in my bed with Farris to being in the same room with Lucas?

“I didn’t like seeing you, Lucas.” My eyes find him again, and now the smirk is gone from those lips. “Because when I see you, despite my logical thinking, something utterly so stupid in me still beats for you, still wants you to step up and touch me. Those hands ghost along my skin, sending prickles over every inch of me. The only person who has ever been able to do that is *you*. And I hate that the most. The man I am with, who is good for me, who looks at me as if I am the sunshine, doesn’t have that same effect.”

“And how do I look at you?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “You look at me the same way I look at you, Lucas. It’s like we are in a sea of blood, and our only lifeline to survive is each other. As if the moment we touch, we both remember our hearts are no longer bleeding but pumping because we hear them so loud in our chests when we touch.”

Looking away from him, I go toward the door. He speaks as I reach for the doorknob.

“You are mine, *mia per sempre*. You know this, right?”

I have no more words to give him.

What else could I possibly say?

I still feel like his, and that’s the part I hate the most.

Stepping out, I shut the door and lean against it, taking a deep breath before I push off and walk down the hall.

“Chanel.” I stop as the door to the left of Lucas’s opens, and Piper is standing there. “I knew you were in there. I like you... you know this. So, I’m telling you this, girl to girl. Leave. Now. And never come back. Keir will kill him, and you too.” She steps back inside and shuts the door.

* * *

Farris ended up taking me home so I didn’t have to fly with them. I managed to find someone to cover my chartered flight and took the next commercial flight out with him. I told him I was feeling ill, and it worked.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay at my place? I have no work tonight.” His hand lands on my thigh, and I look over at him as he drives the car.

“I just want to lie down in my own bed, you know?”

“Look, Chanel, I think we need to talk.” His hand grips the wheel. “You know I think the world of you...” He pauses, and I feel my stomach tighten at where this may be going. “But I messed up.”

One hand leaves the wheel and runs through his hair.

“It happened when I first met you. I didn’t know what we were, so when she came onto me, I didn’t think it would be an issue, but she called this morning.” My eyes haven’t left him since he opened his mouth, but now they do.

It was too good to be true, right?

Of course, it was.

“She’s pregnant.”

I cough. Literally cough, and then splutter.

Choking on his words.

How is that possible?

“Are you serious? Or is this a joke?”

“I was going to tell you in Vegas, but you wanted to leave.”

“Farris...” I shake my head.

This is unbelievable.

“It doesn’t mean anything. It’s you and me, babe. We can get through this.”

“I don’t want kids, Farris,” I tell him honestly, looking toward him again.

“You used to be a nanny,” he says, shaking his head.

He’s getting angry now—angry like I should probably be.

“Do you expect me to be your nanny?” I ask, shocked. I’ve never shared much of my life with Farris, there was no need to tell him what I did previously, and that has worked out well for me. What I did tell him is that I used to be a nanny, but I never told him who I worked for.

“Well, I figured we would take the kid. It’s you I want. Not her.”

How could I not have seen this side of him?

Who does he think I am? Someone who will give up everything to raise *his kid*, obviously. There’s no fucking way.

“I want to go home, Farris.”

“No.” He slams his hands on the wheel and speeds up, running a red light, and I scream at him, “Farris, calm down.”

“No. I’ll tell her I don’t want it.”

“It’s your child, Farris,” I say and go to reach for him, but a horn honks, and he speeds up even more, throwing me back into my seat. “Farris, slow down. You’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous,” he scoffs out, then laughs. “I’m not even allowed to kiss you. Yet, I am being ridiculous.” His hands slam on the wheel again and again, making me flinch. “You say you love me, you wear my ring, and you won’t even damn well kiss me. What the hell is wrong with you, Chanel?”

“Let me out of this fucking car, Farris.” My voice comes out shakier than I want it to, but it’s still strong enough to gain his attention as I remove my seat belt to make a hasty exit.

“Fuck you!” he snarls, and I watch it all happen in slow motion.

I don’t see my life flash in front of my eyes like they all say.

No. Instead, it’s like everything is at the slowest possible speed ever.

My hands clutch the seat belt I removed, but I know it’s not going to help.

Farris opens his mouth to scream, but nothing comes out as his body is slammed into the steering wheel.

The wind is knocked out of me, and before I can even think or say anything or move, pain shoots through my head, and everything goes black.

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Chapter Fifteen

LUCAS

She left. I expected to see her on my flight back the next day. But someone else was there, and it even surprised Keir, which means he didn't organize the switch.

As soon as we step off the flight, Sergio is there, car ready, and he nods to everyone as they step down the jet's stairs.

When I reach him, he leans in. "Something has happened."

I pull back and study him.

Keir comes over and waits for him to talk but has to prompt him, "Sergio." Keir motions for him to speak, and I nod.

Sergio looks at me before he murmurs, "There's been an accident."

"What type?" I ask.

He glances down at the ground.

"Chanel," is all he says.

In a flash, I turn to look at Keir. His eyes fall to me, and I clench my fists, knowing it was him. "You really couldn't help yourself."

He says nothing, then looks back to Sergio. "What accident?"

"Why would you act like you don't know? You're the one who would have had it done."

"Lucas, shut the fuck up. I had nothing to do with it."

“She went through the windshield of a car belonging to a Dr. Farris Child.”

I’m pushing my way to the car as soon as the words leave Sergio’s mouth.

“Lucas,” Keir shouts as I get in.

Fuck him! So, I don’t even bother to acknowledge that his single word is a warning. Instead, I blurt out, “You can kill me if you want. But you know I won’t be put down easily.” Then I take the car, speeding off, hoping I am heading in the right direction.

Sergio messages me the hospital Chanel’s staying at, and it takes me no time to get to her.

It’s a blur of lights and traffic, and then I’m running until I find Chanel’s exact location in the hospital.

The doctor says, “Family only, you can’t see her.” But just as I’m about to threaten his life and his family’s life, Brody comes down the hall.

“Lucas,” he says.

The doctor looks at Brody, then at me. “You know this man?”

“Yes, he does. I’m his uncle.” Brody’s brows pinch together before he nods his head. “Where is she?”

“She’s stable, and we’re waiting for her to wake,” Brody says as the doctor takes his leave. “Sir, why are you here?”

“I’m here for her, Brody. You should know that.”

“They say she has brain swelling, and we shouldn’t expect much when she wakes. She hit her head pretty hard. For some reason, she wasn’t wearing a seat belt.” He rubs his arms, the same ones that are marked from years of drug abuse.

“Are you using, Brody?” I ask bluntly.

He nods his head.

“And drinking?”

He nods again.

“She can’t wake up to her brother strung up, Brody. Go and get clean. I’ll sit with her.”

Brody does something that instantly reminds me of her. He bites the inside of his cheek.

“Maybe I need rest.” He nods, confirming. “You won’t leave her side, though?” he asks.

“Of course not.”

Brody points to Chanel’s room before he walks off.

With quick steps, I walk into her room. She’s lying on the bed, eyes closed, a tube down her throat, and so many machines around her, the noise is over the top.

The scene in front of me is crushing.

Overwhelming.

Shocking.

I stay.

All night.

Then the next day.

During that time, Chanel does not move.

She merely sleeps.

And eventually, so do I.

* * *

“Do I know you?” Her demure voice pulls me from my sleep.

When I focus my tired eyes on her, I see she is sitting up in her bed, the tubes no longer in her throat, the machines are all but gone.

How can she be so bruised, so battered, and so stunningly beautiful?

“Did you say something?” I ask, standing and walking over to her.

The door opens before she can say anything more, and Brody steps in, showered and in a clean set of clothes. “Brody.” She smiles.

“I heard you woke up. How you feeling?” he asks, standing on the other side of her bed.

Chanel glances at me, and her puzzled eyes lock on mine. “Do I know you?” she asks again, with confusion written all over her face.

“Chanel, he’s only been gone two years.” Brody laughs.

She touches her head and keeps looking at me.

“Lucas,” I offer her my name.

“Lucas,” she repeats, nodding, but there’s no recognition at all in the way she says my name.

“Chanel, how do you not know Lucas?”

Before she can answer, a doctor walks in. We step back as he checks Chanel over, then he asks us to leave. She tracks me as I go but asks Brody to stay. So I wait outside her room. Glancing back in, I see her eyes wander to the door, watching me.

The doctor eventually leaves and Brody follows, stopping in front of me. He bites his lip and looks down. “Seems she has some memory loss. They say it’s temporary, and they hope her memory will come back, but they don’t know when.” He looks back into the room. “I’m her brother, so she knows me. She remembers our parents. But there’s nothing other than that, not even Merci.”

“Her fiancé?” I ask.

“She isn’t engaged,” he replies, his face is scrunched with confusion.

I go back into the room and sit in the chair as Chanel watches me.

“How do we know each other?” she asks, looking me over.

Brody coughs from the door, but I ignore him as I answer, “You came into my bar and told me not to hire your brother. That is how we met.”

A small but incredibly faint smile pulls on her lips. “I’m quite protective over him.”

“That you are.” I nod, agreeing.

“And we became... friends?” she asks. Her eyes move to Brody in the doorway, who’s looking down at his feet but listening intently.

“You could say that.”

“You don’t sound too convinced.” Even with a head injury, she sits there questioning me, her tone with me is still the same, and I see her personality shining through. “Brody, do I have a bag? Personal stuff? Anything? Everything feels so foggy. Something might jog my memory.”

Brody shuffles inside and opens the top drawer next to the bed. He pauses, then glances at me before he pulls out a diamond ring.

“Wow! Who would wear something like that? Yuck.” She chuckles.

“You did,” I tell her.

“I’m married?” she asks, eyes wide. “To you?” She points at me, her eyes wide while her body tenses.

“Engaged, yes... and no, not to me.” I grind out those last words, not wanting to spill them from my mouth. They grate all the way out, and I want nothing more than to shove them right up Farris’s ass.

“So, if not to you, then where is my fiancé? Shouldn’t he be here?”

“He’s recovering as well.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Because he was driving the car you were thrown from,” I state. The police report says the idiot was speeding, but I leave that part out. I’m still contemplating how and when I will end him.

She looks to Brody. “Did... did I love this man?”

“I didn’t even know you were engaged to him,” Brody replies. Her eyes go wide at that statement, and her head flops back on the pillow.

“That’s a no, then.” She looks to me, eyes glued to mine, but says nothing before she drifts off to sleep.

“How did you know she was engaged?” Brody asks.

I stand, pull on my jacket, and walk toward the door. “Stay with your sister, Brody. I’ll be back later after I’ve showered and changed.”

“You don’t need to come back,” he says. And it’s the first real taste of venom I’ve heard come from his lips.

“That may be true, but I’ll be back all the same,” I state as I walk out.

* * *

“Why are you here?” Merci is sitting on a seat in the waiting room when I finally arrive back at the hospital. She looks much the same—braided hair and a sour expression on her face when it comes to me. “She’s happy, you know. Without you in her life.”

“Is she?” I ask. “So much so that none of you knew she was engaged?” I had a feeling she didn’t know, and I just confirmed it by the look on her face. “Tell me... have you even met him?”

Farris walks past us and straight to her room.

I smile at Merci. “Now is your time. That’s him.” She gets up as I follow her to Chanel’s room and stand at the door. I hear Farris speaking, her chocolate eyes finding mine straight away.

“Why is she staring at you?” Merci asks.

Farris turns around, and his brows pinch at the sight of Merci and me at the door. “Hey, we met.”

I nod, not giving him anything more. He turns back to Chanel while her brother sleeps in the chair opposite the bed.

“He says he’s my fiancé. Is it true?”

All eyes fall on me.

She’s asking me.

Her brother is asleep, and the only face she knows, apart from his, is mine. Not that she knows me, just that Brody confirmed we did.

“Yes,” I say, grinding my teeth.

I’d rather tell her no.

That this fuckhead isn’t the right man for her.

I am.

And we both know it.

“Chanel.” He steps closer and touches her hand. She tries to pull it back, but he grips it. “I didn’t mean what I said. I didn’t. I’m so sorry. The baby doesn’t have to be an issue.”

“Baby?” Merci squeals from the door. “Are you pregnant?”

Chanel’s chocolate eyes find mine, and her brows squish so hard they form one line.

I wasn’t going to interfere, but I do step in and move over to her side of the bed, and as I do, I see her relaxing ever so slightly.

“Why are you looking at him? You don’t even know this man,” Farris says.

And now I see the real side of him—the angry asshole. He doesn’t like the fact that she’s paying me attention. Pity for him, she isn’t his. *She’s mine.*

“She does, actually,” Merci says from the door.

Brody gets up, walks over, and kisses Merci’s cheek. She lets him.

“We only just met him. She doesn’t know that man. It’s me she knows.”

“Hi, I’m Brody.” Brody holds out his hand for Farris to shake. “I’m Chanel’s brother.”

“And you like drugs, I see.” He nods to Brody’s arms, which clearly show track marks. Farris doesn’t shake his hand that’s still extended. Brody soon pulls his arms back and puts his hands in his back pockets.

“Who the hell do you think you are talking to him like that?” Merci says, pulling Brody’s hand from his pocket and wrapping her fingers around his. “You should leave.”

“I’m her fiancé,” he bites back.

“You. Should. Leave,” Chanel states categorically.

Farris, or whatever his damn name is, looks over his shoulder to me. “You want me to leave, but this man can stay here?” His eyes pin mine.

“Yes. Lucas isn’t causing trouble and upsetting my brother. I may not remember you, but I remember my brother, and he means everything to me. So, get out!”

“This isn’t going to work, Chanel.”

Ha, letting her go so easily.

I would never allow this to happen. For me, it was the threat of death, but even with that threat, I have found my way back to her or perhaps fate did.

“Okay,” is all she says back.

Ferris shakes his head and walks out.

“You’re pregnant?” Merci asks, and I wait for her response.

Do I want her to be pregnant with another man’s child? Fuck no.

Would I pull a Farris and leave when it gets tough? No. Not even a storm could stop me from being near her now.

Fuck death.

Fuck everything.

“I don’t know,” Chanel whispers.

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Variety Gossip

The City's Bad Boy

Have you heard?

There was an accident, and our two favorite love birds have been reunited.

What will come of this?

I guess time will tell.

Until then, I'm going to leave you with this tidbit of information.

Someone could be pregnant?

Chapter Sixteen

CHANEL

“You are not pregnant,” the doctor confirms. He also tells me I can go home tomorrow but to take it easy and have someone with me at all times.

“You can come to mine,” Lucas offers.

“I’ll go home,” I reply, looking to Brody.

“You don’t live with us anymore,” he informs me.

Since when did that happen? I would never move out and leave him.

“And, sis... I need to go to rehab.” He scratches at his arms. As I take a really good look at him, his face is sunken in, and his eyes no longer hold that mischief. *What the hell have I missed?*

Turning back to Lucas, I ask, “Have I stayed at yours before?”

He tries to fight the smirk on his lips as he answers me, “Yes.”

“Oh,” I say, shocked. “While I was engaged?”

“No, before you were with...” His nose scrunches up, and he doesn’t finish the sentence.

I look back to Brody. “Where do I live?”

“In an apartment by yourself,” he answers.

“We can go to yours and collect things, see if it sparks anything,” Lucas offers.

When I glance back at him, I wonder how I wasn't engaged to this man. He is dressed in a black suit with a red tie, and his hair is styled to perfection. I thought when I woke that he was beautiful. But now... I am confused.

Again, how am I not with this man?

I think he is the most devastatingly handsome man I have ever met. Farris, or whatever his name was, my fiancé, was okay. But Lucas? Lucas makes my coochie tingle, even when it's broken. Because let's make no mistake, my whole body feels broken right now.

"Can I have a mirror?" I ask Lucas. He nods, steps out for a moment, then comes back a second later holding a small pocket mirror—he must have asked a nurse for one—and hands it to me. When he's this close, his smell envelops me, and I have to suck in a breath at his nearness.

Taking the mirror from his hand, my fingers slide over his. Before either one of us lets go, our eyes lock.

"You have such woodsy-colored eyes. I like being lost in them." This pulls a smirk from his lips.

"And yours are chocolate, my official favorite thing." His words make me smile as I pull my hand away and look in the mirror. The first thing I notice is my hair is no longer a dull brown. What the hell! It's now a vibrant red.

"My hair," I say, touching it.

"I liked your natural color," Lucas comments.

"So do I," I say, smiling. Then I look back into the mirror and touch my lip. It's healing but still has a small cut. My head has a bandage wrapped around it, and I wonder if it will leave a scar. I know I shouldn't think that way and that I'm lucky to be alive, but my mind still wonders.

"You're beautiful," Lucas whispers.

"Have we been together?" I ask.

Brody starts coughing, and Merci looks away when I glance toward them.

“Yes,” he answers.

“Why aren’t we still?” I ask. I’m not sure why I would ever leave this man. Not just because of the way he looks—definitely an added bonus—but the way he makes everything in me sing. Loudly. Even with the slight touch of his fingers, I can still feel my skin burning. Which is totally the opposite of the nothing I felt from my fiancé. *Is that normal?*

“You decided things would be better if you left.”

I can tell it’s not the full truth, but it may be part of the truth.

“And I can’t go home with you?” I ask Brody, and he shakes his head.

“And you trust this man if I went with him?” Brody should know me best.

Brody eyes Lucas, and they exchange a look.

“I would never hurt her, you know that.” Lucas raises a brow before he looks at me.

“Yes.”

“Are you insane?” Merci says to Brody, then smacks his chest before she walks out.

“What’s wrong with her?” I ask Brody.

“She isn’t the biggest fan of Lucas.”

“And you are?”

“I am. I can stay home if you don’t want to go with him,” Brody says as he scratches at his arm, and I can tell he needs help.

“No. I would never want you in pain.” I take a deep breath. “I’ll go with Lucas.”

* * *

“You have keys?” Lucas asks as we come to a stop.
I look up at the building.

I don't remember it.

Shouldn't I remember a place I called home?

"It's nicer than your last place," Lucas comments before he gets out and walks around to my door. He opens it and then offers me his hand. I place mine in his, and he helps me out, then places a hand around my waist to help steady me as we walk inside. The place where his hand is touching tingles, sending shockwaves throughout my body. I want to tell him to remove it, that his touch is too much, but I say nothing as part of me likes to feel him this close to me.

When we get to my door, Lucas holds out his hand, and I place a set of keys onto his palm. He unlocks the door, not letting me go as we walk in.

The apartment is... nice.

"This is mine?" I ask as I look around. A brand-new couch sits in the middle of the living room with a throw rug on the floor in front of it. The kitchen is just beyond with a neat white counter.

"That's my guess. It's for sure nicer than your old dump," he comments.

"You've never been here?"

"No, you moved here after us."

"Oh." I go to pull away, but he keeps his hand on me as I look around. I move toward the single bedroom with him right behind me, his hand still on my lower back. When I open the door, I smile. "It's nice."

"It is," he agrees. There's a four-post bed with pink sheets and throw pillows—way too many of them. A bedside table is situated on either side of the bed, and a small closet is open at the other end of the room.

"I'll just grab some clothes. Do you think you can find a bag for them?" I ask.

Lucas nods, reluctantly lets me go, then leaves the room. When he comes back, I have my drawers open and a few clothes on the bed. He gets to work packing them before he walks out again, returning with some items from my bathroom and packing them as well.

“How are you feeling?” Lucas asks as he zips up the bag.

“Do you not have work?” I ask. “I’m sure you have better things to do than look after me. And I’m feeling fine, thanks for asking.”

“I’m my own boss, so I set my own hours. And right now, I have work covered.”

“What is it you do?”

“Well, I’m not a doctor like your fiancé.” His mouth lifts at his inside joke, but he doesn’t answer my question. “Let’s go, I want to start dinner.”

“You cook?”

“Among other things,” is all he says as he throws the bag over his shoulder, his hand once again resting on my lower back as he guides me out.

“This feels weird,” I say as we get to his car. He puts my bag in the back seat of his flashy car as I climb in the passenger side, then he slides into the driver’s seat before pulling away.

“How so?”

“I don’t even know you, yet here I am in your car, going to your place.” I bite the inside of my cheek. “It’s not normal, right?”

“You needed someone to look after you. Your brother is your only family, and he has to get help. You’ve stayed with me before, and right now, I am your best option,” he says as if it’s a matter-of-fact answer.

“Why do I get the feeling you would have forced the option on me anyway?” I ask, turning in my seat. “I feel like you always get your way. Am I wrong about that?”

“You aren’t wrong. But with you, that isn’t always the case.”

“Do you have a girlfriend or a wife who may be upset that I’m staying with you?”

“No. You are the only woman allowed in my house.”

Butterflies take off in my stomach at his words. “Wow, okay.” I place my hands in my lap as the car slows down, and he pulls to a stop in front of

a small house in a shitty neighborhood. He gets out and helps me again.

“This is your place?” I look around. “You just leave your car there?”

“No one will steal it.”

“I grew up in this neighborhood. Everyone steals everything,” I tell him, and he chuckles. “What?”

“You’ve mentioned my car getting stolen before. It’s funny.”

“Well, has it been?”

“Yes, when you had it.”

I gasp, and all he does is smirk.

“Oh...” I like his car, and I bet I loved driving it.

He opens the door, and I smile as I see inside his house. It’s nice. Clean. And nothing like I expected from the outside. Now, that’s an impressive kitchen, especially with its old-world charm. A large oven and range stand in the middle of the huge cupboard space. This moves into a breakfast bar, where a few white stools with high backs are lined up. But before it is a big living room with sofas, a large-screen television, and some artwork that I wouldn’t expect this man to adorn his walls.

“It’s beautiful.” He walks me to a bedroom and opens the door. “Is this yours?” There’s a made bed with a large closet. It’s plain but screams *his*.

“Yes.”

“Where will you sleep?” I ask. “If I’m sleeping here.”

“Next to you,” he states, then walks to the closet, pulls a few hangers out, and starts hanging my clothes.

“I don’t know if I feel comfortable with that.” I bite the inside of my cheek as he finishes and turns toward me.

“I won’t do anything. It’s so I can monitor you. Now, lie down and turn the TV on so I can cook for you.”

Before he can make it to the door, I can’t stop myself from asking, “Have we had sex?”

He stops then turns to face me. “Yes.”

“A lot?”

He smirks, and it makes me smile. “Yes. You liked it a lot.” My cheeks redden at his words, and I have an inkling I liked it a lot.

“Are you sure? I heard it’s my profession to pretend otherwise.”

“You no longer do that.” He steps closer and leans down. His breath tickles my ear, and my face is in his neck. “Can you feel that?”

“What?” I ask through a heavy breath, a shiver running down right through my core.

“That,” he says. “Us.”

“I don’t understand.”

He pulls back ever so slightly and touches my arm, running his fingers over the goosebumps that have risen all over my skin. “I bet your heart is beating hard in that chest of yours. That’s what I do to you without touching you. I know because you do the same to me.” He inhales deeply.

Is he... smelling me?

Before he pulls back, he whispers, “Now do you think you enjoyed it?”

“I don’t...” I have no answer. I’m so confused, but unfortunately, my body is not. It knows more than I do about my connection to this man. “I’m tired,” is all I can say before I do something I probably shouldn’t.

Lucas steps back and goes to the door. “I’ll cook you something first. Pasta?”

My stomach growls at the thought of pasta—I love pasta.

And I wonder if I loved him.

How could I not?

He seems so...

... perfect.

So why was I engaged to another man?

Chapter Seventeen

LUCAS

By the time I return, she's asleep. I lay my hand on her shoulder as the doorbell rings. *Who the fuck could that be?* No one comes here.

Her chocolate eyes open and find mine. "Sorry, I must have fallen asleep."

"I could get used to you this way." She gives me a puzzled look. "Polite. Nice."

"Was I not nice to you?" she asks.

"Oh, you're the only woman who could talk back to me, and you knew it." The doorbell rings again, and I place her food on her lap before I go check to see who's here.

When I get there, I'm surprised at who I find on the other side.

"Do you plan to invite me in?" Keir asks. He's standing there by himself, which is very unlike him. He always has someone with him.

"No, I think not," I say, stepping out.

Keir steps back and raises a brow. "Have you seen her?" he asks. I think about lying to him, but it's been two long years of not seeing her. I listened to him to begin with, but not any longer. If he thinks for one second, I will stay away again, he's fucking dreaming. So I answer with one simple word, "Yes."

“Lucas.” We both turn to her in the doorway with a bowl in her hand. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize you had company.” She turns to leave.

“Chanel, come meet someone.” Keir eyes me but says nothing. She walks to the door and steps close to me as she looks at Keir. “Chanel, this is Keir. He’s my boss.”

“Oh, your boss. I thought you were your own boss?”

“I am, but we all have people we answer to. Keir is my person.”

Keir appears confused, understandably. This Chanel is not the one he’s used to.

“Chanel had an accident and has lost her memory,” I explain.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Keir states.

“Yeah, they say it may come back. Here’s to hoping.” She shrugs her shoulders.

“Yeah, hoping,” Keir says and locks eyes with me.

“Did you need anything?”

“Oh, yeah...” she bites the inside of her cheek, “... I spilled the pasta on your bed. I didn’t mean to, it’s just...” She lifts her hand, and it shakes a little.

“Go back inside... I won’t be long.”

Chanel nods and smiles at Keir. “Was good to meet you,” she says to him, and I shut the door behind her.

“Lucas,” he warns.

“Do you plan to threaten me or follow through with your previous threat?”

He glances behind me at the closed door and then toward his car. “Walk me to my car.” I follow him down. He lays a hand on the roof as he slides on his sunglasses. “You plan to make her love you.”

I smirk at his words. “Love is such a fickle word, but if that’s what you want to use. She already does, she simply needs to remember.”

“And what happens when she remembers the part where you gave her to your father?” he asks.

“Then I’ll deal with that then,” I reply, smiling.

“You paid your dues, Lucas. I won’t interfere. But don’t go making the same mistakes. I won’t be so lenient again.” Keir gets into his car and drives off, and I walk back inside thinking, *I wonder how much Sailor had to do with that decision*. Keir doesn’t usually forgive, and I went against his wishes. So right now, I should be dead on the pavement. I have no idea why he’s decided to change his mind about my punishment, but I am going to accept it for what it is. I want Chanel, and I am going to do whatever I can to get what I want.

When I walk inside, I find her trying to clean up the mess on the bed.

“It’s fine, sit. I got this.” She takes a deep breath, and I realize she’s out of breath and shaking. “Fuck, Chanel.”

She smiles as she sits on the end of the bed. “I made the mess, so I was trying to clean it.”

I finish tearing off the sheet and help her to stand. As soon as I get a new sheet on the bed, I help her sit back down.

“You have real pretty eyes, you know that?”

“Who are you?” I ask her, our faces close as I hover over her.

“Why?” She looks at me confused. I miss that fire from her, but I’m also enjoying getting to know a different side of her.

“You don’t talk to me like this,” I tell her honestly.

“How do I speak to you normally?”

“With venom.”

She scrunches up her nose. “But we were a thing, right?”

“Yes.” I nod.

Pulling away, I finish making the bed and then help her back in it. “Go to sleep. Tomorrow is a new day.”

* * *

Like a stalker, I watched her sleep and then eventually fell asleep next to her. I wake with her hands clutching the bedsheets, sweat on her forehead, but she's still asleep. How is she so fucking beautiful? And the way she smells, even drenched in sweat, I would lick every inch of her clean if she asked me to.

Every. Fucking. Inch.

"Chanel." Her eyes spring open, searching until they find me.

"I remember." The words leave her mouth, and I wait for more because she's sure to turn around grab the nearest weapon and stab me for bringing her here. "The accident. He was yelling, driving insanely... I told him to slow down."

"You only remember that?" She nods at my words, and relief washes over me. "He cheated on me, got another woman pregnant, and expected me to help raise the baby. I don't want a baby. I've never wanted kids."

Her words surprise me because, honestly, I never knew that about her.

"Why?" I ask.

"Why what?" Her chocolate eyes find mine.

"Why do you not want kids. You're fiercely protective of those you love."

"Because I raised my brother. I don't need to do that again. I have me, and it's me who now needs the attention. At least, that's what I've always told myself..."

"You have a habit of saving those you love."

"I don't think I loved my fiancé very much."

"I don't think you did either, considering you never kissed him." Her lips purse at that.

"Did I kiss you?"

Oh, how I wish I could lie to her.

“No, you didn’t. Not that I didn’t try.”

“Interesting,” she says as I get up out of bed. I feel her eyes on my back, and when I turn around, I see her cheeks go red at being caught. “I keep on seeing the look in his eyes as he was driving. He was crazy. So furious that I didn’t want to go along with his plan. I think he knew then that I no longer could do it... whatever we were.”

“He cheated on you?” I ask for confirmation.

“Yep. That’s what keeps on playing like on repeat in my head. How could he be mad at me? I wasn’t the one who impregnated another woman and expected my fiancée to raise the kid.” She shakes her head.

“Brody is on his way over. I have to go out,” I say, shooting a message to Brody. He messages straight back, and when I put the phone down, she’s watching me.

“What does that say?” She points to a tattoo over my heart.

“It’s Italian. It means *mine forever*.”

“You have a lot of tattoos.”

“I do.” I nod and walk around to her side of the bed. Leaning down, I kiss the top of her head, lingering like I always do. I inhale her scent, and she takes a deep breath. “I’m going to cook you breakfast before I go. If you need a hand using the bathroom, yell for me.”

Chanel’s cheeks are pink, and she has a soft smile on her face before I leave her in bed.

* * *

“You,” he spits.

“Me,” I reply, smiling.

The fuckhead has hardly anything wrong with him. There are a few scrapes on his face, and that’s it. How is that even fair? I walk into Farris’s

house, and he gasps, then reaches for his phone. “I would put that down if I were you.”

“Fuck off. You’re in my house, so I’m calling the cops.” So I turn, raise my gun, and shoot his hand. The phone drops to the floor when a scream rips through his throat, and his hand is now bleeding profusely.

Nice shot.

Keir would be proud.

“Now, sit down. I have a few things I want to discuss with you.” He steps back, trembling, as I stalk closer to him. I pick up his phone from the floor and glance down at the cracked screen. His screensaver is a picture of himself. *Why does that not surprise me?* As he had already unlocked it while trying to ring the cops, I navigate to his photos, where there are several of himself but only a couple of Chanel.

“She remembers you.” Farris’s cries stop, and he looks up at me. “The accident, dickhead. She remembers everything,” I inform him. “You got another woman pregnant.”

The asshole has the audacity to look away before he lifts his shirt and wraps it around the wound on his hand. “That is none of your damn business.”

“It is, though. It became my business the minute you put her life in your hands and decided to be reckless with it.”

“I have no idea what you are on about.”

“So, are you telling me you weren’t driving like a fuckhead with Chanel in the car because she doesn’t want kids?”

“She’ll change her mind. She did about marriage, and she will about kids too.”

“I don’t think you’ll win this one,” I reply.

My eyes wander, taking in his home. Everything’s white, even the stupid couch that his blood is dripping all over it. There are no photos anywhere. No animals. No nothing. The words that come to mind are

‘hospital sterile.’ The room gives off the feeling of an operating suite, only with soft furnishings. I am not even sure where the television is located—it must be hidden in the walls or something. Have you ever been somewhere where everything feels so pristine, so clean that you just want to dirty it up to make yourself feel comfortable? Well, this is the place for you.

“Yeah, and what would you know?” he bites back, bringing me back into the now.

“I know Chanel. I know her well. Did she tell you about me? Or did she keep playing the game of she never knew me?” I ask, taking a seat opposite him.

“You never knew her,” he scoffs out loudly.

Without batting an eyelid, I pull out my cell and go to the only video I have, press play, and turn it to face him. It’s her coming, for me.

His eyes go wide, and then the scowl of all scowls appears on his face. “That’s *not* her.”

“Listen...” I smile as Chanel screams out her release. “Tell me, do you know that sound. Or does she use the fake screams she used to give her clients to you?”

“Clients?” he asks, shocked.

“You did know she was a hooker, right?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Chanel was a hooker, a prostitute, a whore... not sure how much clearer I can make it for you. She used to fuck me over as well. Made me so mad I killed any man who said they touched her.” Farris’s eyes search for the door. “You wouldn’t make it in time. I’m a damn good shot, in case you were wondering,” I state, then nod to his hand.

“Who are you?”

“It’s a little late for that question. I came here to teach you a lesson because you hurt something that belongs to me.” I smile. “She told me that night in Vegas, when she came to my room, that she’s never kissed you.

She's never kissed me either. Though, I do plan to change that now I have her back."

"Why would you want trash? If she is who you say she is? She's a liar."

"She lied to you, but I always knew who she was."

"Well, you can have her!" He goes to stand, completely disregarding her as if she doesn't mean anything to him like she is less than dirt on his shoe.

"Sit down, Farris."

"That's Dr. Farris Child to you."

"Sit down, *Dr. Child*."

He does, reluctantly.

"I said you can have her. So why are you still here?"

"I told you, Farris... *oh, sorry, Dr. Child*... you hurt what is mine."

"She wasn't yours then."

I click my tongue in a tsk tsk motion. "That's where you're wrong." I stand. "She was and always will be mine. Forever mine... if you want me to be precise. I simply let her live her own life for a while before I made sure she came back to me." I smile down at him as I step closer. "Any last words, Farris?"

"Yes! Leave now. Don't come back. Or I'll call the police."

"I don't plan to come back, Farris." I raise the gun and shoot him between his eyes. He drops back like the bag of fucking scum he is.

You fuck with what's mine, then be prepared for me to destroy you.

And make no mistake, she is *mine*.

Chapter Eighteen

CHANEL

“Lucas’s been gone all day,” I say to Brody, who sits next to me in the bed.

“He’s a busy man.” There’s a touch of admiration in his reply, and I am unsure if I like that fact or respect him for showing it so openly.

“How do we know him?” I ask. “I want to hear your version.”

“I got a job to help out, to stop you from doing something you hated, and well, you didn’t approve.”

“Why?”

“Because it was in *that* part of town.” He tries to hide a wince, but I catch on.

“Did you stay employed?”

“For a little while, but eventually, it ended. And now here I am, addicted to everything even after you tried to stop me.”

I reach for his hand. “I love you, and it’s not your fault. It’s in our blood to fuck up. But you can overcome this, I know you can.”

“I go to rehab tomorrow. Lucas is paying for me to go. It’s a nice facility,” he says, smiling.

“Does he do that, pay for things for you?”

He chuckles.

“I tried to give you a new phone once, and you threw it out the window.” Lucas’s voice comes from the door. Brody and I both turn to see him standing there with a few shopping bags in hand. “I’m cooking,” he states, then off he goes to do his thing.

“He cooks... a lot.”

“For you, yes.” Brody gets up off the bed and walks out. “See ya later, sis. I’ll call when I can.”

I get up and head to the kitchen. My eyes take in Lucas as he leans over the counter, rolling something between his hands, his back tense through his tight dress shirt.

“I’m feeling better today, no head-spins. That’s a good thing, right?” I say, and he looks over his shoulder to give me a once over.

I’ve managed to shower and change my clothes. I am wearing on an old dress shirt that was packed in my things and a pair of daisy dukes.

“Yes, and you look incredible.” He smirks as heat rushes to my cheeks before he turns back to whatever it is he’s cooking.

I can’t help but ask, “What are you making?” as I hop onto the counter behind him.

“Pasta.”

“Is that your favorite dish?” I ask.

“No, it’s yours.”

I pull on my bottom lip, knowing he’s right. “You enjoy cooking?”

“I enjoy watching *you* eat.” Lucas’s back is still to me.

“Why?” He stops what he’s doing and turns to face me, picks up a cloth, and starts wiping his hands. I pick up a bottle of water and bring it to my lips.

“I enjoy things that make you moan.”

Oh, good God, I cough and splutter water all over the counter and somehow manage to apologize while choking. “Did you really just say that?” I ask, barely stuttering the words out, in complete shock and a throat

that's gone as dry as the Sahara Desert, even though I have just swallowed more than my share of water.

"I did."

"Did you used to say stuff to me like that a lot?"

"Whenever I got the chance." Lucas turns again, then places the handmade pasta into the boiling water. Then he begins cooking bacon. It crackles and sizzles in the pan, the aroma sending my taste buds into overdrive. Finally, he adds the pesto. My mouth waters and my stomach grumbles as I sit there watching everything he does. He's like a precision machine, everything is done in order and perfectly in sync with his body.

"Will you kiss me?" His hand pauses on the pot before he glances back over his shoulder at me. "I heard that could trigger memories. Will you kiss me?"

"No," he replies instantly, then goes back to cooking.

"Why? Don't you want me? I know we broke up, but I don't know the reasons behind it. So, I am going to ask again, don't you want me?"

He replies with a husky laugh and shakes his head.

My forehead creases as I wait for his response.

"I want you, but if you got your memory back tomorrow after I'd kissed you, you may very well kill me in my sleep." After he drops that bombshell, he casually takes everything off the heat and plates it up. "You never kiss. It's your rule."

"I remember bits of the argument with Farris. He yelled at me because I wouldn't kiss him. I guess I wanted to see if that extends to you as well."

"It did. It extended to everyone." He pushes the plate to me. "Eat." I pick up the fork and take a bite, then moan as the taste hits my tongue. And when I look up, he's smiling. "That right there is why I cook for you."

"Here I was thinking it was done out of some sort of guilt trip."

The smile drops away from his face, and he says no more.

After dinner, we head to bed, and I fall asleep before he does.

* * *

The week goes on. Lucas is gone during the day and comes back at night, cooks for me, and sleeps next to me.

We hardly talk, and when we do, it's about cooking.

So I have stopped asking questions, hoping that they will just come to me—the memories of my past life. But with each and every day, I feel like something is changing between Lucas and me. I can't remember who he was before, but when he cooks for me and looks after me, I have a feeling we were something different.

Different from what I had with Farris.

* * *

“Why do you have a gun?” I've seen him wear a gun a few times, but I've never questioned it. Tonight, he's in the kitchen, cooking yet again, and I can see the gun in his holster.

Two weeks have gone by, and I feel good now, almost back to normal. All my cuts and bruises are mostly healed, and I don't need help with anything now, which is good.

“For protection.”

“Don't you own a bar?” I ask, confused.

“Among other things.”

“Why do I get the feeling you're hiding something?”

“Just you,” he answers.

“This is true. But I think I'm ready to try to step back into the world again. I was a flight attendant before. Maybe I'm not quite ready for that, but maybe I should find something else to occupy my mind?”

“We've been invited out for dinner tonight,” he says, ignoring what I've just said, or maybe he simply doesn't have an opinion on what I do with

myself.

“Where?”

“My boss’s house, and technically your ex-boss who you used to nanny for.”

“That will be nice.” I nod to him at the stove and tilt my head to the side. “But you’re cooking?”

“I’ll bring it. Keir never says no to my cooking.”

“I’ll go and get changed,” I say, standing and quick-stepping it to the bedroom. I search through my bag—Merci ended up bringing over another one full of clothes—and pull out a skirt and shirt before I start tearing off the clothes I have on. I’m excited to go out, to get out of this house, even though it’s a nice house and has everything I need, but it’s become more like a prison lately.

“That was fast.”

I turn my head as I’m pulling up my skirt. Lucas is in the doorway, his eyes fixated on my ass without any shame.

I smile and shimmy the skirt all the way up my body until it’s in place and then pull up the zipper on the side. “I’m excited to go out, even if it’s to someone else’s house who I don’t know.”

“You do,” he corrects. “You just don’t remember Keir and Sailor.” I turn back around to pull on my shirt, and when my head pops through the hole, I notice he hasn’t moved. He’s intent on watching me while standing on one foot and leaning against the door frame.

All I can think of is how sexy he looks standing there with the lighting behind him and the way he takes up most of the doorway. Facing him fully, I ask, “Okay, well, did I like them?”

“You loved Sailor. She’s Keir’s wife.”

I nod and step up to him after slipping on some heels.

“Let’s go.” Lucas grabs my hand, and I follow him out as he carries a tray of food in the other. He helps me into the car before sliding into the

driver's seat, after having put the tray in the back seat, and taking off with a squeal of his wheels. His touch is burning my hand, and all I can think about is what those hands might feel like all over my body.

"How many times did we have sex?"

He clutches the wheel, knuckles almost turning white before he glances over at me. "I fucked you in a plane. Do you remember that?"

What? Wow!

"Umm, no, clearly," I say, shaking my head. "Why on a plane? Was I working?"

"This was before you started working in that field. I took you to Disney World."

"You took me to Disney World?"

"On a private jet, where I proceeded to fuck you after. Side note, you enjoyed it."

"Did we do that a lot?"

"No."

"How come we didn't work? Please, give me the truth."

He's silent for a few moments, and I think he isn't going to answer my question. I'm about to tell him to forget about it when he speaks, "I fucked up. You knew it, I knew it. Took me a little longer to realize my loyalties didn't lie with a man who used me. They should have been with you. They should have always been with you. However, I didn't quite understand who you were back then. But you paid me back for it, make no mistake."

"So, if I paid you back, why didn't I take you back?"

"It's more complicated than that. Believe me, if it were, I would have been a happy man, but you despised me for what I did, and rightfully so."

I turn in my seat to face him. "I have a feeling I would have forgiven you."

He smirks as he looks at me, his face telling a story, but it's one I don't know yet. "No, you wouldn't have." And the way he says the words make

me believe him which, in turn, makes me a little sad as to why I wouldn't have forgiven this beautiful man next to me.

The car comes to a stop out the front of a cute brownstone. Lucas gets out, runs around, and opens my door to help me out. "If you get tired, let me know, and we can leave straight away."

"It's just a small dinner, right?" I ask.

"Nothing is ever small in this family."

"Family?" I look at the house. "This is your family? I thought you said he was your boss?"

"It is. And family. Keir is my boss."

"Do I look all right?" I ask, my hands sliding down my skirt to try and make it longer.

Will they hate me?

Like me?

"There is literally not a more perfect person in this world. Now, stop fidgeting and come on." He walks up the stairs, and I follow him.

The door opens before he even knocks, and a lady stands there, beaming a smile at us. Her smile is contagious and beautiful, and her soft eyes fall to mine. Her honey-colored hair is tied back in a bun, and she's wearing a tight-fitting dress.

"Chanel." She steps out and wraps her arms around me. I stand frozen for a moment, then lift my hand and pat her back. The whole exchange being a little awkward when I have no idea who she is. When the woman pulls back, I step back until I reach Lucas. My side bumps his, and I stay there.

"It's so good to see you again, and you're looking better as well."

"Chanel still doesn't remember who you are."

Sailor looks to Lucas, eyebrows drawn close together, then back to me. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realize. Well, I'm Sailor, and it's so nice to see you again."

I smile at her words. “It’s nice to see you too. Thank you for having me over to your house for dinner. I’ve been dying to get out. Even though Lucas is great company, it’s time for me to go out into the world again.”

“Lucas, great company? That’s a joke.” Lucas hands over the tray of food, and Sailor smiles at it.

Someone comes up behind her.

He isn’t the man who came to the house—this is someone new. He has playful eyes and a kind smile.

“I’m Joey, and it’s good to see that beautiful face again. Pity it’s next to that prick.”

Okay! I look back at Lucas, his face is expressionless, so I turn back to Joey. “Thank you. I would say it’s good to see you again, but I don’t remember you.”

“Okay, let us in.” Lucas steps forward as they move back, and he grabs my hand, pulling me in after him. We go straight to a dining room where another guy, as well as a woman, are seated.

“Piper and Joey insisted they be here,” the guy at the head of the table says to Lucas, then looks back down at his phone.

I remember this man when he came to Lucas. *Keir.*

“Keir, you remember Chanel.” He looks up and nods before he goes back to his phone, completely uninterested in me.

Well, okay, not very talkative, then.

Lucas goes to the table, pulls out a seat for me, and then sits next to me. “This is Piper.” Lucas nods to the lady across from us. I offer her a smile as she sits back with a glass of wine in her hand and some sort of expression on her face I can’t make out.

“You hated him. Did he tell you that?” Piper says.

Lucas doesn’t respond, but I know she’s talking to me, so I reply with, “He did. Said I paid him back.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “That you did.”

“Piper, play nice,” Sailor says, entering the room, holding a tray of food with Joey behind her doing the same.

“What is it you do for work?” I ask her as the food is placed down on the table. Everyone in the room goes silent at my question, and I feel bad for asking. Was that not something I was meant to ask? “I’m sorry, was that rude?”

“No, no, it’s not. Have you asked Lucas what it is he does?” Piper questions, leaning forward and placing her wine on the table, her elbows now resting on the edge and again an expression I am unsure of. Glancing over my shoulder to Lucas, I see him pick up a glass of whiskey that Joey placed in front of him, and he places it to his lips, taking a large swallow.

“I have, and he’s incredibly vague. All I really know is the part about owning the bar.” I turn my attention back to her. “Do you own a bar too?”

“No, only Lucas holds that title, though Keir has stock in certain bars. One of them is called a traffic light party. Have you heard of that? It’s actually where Sailor and Keir met. Yeah, funny story. She went there with her husband and left with Keir.”

“What’s a traffic light party?” I ask.

“It’s a place where you go to meet like-minded people. Certain colored wristbands show your willingness to...” she trails off as my mind thinks, *Oh, okay.*

“You used to be a hooker. Do you remember that?” Piper asks.

“Piper,” Lucas warns.

“I do, kind of. It’s all a bit fuzzy if I am being honest. I remember Brody and my parents. Not how my parents died, just that they did. I remember having to find work to pay for things for Brody, but again that’s all fuzzy. The doctor said my memories should come back, but it will be a slow process.” I turn to look at Lucas. “Did you ever pay me? I can’t believe I haven’t asked you that.”

“No, and I never would,” he says, throwing back the last of his drink.

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Chapter Nineteen

LUCAS

I'm contemplating throwing this glass at Piper's face.

Do you think she needs her whole face? I think not.

Maybe then it will shut her the fuck up. *Yeah, probably not.*

"You're hiding a lot from her. I wonder if she would choose to stay with you if she knew," Piper says.

Sailor has taken Chanel upstairs to see the sleeping kids.

"She knows enough," I finally answer back.

Piper's been sitting there going on and on and on since the minute Chanel walked away.

"What do you think she will do once she remembers? You can't hide who you are from her forever."

"I'll tell her."

"So you plan to tell her you're in the mafia and like to kill people the same as normal people like chocolate?"

"You what?"

Fucking hell! We both turn at Chanel's outburst. She's standing at the doorway with Sailor next to her. Her chocolate eyes stare at me, and confusion reigns on her beautiful face.

"Are you in the... *mafia*?" she says the last word in almost a whisper. "And did I know this before?"

“You knew. It wasn’t an issue.”

Piper laughs.

Chanel looks at her. “Was it an issue?”

“Only when you shot his dad,” Piper replies, and that’s it. I pull my gun. I have to. She’s a fucking shit-stirring bitch. The gun points at her face, and she does nothing, says nothing. It’s Chanel who’s screaming for me to put it down.

“You will learn one day to shut up, or you will end up like your brother. Six feet in the fucking ground.”

Her lips fight a smile, and she leans in close, so her forehead is touching the barrel. “You could try to kill me, but I will find a way to end you, regardless.”

“Not if your body is cold and filled with maggots, you bitch.”

“Enough!” Keir bellows as he storms in, and I pull my gun back. “Stop your fucking bullshit, Piper, and leave.” Keir looks at me and shakes his head. “Take Chanel home.” Then he strides out—the man gives me fucking whiplash.

I move away from Piper and to Chanel. I go to reach for her, but she pulls away at my touch.

“It’s time I go home.” Her arms cross over her chest in defiance before she spins and walks out.

“Lucas...” Sailor’s hand lands on my arm. “I’m sorry.”

I nod and leave. There’s little Sailor can say that will fix this. It was bound to happen sooner than later—Chanel needed to find out who we are and what we are into. When I climb into the car, she has her body turned away from mine and is looking out the window.

“Chanel...”

I hear her tsks before she glares at me, and even me, a mafia man through and through, pulls back a little.

“Did you lie to me a lot when we were together? Is that why we didn’t last?” Chanel asks. “Or was it because I killed your father?” she spits. “How could you be around me after I did that? What type of person was I? Not one I recognize, that’s for sure.”

“I’m not mad or even sad you killed him. You had a good reason for what you did.” And I mean those words. I know I had a moment where I was pissed about it, but that feeling didn’t last long.

“You sound delusional. How could you sit there and help me after that?” She takes a deep breath. “And... *you’re in the mafia*. Shouldn’t I be dead for killing one of yours?”

“My father was no longer in our ranks. And as for my father, he took you, and as far as I’m concerned, he got what he got... he deserved it!”

“He took me?” she asks.

“He was one of your clients,” I tell her truthfully. “He had a fixation with you. Which, I might add, is easy.”

“Do you have a fixation with me?”

“Do you want the truth?” I question because the ‘real’ truth she may never be ready for. I’m not even sure I am.

“Yes,” she almost pleads with me.

“Promise me you’ll stay tonight, and I’ll tell you.”

“Okay, I’ll stay.”

“I do. I have a fixation with smell, and yours is my favorite smell. Even years after, when I first smelled you again, I knew I couldn’t stay away. But apart from your intoxicating smell, it’s also you as a person. No other woman has ever held my interest like you. You are literally perfection in my eyes.”

“I’m far from perfect by the sounds of things.” She scoffs, looking out the window again. “If I asked you to take me home, even though I just agreed to stay with you, would you?”

In the reflection from the window, I see her biting the inside of her cheek.

“I would.”

“I’ll stay, but I do want to go home tomorrow.”

“And I’ll take you,” I reply, finally pulling into my place.

She gets out without me helping her and walks up to the front door, then waits for me to open it. “What do you do for the mafia?” Her voice is soft as she starts asking the questions I am sure are troubling her mind right now.

“I do whatever Keir needs from me.”

“And what does he usually need?”

“I take lives,” I reply unashamed as I unlock the door and walk in, with Chanel following behind me cautiously.

“Do you have remorse?” She shuts the door behind her with a quiet click.

“No, not ever.”

“That’s sad. That makes me sad for you.”

“You can feel that for me. But, Chanel, I don’t. If he called and told me to kill the mother next door, I would. And I wouldn’t hesitate. I’m not your average man, Chanel. You need to really listen to me and understand that. I have no qualms with taking someone’s life when requested. There has only ever been one I could not take.”

“Whose?” she asks.

“Yours,” I reply, looking her straight in the eye. Then I walk into the bathroom and begin taking off my clothes.

She follows and stands at the door as I pull my dress shirt off, letting it drop to the floor. Then I take off my belt and let it drop on top of my shirt. I turn to face her and let my trousers fall to my ankles, kicking them off so they join the pile before I walk to the shower, turn it on, and step under the hot spray.

“I’m not going to lie and say that’s not an issue.” She bites her lip as I soap my body, and she watches from her position at the door. “Do you care that I see you naked?” she asks.

“No, you’ve seen me before and touched me several times,” I tell her. Putting my face under the water, I rinse everything off before I pull back out and note she still hasn’t moved. Turning the faucet to the off position, I step out, reach for a towel, and wrap it around myself before I walk over to her.

Her eyes travel the length of my torso before they land on my eyes. “Would you do something for me to help me remember?” she asks, but her voice is strained and unsure, so she purses her lips.

“What?”

Her eyes dart away, then lock back on mine. “Would you have sex with me?”

Did she just ask me to have sex with her?

“I’m feeling fine. Nothing down there is broken. And, well...” she bites her bottom lip, tempting me even further, “... it might help bring back an old memory.”

“You shouldn’t offer a thirsty man water, *mia per sempre*.”

Chanel’s eyes dance up to mine, and her body goes rigid. “Why do you call me that?” Her eyes fall to the tattoo on my chest. “That’s what that says. Why would you call me that? You’ve said it multiple times, and I don’t understand,” she asks again.

“It’s late. You should go to bed.” I go to leave the bathroom, but she stops me, her hand going to my chest where her tattoo is located as she looks up at me.

“Did you love me?” she asks, so casually, as if it’s nothing. “I mean, I’m here and you’re looking after me, so I’ve been thinking maybe you loved me. Is that it?”

“I do *not* love you,” I tell her honestly.

Her hand drops like I just burned her, and she takes a step away from me.

“I’m fucking consumed by you. Love is a shallow word for how I feel. It’s not even a word that deserves a place in what we are.”

Her hand goes to reach for me again, but she drops it, shocked by my words. “Did I love you?” she asks.

“You hated me at the end, so no, I don’t think so.”

“Okay.” She turns and walks to the bed, then sits on the edge and kicks off her shoes before removing her shirt, exposing a lacy bra. “Will you at least touch me?”

My cock strains against the towel, and her eyes trail down my torso to the bulging lump forming right in front of her eyes. She knows what she’s doing to me and reaches for the waistband of her skirt before she scoots it down to the floor at the end of the bed where she’s seated.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” I tell her gruffly, my voice taking on a huskier tone.

“I’m fine. The doctors even said I am. It’s just a matter of time if my memory comes back or it doesn’t. Do you not want to help me remember?” she asks, now basically naked on my bed.

Fuck! Do you know how much, over the years, I have dreamed of this moment?

What I would do if I had this woman back in my bed.

“You’ll hate me if I do. And you do remember,” I try to convince her. But let’s be real, I’m trying to convince myself as well.

“Lucas,” she calls.

“Hmm.” My gaze is on her tits, those perfect round tits that I’ve missed so damn much.

“Would you hurry up and touch me, please?”

Please? So different from her usual old demands. I like both sides of her, and now I am wondering which one I will get to keep.

“Please,” I repeat her word.

I step over, she lifts a hand, and reaches for mine, then places it on her tits along with the other one so both are touching her. Her hands cover mine for a heartbeat before she drops them, leaving me standing there with my hands full of tits.

“Lucas.”

“Hmm...” I look up and see she’s smiling.

She reaches forward and tugs the bottom of the towel, letting my cock free. Then her hand wraps around me. I suck in a breath, the sound more like a hiss at the feeling, and squeeze her tit before I pull back, her hand falling away from me too.

I shake my head, telling myself this is wrong.

I should back away.

But when I next let my eyes fall to her, her panties are gone, and she’s reclining at the end of the bed with her legs spread and a wicked smile on her face.

“I would like to be kissed,” she purrs, then her hand runs between her tits to her stomach, trailing down lower until it reaches her beautiful cunt. “Here.”

Instantly, I drop to the floor on my knees a few feet back from her, completely transfixed, as she spreads herself wider, then slides one of her fingers into her cunt.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She pulls it back out, and it’s glistening wet. “Remind me what it’s like.”

“I’m the only man to make you come, do you remember that much?” I ask, crawling forward until I’m between her legs.

My lips touch her inner thigh, and I smell her.

Fucking divine.

She goes to slide a finger in herself again, but I capture it, pull it to me, and slide it under my nose, taking a whiff of her gorgeous scent before I smile and slide that finger that was inside her into my mouth. She moves her finger from my mouth to her mouth, opening in pleasure before she pulls her hand away and bites her lip.

Her hips move in that perfect way, that synchronized style she moves in that almost makes me come on the spot.

I know what she wants.

What she needs.

“Show me how you make me come,” she whispers.

I lean forward, blowing air onto her pussy. This makes her hands come up to my head and grip my hair with her fingers, holding me in position.

“Tell me,” I say before my tongue slides out, as if it can’t help itself, and tastes her. She squirms, and a moan slips free before I finish speaking. “How do you want me to fuck you?”

She’s looking at me between her legs, a sinister smile on her lips. “Whichever way. You know me best, do you not?”

“I do,” I growl out before I reach up, push her back on the bed, and take one of her tits into my mouth. Then I reach between us, my hand sliding between her legs and rubbing her clit as I taste the other nipple, sucking then popping it from my mouth before I slide back down her body to where I want to be. I could live my life happily down here.

My second taste is explosive, just like we are together.

We know we shouldn’t work.

We break, destroy, unravel each other until we can’t see straight.

But I want to continue to see her, even if it’s through rose-colored glasses.

Because she is the best sight there could ever be.

She is it.

I knew that the day she walked into my bar with her attitude, her sass, and I had her up against the wall. I want to fuck every part of her, taste every part of her, and claim every part of her.

My tongue slides over her clit. With the way she says my name as I flick it in a slow motion, making her legs clench around my face, I hope she believes it too.

But that's one thing about Chanel—I never know what to expect from her.

She isn't bad.

But she's not good either.

But is she sinful enough to handle my kind of evil?

Or will it consume her and be too much?

I hope not.

"Lucas, if you don't..." She trails off as I slide a finger into her. Her body relaxes, and I know full well that's what she wants. She comes apart on my tongue, and the minute I feel her pussy stop clenching around my finger, I pull it out and back away from her a few feet. She leans up on her elbows and looks up at me, confused. "Why are you holding back? What are you waiting for?"

"I don't want to hurt you," I reply.

Chanel's eyes flick to my very hard cock. She stands and saunters over to me until her body is pressed against mine.

"I'm not breakable, or have you not worked that out yet?" She moans before her lips skate down on my neck, her other hand coming between us to grip my cock, and she starts to stroke it. I reach down, not able to resist the urge to touch her, then lift her by her ass cheeks and ever so slowly drop her down on my cock. I slide inside her like I am meant to be there, like her sweet, tight, fucking beautiful pussy is mine, and it's made for my exact dimensions.

Her cunt? It's mine.

Make no mistake.

I killed her fiancé for a reason.

She Is mine.

And I will do everything possible to keep her.

Her lips sweep along my neck again before she bites to the point I feel the skin break.

Ah, there she is. My Chanel has come out to play.

She rides my cock as I grip her ass, helping her move up and down effortlessly.

“Lucas!” she screams, her ass firmly in my grasp, my cock in her pussy. “Lucas.” She throws her head back, and I take that opportunity to spin us around and push her back against the wall. With one hand holding her up, she lifts and bounces on my cock while the other snakes up around her throat, gently squeezing as I look into her chocolate eyes that are filled with so much more than pleasure.

“Tell me I’m it for you. That it’s me you want.”

“It’s you I want,” she replies, never stopping her movements.

My hand leaves her throat as she comes. Hard.

Fuck. What have I done?

But do I regret it?

Not one single fucking moment.

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Chapter Twenty

CHANEL

Lucas carries me to the shower and places me on my feet.

Was it a huge mistake to sleep with him? I'm not quite sure what the correct answer to that question is anymore. To tell the truth, I actually, don't know of many right answers.

A knock comes from his front door as he turns on the shower. He kisses the top of my head, reaches for a towel, and walks out. I stand under the water and start washing myself when I hear him yelling.

Quickly, I step out, reach for a towel, and follow the sound, careful not to be heard as I do.

"You did it again. You pushed the fucking boundaries." That voice? It's familiar. Is it his boss? "End it, or I will."

"No."

My back straightens as Lucas speaks. He sounds casual, but there's a definite undertone of something I can't quite make out.

"I won't kill you, Lucas. I need you. But remember, everyone *is* replaceable. I know what has to go to get you in line, and she *will* be gone."

"If you touch her..." Lucas warns.

"What?" Keir asks with a laugh. "You'll what, Lucas? You will do nothing and think yourself lucky I have given you as many chances as I

have. I wouldn't give anyone else the fucking same privileges I have given you." I hear footsteps before the door slams shut.

I run to the bed and quickly change into my clothes before Lucas enters the room. "I'm going home."

"Stay," he says, striding over to me, the towel on his waist falling away, but he doesn't care, he's more interested in my demeanor right now.

My eyes track the towel as it pools on the floor, and I can't help but stare because I know what that body can do. Even if I don't ever remember the us from before, I know that Lucas Rossi is bad for me. Not just bad for my head but bad for my heart.

He has the power to shatter it into a million pieces.

They say I killed his father.

And yet, here he is, still with me.

What type of person does that? Someone who's in love, that's who.

I don't know if I love Lucas—I can't remember him—but from what I have gathered these last two weeks, I know I have strong feelings, so I would hate to imagine how I felt before this.

He would have had all of me, just not the sensible part.

The part that chose to leave him.

"I want to go home," I tell him again while packing everything into a bag. "Who was at the door?" I don't expect him to tell me, so when he does, my body goes rigid.

"Keir."

My eyes find Lucas, and I know he's telling me the truth.

Has he always?

"Anything important?" I ask.

"Just him pissing where he doesn't belong." I bite the inside of my cheek and nod my head once. I guess that's as much as I will get from him, and I guess in some ways, it's enough.

Should I be worried for my life? These men are mafia. They kill. They maim. They are *not* good men. Their lives are full of turmoil, destruction, and pandemonium.

Speaking of...

I turn to face him.

"You'll tell me the truth if I ask you something?" He nods. There's no hesitation. "Why do you have photos of women in your drawer... including me?"

His lip quirks.

"What?" I ask.

"You've asked me that before." He sits on the bed. "I don't know if you're ready for this conversation after I have just fucked you."

"Why? Did you kill them?" I joke. His lips fall to a flat line, and he blinks a couple of times. "Fuck, you did."

"No one said I was perfect." He smiles. "Near-perfect though, I must admit." He looks down to his cock. "That is for sure perfect." Then his dark, wood-colored eyes find mine. "You are perfect."

"How did I get mixed up with all this? It's all so..." I pause. "Dark."

"You aren't a white light, make no mistake, *mia per sempre*. Our souls are black... mine is rotten, yours is tarnished. But together, we work."

I scoff at him. "Clearly, we don't." I put more of my things into my bag. "You think because we fuck great that we work?" I ask. "I used to fuck other people for work, did I not? Does that mean I should work well with them and give them a chance?" I pull my bag to my shoulder and wait for an answer.

"No, of course not. I would kill them." He smiles again, this time showing his teeth, and his eyes glisten with mischief.

"I want to go home. You either take me, or I'll find my own way."

Lucas stands and walks into his closet to get dressed while I step out and wait at the door of his car for him.

He doesn't speak to me but opens my door then drives me to my apartment. When we pull up, he hands me my keys.

"Thank you for helping me," I say as I get out.

He nods, and as soon as I shut the door, he drives off.

When I get inside, I find a cell phone on the table. Turning it on, I flick through and call Merci. Thankfully, she answers.

"You got your phone. I left it there the other day," she tells me.

"Thanks. I didn't even think about it while I was at his house."

"Doesn't surprise me. You aren't real big on phones anyway." She chuckles. "I heard from your brother today. He said it's hard, but he's doing okay. How are you?"

"You knew me well, right? I mean, I'm starting to remember some things, and I think I remember you. Things like glimpses of us in dresses, walking into a pink apartment..."

"That was mine, across the hall from where you lived," she tells me.

"Yes, I knew you well," she finally says. "Why?"

"Did I love Lucas? And if I did, why did I leave him?"

"I'm not sure you're ready for this conversation. It wasn't a good time in either of our lives. Actually, it was our worst moments, and we had a few of them growing up."

"I want to know. I can see myself falling for him. Even knowing how bad he is. Why is that?" I ask, sitting on my bed, then lying back on the comfortable surface. "Who loves a man so calculated, cold, and hard? Dammit! He kills people?"

"You would be with him even if he didn't do what he does. Of that, I have no doubt."

"What did he do?"

"Did he tell you about his father?" she asks.

"Yes, that he was one of my clients."

“Good, I’m glad he didn’t lie to you. Well, Lucas hired your brother to get to you. His father wanted you and made Lucas do his dirty work. I don’t think Lucas minded, but then he let his father take you, and well, then me. His father is a sick son of a bitch. He was obsessed with you. Did things he shouldn’t have—”

“But I killed him?” I ask.

“Yes. Right in front of Lucas too,” she replies softly.

“Good, he deserved it,” I say, based on what she’s just told me. I’m glad I did.

“Chanel.”

“Hmm,” I say.

“I’ve missed you.”

I smile before I hang up. When I click through my phone, I see photos of Brody, me, planes, but there’s not one of my fiancé and me. If that’s what he even was. I find Farris’s name and press call. No one answers, so I message him asking him to call me back. I see our previous messages and they are all so... bland. Then I read...

Do not answer.

And I know it’s Lucas.

The night before the accident, Lucas tells me to see him, and I must have gone.

Typing out a message, I send it to him...

Did we meet the night before my accident?

His reply is quick.

Yes.

Putting my phone down, I don’t reply. I then pass out to memories of Lucas’s tongue trailing and tasting my body.

* * *

When I wake the next morning, my phone is ringing.

“Hello.”

“Hi, yes, is this Chanel Lilly?”

“Yes.”

“This is Officer Slander. I’m calling regarding Dr. Farris Child. Do you have time to come down to the station and talk?”

I sit up on the bed. “Yes, what’s this about? Is everything okay?”

“Please be here by nine. Thank you.” Then the phone goes silent.

I check the time, it’s eight thirty. *Shit*. Quickly ordering an Uber, I get dressed and run out the door as I get a message the Uber has arrived.

Lucas is walking toward me with two hot drink cups in his hands. “Where are you going?” he asks, offering me a coffee cup. I don’t take it. My eyes check him over in his black suit, red tie, leather shoes, and his always perfect hair.

“Police station. They asked that I come down about Farris.”

Lucas hands me the drinks, walks over to the Uber, and hands some cash to the driver. He then comes back, takes the drinks from my hands, and walks to his car.

What the hell?

“I’ll take you. Get in.”

I follow only because he’s just canceled my ride.

“I didn’t need you to do this,” I tell him.

“You did. You just don’t know it yet.”

“I’m not in trouble, they only want to talk. Probably about the accident.”

“No, they want to question you about his death,” he says calmly.

My eyes go wide at his words. “Sorry, his what now?” I ask, confused.

“He’s dead. I killed him.”

“Hold the front fucking door!” I scream. “You killed my fiancé?”

“Don’t act all high and mighty. That man never loved you. He simply loved the idea of you.”

I shake my head. “You don’t even believe in love, so what does it matter to you?”

“He tried to kill you,” Lucas says, his hands gripping the wheel. “So, I did him a favor and killed him.”

“What am I meant to do or say now?” I sit back.

Fuck! Holy shit. Fuck!

“You say nothing. I’m coming in with you.”

“Good. I’ll tell them you did it,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Don’t be stupid.” He laughs.

The problem is I wasn’t joking.

“Or do you plan to throw me under the bus like you did with your father?”

Lucas slams on the brakes and looks at me. A car behind us honks loud, but he doesn’t care.

“You remember?” he asks.

I should lie.

“No, Merci told me.”

He nods then starts driving again.

“I would never do that again. And as for your fiancé, he cheated on you, used you, and told me I could have you.” He shakes his head. “Little did he know you weren’t his to give away. You were always mine.”

“I’m not yours, Lucas,” I snap as we come to a stop out in front of the police station. As soon as we get out, a man in a suit with a briefcase walks over and stops near Lucas.

“Sir.” He nods, then addresses me, “Miss.”

“This is Chanel. Please advise her that it’s in her best interests not to speak.”

“Miss, it’s best you let me do all the talking in there. Please don’t directly answer anything they ask you. Just look to me to answer for you or for direction.”

“Who are you?” I ask.

“My lawyer,” Lucas answers. Then he places his hand on the small of my back and guides me up the stairs and into the station. As soon as the officers behind the counter see Lucas, their eyes go wide, and one runs off. We wait in the lobby before two detectives come and get me. Lucas’s lawyer follows me while Lucas stays behind. Everyone watches him and looks the other way when he glances at them.

We’re taken to a small interrogation room, and we all sit.

“Thank you for coming in. We aren’t here to investigate you, Miss Lilly, we just want to ask a few routine questions.” I nod but say nothing. “How well do you know Dr. Farris Child?” one of the detectives asks.

I look to my lawyer, who nods, indicating I can answer, so I place my hands on the table.

“I’m not sure how much you’ve been told, but I have no memory of him.”

Both detectives stare at me wide-eyed.

“How is that possible? He was your fiancé, was he not?”

“So I’ve been told.” I shrug my shoulders. “Farris was driving and had an accident. I was in the car, hit my head, and lost my memory. So, I can’t tell you much about him. Apart from when he came to my room after the accident, which was the last time I saw him.”

They glance at each other.

“Where have you been this last week?” one of them asks.

Once again, I look to the lawyer, and he nods his head.

“At Lucas’s. That is until last night when I went back home.”

“Lucas Rossi?” one of them asks in almost a whisper.

“Yes.”

“Anyone confirm this?”

“Lucas can,” the lawyer replies.

“Of course, he can,” the detective says in a fully sarcastic tone.

“I’m not sure what help I can be.” I shrug. “What happened to Farris?”

The detectives share another look.

“He was killed. Shot point-blank between the eyes, but first, he was shot in the hand.”

My eyes go wide, and my hand covers my mouth. “Oh my God,” I say from behind my hands.

“Yes, so this is a homicide investigation,” he states, then gets up and leaves.

What has Lucas done?

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Chapter Twenty-One

LUCAS

She walks out a few hours later, her eyes red and her hands clenched at her sides.

Samuel, my lawyer, nods and tells me he'll talk to me later before he leaves. I follow Chanel out of the station, but she doesn't walk to my car, instead she strides quickly past.

"Chanel." I catch up with her, but she still doesn't stop. "Get in the car and let me take you where you need to go."

She keeps on walking until we are away from the police station, then she stops, spins, and looks behind me before she gets right up in my face. "You did this. You caused this. You took a good man from this world."

"And I would do it again. He purposely ran that light. He was driving with intent to cause harm, you know that."

"Yes, he was driving crazy, but he would never..." She shakes her head.

"He told me you were trash. Did you know he thought that of you?" Her eyes look down, then she turns and starts walking again. "I do not think of you like that. I never have."

"Oh my God, Lucas, would you stop? Just stop." I catch up to her and manage to put myself in front of her, my body now blocking hers. "You need to get out of my life. This..." she waves between us "... this is toxic. I can see now why we didn't work the first time around."

“Sorry, *mia per sempre*, that’s simply not going to happen.”
Chanel spins, her hair flicking my face, then she walks away.
But this time I don’t follow.
I’ll make her want me again.
It’s merely a matter of time.

* * *

“I dare you to threaten her again,” I say to Joey.
He chuckles and shakes his head. “I didn’t threaten her, I threatened you. There’s a big difference.”
“Is there, though?” I question.
“Keir is pissed. You’ve made him angry.”
“This isn’t news to me.”
“He needs you. You’ve been doing great ever since you left her all those years ago. Now, you couldn’t care less,” he states, leaning against my bar.
“I’m working. You know this. We all know this.”
“You aren’t, though. And you’ve made a mess. A big fucking mess. You killed a doctor whose father is a retired police officer. Keir can’t just sweep this shit under the rug. And now they’re looking at us.”
“He deserved to die.” I smile at him, and the look is sardonic.
“Now Keir wants to make you pay.”
“If he touches a hair on her head, I won’t be stopped. You don’t want me loose, Joey. I’ll kill you all.”
Joey shakes his head, his hand scrubs at the back of his neck. “You need to stop threatening your family, Lucas.”
“It wasn’t a threat.” I smile.
Sergio walks in and around to where I’m seated.
“That sounded like a threat, Lucas,” Joey continues.
“It wasn’t, Joey. Do you want to know why?”

“Because you don’t make threats, right?”

I wave him off. “Oh, hell, yeah, I do. All the time. But that wasn’t a threat. That was just me being polite to family and letting them know that if a hair on Chanel’s head is harmed, I’ll kill you all. Because I can.”

“You know you don’t want to go war with Keir, Lucas.”

“I never started a war, Joey, but I sure as shit will end one.”

Joey looks over my shoulder to Sergio. “If you have any pull with your boss, I suggest helping him see straight.”

Sergio places his hand in front of my eyes and waves it back and forth. I give him an annoyed glare, then he turns back to Joey. “No help needed, Joey. He can see perfectly fine.”

“Death wish, all of you,” he grumbles while shaking his head and walking out.

Sergio moves to the seat that Joey just vacated. He sits, and I feel his stare on me.

“Just say it.”

“You really want to go war with them?” he asks. “I’ll have your back, no matter what, you know that. But Keir is the don for a reason, and he’s not known to give second chances, yet he gave you one.”

“He didn’t give me one. He just knew I was better kept alive, purely for *his* purposes. Don’t mistake that for him having a weakness,” I tell Sergio.

The doors swing open, and in walks Keir with Joey right behind him along with Piper and a few other of his goons. Keir stalks straight to me, and I see Sergio tense, his hand going to his gun.

Keir sees it as well, and in a flash, his gun is out and pointed at Sergio as his eyes stay trained on me. “You are going to listen,” he tells me. He snaps the fingers of his other hand, and Joey places a phone on the table in front of me. “Marcus,” Keir says.

“Yes, boss.”

“Put her on.”

“Lucas?” Her voice comes through the phone, and in seconds I’m moving for his throat. He quickly swings the gun from where it was pointing at Sergio to aim at my stomach.

“Remove your hands from my throat, Lucas.”

“No!” I growl.

“You don’t have the advantage here. Can you feel that?” he asks and digs the gun into my flesh.

“I can, but can you feel this?” I say, the barrel of my own gun now pressed against his leg. “If I hit the correct artery, you will bleed out, and nothing will stop it. Yet, if you shoot me in my stomach, my chances of surviving are high. You know this, Keir. So, the question is, if you shoot, do you think you have the speed to stop me?”

Someone moves behind me.

Sergio’s standing, a gun in his hand pointed over my shoulder.

Keir gives me a death glare. “Do it,” Keir requests. At first, I think he’s talking to me, but then I hear Marcus.

“Yes, boss.”

“No, no, no.” Her voice rings through the phone, followed by a shot before everything goes silent.

My head whips to the phone.

“It’s done,” and the phone goes dead.

“Remember, Lucas, you asked for this.” His words hardly register in my head. Everything just goes black. I shoot before I can even think. Keir takes a minute to realize I shot him before he falls backward, his hand going to his leg. Then I turn to Joey and shoot him as well. He falls like the piece of shit he is. Piper manages to get close to me, but the minute she does, I smile at her and tilt my head. “You should have never come,” I say as I pull the trigger of the gun. It hits her directly in the stomach, making her drop.

I look back over my shoulder at Sergio, who’s managed to kill another of Keir’s men.

I hear a grunt, then turn back to Keir. He's on the floor, one hand gripping his gun, the other clutching his leg. I remove the gun from his hand and drop down to a squat so I'm eye-level with him. "You picked the wrong person to fuck with." He goes to speak, but I cut him off. "Now I'm going to pay Sailor a visit. What do you think she will say when she sees me? Yes, that's right, she will welcome me inside with open arms." I smile.

Keir's face goes red, his lips thinning as the pain in his leg dissipates. He reaches for me, but then I use the end of his gun and knock him the fuck out with it.

Standing, I look at his phone on the table and pick it up.

First, I need to find Marcus, and the only sure way to do that is to visit Sailor.

"Where to?" Sergio asks.

"Get the car."

Joey whines from the floor. Piper is still with her eyes closed. I'm sure she's not dead, but if she doesn't get help soon, she will be, and I don't care.

"Don't," Joey squeaks out, barely.

I step over him and smile. "You all thought I was a puppet, but now you've pissed me off. You should know better than to play with a viper, Joey," I say, walking out and shutting the door behind me.

I get into the car, and we head straight to Keir and Sailor's house. Sergio passes me a pack of wet cloths, and I wipe my face and hands clean on the drive over. When we arrive, I slide the gun into my back pocket and shoot Marcus a message to meet me here from Keir's phone before I knock on the door.

"Are we doing this?" Sergio asks as Sailor opens the door with a smile. When she sees me, she looks behind me at Sergio.

"No Chanel this time? I want to catch up with her again. Stop hiding her from me." She smiles, then something in her changes, and somehow, she picks up that I'm not here for a social visit. "Keir isn't here," she spits out.

Her smile is gone, and her hand clutches the door. “I can call him and tell him you’re here.” She lifts her phone and presses call, but Keir’s phone starts ringing in my pocket, so I slide it out and answer.

“Hello.” I smile.

She tries to shut the door, but I manage to catch it with my foot and push it back open.

“Lucas, what are you doing?” She backs up, her hands up in surrender.

“He took what’s mine. Do you know the pain of that?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” Her voice is trembling because she’s afraid.

“Chanel. He took Chanel.”

“He would never,” she says in disbelief. “You just need to talk to him.”

“You know he is capable of this, Sailor. He took you with the intent to kill you.”

“Lucas, please. Let’s find her.”

“He shot her, killed her as if she was not worth anything to anyone.”

“Who did, Lucas?” she asks then looks toward the stairs.

“I wouldn’t run if I were you. I’m fast. Faster than you.” I step in farther.

Sergio shuts the door behind me.

“He will live. I want you to have that comfort. And the kids, they will live as well,” I tell her. “But he has to know *my pain*. He has to understand his limits. He doesn’t understand them, and someone has to show him.” I smile at her. “I like you, Sailor. You changed him, but now...” I shake my head.

“Please, Lucas, let’s sit. Talk to me,” she pleads.

“I didn’t mean to want Chanel. Did you know that? She kind of just fell into my arms. Well, technically, I cornered her.” I smile at the memory flinging into my mind. “Now I need to leave here and find her body. Maybe I’ll cremate her and take her with me everywhere. What would you do?” I ask.

A knock at the door echoes through the room before she can answer my question.

“Is he hurt?” she asks on a whisper.

“I shot him, so I suspect so.” Her hands go to her mouth, and tears fall from her eyes. I turn toward the door, and as I do, she lands on my back, her hands covering my eyes. I lift the gun and manage to get it under my arm to shoot her. When I spin around, I see Chanel, at the door, staring at me. Her eyes are wide in fear, but she’s *still alive*. Sailor keeps on hitting me while Marcus walks in, confusion riddled on his face as he looks at Sailor and goes to grab her off me.

Chanel is standing in the doorway, the shock more than apparent on her face.

“Sailor.” Marcus grabs her, pulls her off, and she screams.

“He shot him! He shot Keir!”

“Fuck.”

Sergio has a gun to Marcus’s head before he can even think of raising his.

“You didn’t kill her?” I ask him, confused.

“No, it was to warn you,” Marcus says.

I look behind me at Chanel. “They are going to kill me,” I tell her, smiling.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

CHANEL

What the hell is going on? I don't know what's happening.

Marcus took me from my house, telling me I had to go with him. Then he pulled a gun on me as I spoke to Lucas on the phone. I heard the click of the gun, and I screamed, but nothing ended up happening. It was just me, sitting in a chair as Marcus picked up a phone and looked at me.

"W-what..." I stutter. "What are you doing?" I ask Marcus.

"Come on, let's go." He heads toward the door, and I stand there, unsure of what to do. But if a man with a gun tells you to follow him, you follow. Right? He walks to his car and gets in, then winds down his window. "Get in, Chanel." Then he drives off, and I have no idea where we're going.

Is he taking me somewhere else to kill me?

Is this it?

Will I get to see my brother again?

Merci?

Lucas?

I hate that his name pops into my head.

I hate that even though I don't remember him.

I do want him.

But does that mean I will want him for my lifetime?

That not even a head injury could stop me from wanting him.

We pull up to the house we had dinner at previously, and I hear screaming on the other side of the door. Marcus runs up the stairs. He swings the door open with me following behind him to find Lucas standing there with Sailor on his back.

Lucas's eyes find mine, and he pauses.

Marcus pulls Sailor from Lucas's back.

Words are uttered, but I hear nothing as Lucas rushes over to me, his hands catching my face.

"Who's going to kill you?" I ask him. "Am I going to die?"

His head leans forward, his forehead touching mine. "You're alive."

I don't remember Lucas, but I have a feeling this is a new emotion for him. He seems to be pouring everything into me when the relief floods over him.

"Yes."

"What is happening?" Sailor screams from Marcus's arms.

Lucas turns to face her but stays directly in front of me, blocking me, keeping me out of harm's way.

"Seems your husband wanted to play a game with me. He should know better than to do that."

"Marcus?" Sailor says, looking up at him.

"I had to take Chanel and kill her. Well, make Lucas believe I did."

"Oh my God," I say from behind Lucas.

"You are all fucked-up. So fucked-up. Where is my husband, Lucas? So help me God, if you killed him, I will hunt you down and end you," Sailor says, stepping away from Marcus and getting closer to us.

"He should live," I tell her.

She nods, then turns to Marcus. "Take me to him. Now." She pushes past Lucas, but as she gets to me, she stops. "I'm sorry you had to be involved in this. But him..." she nods to Lucas, "... he would take on the world for you." Then she hurries off.

I don't know what to say to that, so I look back at Lucas. "I want to go home," I say, shaking.

"Will you come with me first?" he asks.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Why?"

"Because if I'm going to die, I would rather say I went on a date with a beautiful woman first. So, Chanel, will you go on a date with me?"

Sergio laughs behind him, but Lucas pays no attention.

"You won't die," I say, not really believing that could be a possibility.

"Just say yes."

I bite the inside of my cheek, looking him in the eyes. "Now?"

"Yes, now."

"Okay," I manage to say.

Why I agree, only God knows.

* * *

"Umm... why are we here?" I ask as we come to a stop at a little store. Lucas doesn't answer as he gets out of the car, and comes around, and opens my door. I get out, and he grips my hand, lacing his fingers with mine before he pulls me toward the entrance.

The store is filled with books and cakes, and it smells divine.

"A bookstore?"

"Yes," is all he replies.

"You read? I assumed the books were for display," I say as he takes a seat at a small table.

"I read a lot, actually."

Wow, I didn't expect that.

I wander down an aisle, my fingers running along the spines of the books as I walk around the store. "I love the smell of books," I tell him.

"I love the smell of you," he says, making me look back at him.

“Why?”

“Your smell is like an overload of endorphins. The same way people seek out eating certain foods to make them feel better, I seek out you.”

“Do I make you feel better?”

Lucas watches me from his seat at the table. “You do. Now, I want you to pick as many books as you want.”

I give him a puzzled look. “Our date is me picking books?”

“Yes. Any book your heart desires. You pick, I buy,” he explains.

“I don’t read,” I tell him.

“Now is the perfect time to start,” he says with a smile. “*To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of my favorites. Though, women seem to like something with a bit more romance.” He nods his head to my left. “Romance section. Try reading the back cover and see if anything interests you.” I walk over to the romance section and pick up a book. Turning it over, I read a bit of the blurb on the back.

“Broken is what he is, broken is all he will ever be...”

When I look up, I see his eyes set on my lips.

“Sounds like you when you think about it.” I smile, then pick up the next book.

““Her heart told her one thing while her head told her another...”” I place the book back on the shelf.

“I think if our story were written, the reader would not be cheering for you.” I chuckle. “From what I know, and that’s not a lot, no one would cheer for you, Lucas Rossi.”

I pick up another book.

“Why would I care what others cheer for? The only person’s opinion that matters to me is standing right here in front of me staring at romance books. Books that when she reads them, will make her realize that what we

have is so beyond fucked, she'll wonder why she even gave it attention." My hand pauses on the next book. "And when you get your memory back... all of it... you will hate me even more for having you again," he tells me with a look of sadness flashing across his face. I turn away from him and keep looking at the books.

"What if..." My voice is soft, but he hears it anyway.

"What if what?" he asks, now closer to me.

"What if the villain needs love too?" I turn to face him.

Lucas lifts his hand and snaps his fingers. The lights dim, and the room goes silent before he lifts his hand again, pushing my hair behind my ear.

"Do you think of me as the villain in your story, *mia per sempre*?"

My breath catches. "Should I?"

His body now presses up against mine, and I feel him everywhere. I want him again desperately.

"You should. You should be very afraid." His mouth hovers near mine, but his lips never make contact.

I lean up on my tippy-toes and whisper in his ear, "Maybe the girl just wants the villain to fuck her already." I pull back to find a devilish smirk before his hand drops from my face, and he scoops me up so my legs grip around his waist.

"You can't hate me after this," he says, carrying me to the back wall of books. My back hits the bookcase, and his hand slides from my ass and slips under my skirt, lifting it, then moves my panties to the side. His thumb touches my clit, and he rubs slow circles. "I think I can make you come right now, without my cock inside of you," he teases.

My breathing is heavier, and when I don't answer, he slides me down until my feet hit the floor. He grabs my ass and pulls me to him so our bodies are pressed together from chest to thigh. I can feel the outline of his cock through his pants, and I stretch up on the tips of my toes so I can be in line with my pussy. My body starts moving on its own, grinding on him, as

his hand pushes my hair to the side, and he kisses the length of my neck. I feel him bend at the knees a little, and it's perfect. His cock is pressed firmly now against my pussy, and I'm rubbing on it, my legs spread just enough to get the right amount of friction.

He doesn't stop me but simply keeps kissing my neck and whispering, "*mia per sempre*" in my ear, repeatedly. I keep moving, rubbing against him, while his hands raise to my breasts, cupping them, and when he bites my shoulder, I can't help but moan out loudly.

I feel like a teenager grinding on my boyfriend out in public.

Except, he isn't my boyfriend.

And I'm far from a teenager.

My head drops back, my hands clutch at his suit jacket, and I keep moving my hips until I feel it build all the way. My mouth opens when I reach that magic spot, and just as I do, he is gone.

Cold air hits me, and my body wants to scream.

What is he doing?

But I soon feel his body back against mine. And he's so fast, my panties are torn off, and he's sliding inside me so violently that my head jolts and hits the shelf. Hard. But I don't stop, and neither does he. I would probably strangle him if he did.

"You just came in the crime fiction section," he pants out as I squeeze my eyes shut. I did, and I came hard. Opening my eyes, I see him staring at me with a look in his eyes that surely isn't meant for me.

Lucas Rossi doesn't do love.

He's even said so.

Repeatedly.

"Did you enjoy the crime section?" He chuckles.

I can't help the smile that tugs at my mouth when he pulls out of me and places me down gently before he tucks himself back into his pants and walks off. I pull my skirt down, my panties now torn to pieces on the floor.

I go to pick them up, but Lucas is back. He passes me a wet cloth—where he got that, who knows—and picks up my discarded underwear and slips them into his pocket. “A memento.” He winks, taking the cloth from my hand and then dropping to his knees in front of me.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Wiping you clean,” he says like it should be obvious.

“You afraid I’m going to push your cum up even deeper and hope I fall pregnant?” I joke.

“You’re on birth control. Have been for years. I can’t have kids. Fixed that as soon as I turned eighteen,” he says, then starts wiping between my legs.

“How did you know I was on birth control? Did I tell you?” I ask, looking down at him.

“No, I obtained your health records.”

I don’t even know what to say to that.

“You can’t have kids?” I ask.

He glances up at me through his lashes. A man like him, on the floor on his knees in front of me, wiping between my legs. He leans in, and his lips skirt over my pussy before he kisses it, then inserts his tongue. A moan leaves my lips. but I still manage to say, “Lucas, you can’t have kids?”

He hums between my legs, and I move my hand to grip his hair.

“You smell divine,” he says, licking me again.

“Lucas, stop! We just had sex.”

“Best date ever,” he says, kissing me again one more time, his tongue doing a final sweep before he pulls back. “All clean.” He stands. “No, I can’t have kids.”

“What if you change your mind?” I ask. “Can you reverse it?”

“Will you change yours?” he fires back at me.

I shake my head. “No. That’s one thing I am certain about, with or without my memory. I do not want to bring a child into this world.”

“That makes two of us.” He heads back to the table. “Come, let’s have cake.”

And we do.

With a pile of romance books next to us as well as some crime fiction.

The ones I came on, to be precise.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

LUCAS

Doors are slammed, and I know what's happening before she even looks up from tasting her chocolate cake.

"How did you do all this?" she asks, looking around.

"I know the owner. I helped her purchase the store." She raises a brow.

"I never fucked her," I tell her.

Chanel smiles, pleased with my answer. "So why did you help her?"

I sit back in my chair and reach for my gun that's on the table and slide it back into my pants.

"She reminded me of me... fucked-up father, wanting to leave. I don't go out of my way to help people, don't get this twisted. She would recommend books at another bookstore I went to. I eventually came in so much that she started talking to me, and you know that's not an easy feat."

She laughs, puckering her lips and nodding her head.

"And she told me about this place, and I happened to be driving past one day, and well, I helped. The rest is history. Plus, on the side, she sends all the new books I like straight to me."

"That's..." she shakes her head, "... awfully nice from someone who's known for being an asshole."

"What can I say?" I smile as I hear footsteps getting closer. She still doesn't notice them, but I do. It's my job to notice, so I stand, and she

follows, stepping closer to me.

Her gaze falls to the gun at my hip.

“If you don’t want me to use that between your legs, you should stop looking at it,” I joke.

Her eyes go wide, and she takes a step back, falling, her ass hitting the floor. Her wild eyes search mine as she looks up at me. “Lucas?”

Before I can say anything, the doors to the shop burst open, and Keir’s standing there, a gun raised straight at me. I glance down at her as I hear the click of the safety and then the gun firing.

I smile.

She screams.

The bullet hits me in the leg.

“Lucas!” She crawls to me, placing her hand on my leg to cover the wound.

“Move, Chanel.”

She shakes her head at Keir. “Why did you do that?”

Keir looks back, and one of his men, who I didn’t kill, walks over and pulls Chanel off me.

“Lucas,” Keir says my name.

“Don’t kill him,” Chanel pleads.

I grunt as Keir lifts his foot and places it on my leg, pressing down hard. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

I stare up at him and grin. “Probably not as much as yours.”

I should stop being a smartass.

I really should.

But I can’t.

It’s next to impossible for me to stop.

“I remember,” Chanel screams.

Keir and I both give her our full attention.

“I remember you, Lucas. All the bad...” She shakes her head, then looks at Keir. “And you... I remember you too.” But she doesn’t look at him long before her eyes swing back to me. “I want to strangle you, Lucas, for making me fall in love with you again.”

The room falls silent, and I reach out to touch her cheek, but she brushes me away.

“I hate you as well. Please don’t mistake the two. They are waging war in me right now.” She stands, looks to Keir, then back down at me. “I don’t want you to die, know that! But this life...” she waves her hands around, “... I will not be a part of it for one second longer. I vowed that last time, yet here I am... again.”

She leans down, kisses my cheek, and lingers on the corner of my lips. “Sometimes you can love someone who’s so broken they can’t see right from wrong, Lucas.” Then she turns and walks out, leaving me in the room with Keir and his men.

This woman! She just destroyed what was left of my black fucking soul.

“Lucas.” Keir clicks his tongue, hobbles to pull out a chair, and sits. I’m still on the floor, my hand covering the wound in my leg. The bastard got me good. *Asshole*.

“Yes, boss?”

“Oh, so now I’m boss?” he questions, sitting back, the gun still in his hand but resting on his thigh.

“I expected you sooner, to be honest.”

“I would have come straight away, but it seems my wife had other plans.” He taps the gun on his good leg.

“Yes, Sailor. How is she?”

“I should have killed you the first time.”

“Probably.”

“The urge to put a bullet straight in your brain right now is pissing me off.”

“Why isn’t one in my head already?” I ask.

He stands, strides to the door, and shuts it before he turns back to me. “Sit on the chair, Lucas. If you wish to act like you’re in charge, start doing it.” I push off the floor, hiding the wince of pain from the strain of getting up, and sit in the damn chair. He walks back and sits in the chair opposite me.

“Joey is hurt, badly.”

“He’ll live.”

“Piper is hurt.”

“Again, she’ll live,” I tell him.

Keir slams his hand on the table. “Stop with your smart-ass mouth, Lucas. Just. Fucking. Stop.”

“Yes, boss.” He puts the gun on the table, pulls out a knife, and leans forward before he stabs it into the bullet wound, digging into my flesh hitting the bullet that’s lodged in there. My teeth clench together at the pain that radiates through my leg as his eyes lock on mine.

“Sailor says I should let you live.”

“Since when do you take orders from a woman?” I bark back at him, the knife still in my leg.

“She isn’t *just a woman*, Lucas. She is my wife,” he says quietly. “And she pleaded with me. *Pleaded.*”

“Well, shit! Maybe I shouldn’t have tried to kill her then.”

“Yes, that’s true,” he says through clenched teeth. “Though, I would have done the exact same if someone had done to her what I did to you.” He pulls the knife out and sits back.

“You getting soft now, boss?”

“Ha.” He lifts the knife and slams it back into my leg, leaving it there as he snaps his fingers.

The door opens, and Sergio is walked in between two of Keir’s men.

“Say goodbye.” Keir doesn’t give me a chance to speak. He lifts his gun while looking at me and shoots. Sergio falls with a single bullet shot straight to his brain.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Apart from your mother, Sergio is the only other person you have kept around who is not family. This is your punishment, Lucas. I will not kill you... yet.” Keir stands, pulls the knife out again, and steps over Sergio’s lifeless body. “I see a lot of myself in you. Though, you are way more fucked-up than me. So this... and I mean this with every plea my wife could make because none will work again... is your *last chance*. And you know how rare that is coming from me.” Then he walks out, shutting the door, leaving me bleeding and panting for breath.

“Lucas.” The shop owner runs into the room, a towel in hand. She wraps it around my leg tightly. She looks at Sergio, then back to me. “What do I do about...” She nods to Sergio.

“Why are you not freaking out?” I ask, confused.

“My father, who I spoke to you about...” I nod, “... he worked for your family,” she says, then pulls her hands away before wiping them on her legs. “I’ll get something to clean up the mess.”

“Adora.” She stops at her name. “Who is your father?”

“I told you, a bad man.”

“Adora,” I say her name again, and she looks down. “It’s not Costa, is it?”

I manage a laugh when she nods.

“You hid?” I ask.

“In plain sight. It’s always the best way, isn’t it?” I study her now. She isn’t the shy book girl I thought she was. She is the smart book girl who worked out how to use everything to her advantage.

“You’re meant to be married to Joey. That was his brother, Kier,” I say, pointing to the door where he just left.

“I’m no fool. I know who he is. Just as I knew who you were.” I throw my head back and laugh as she walks off, then comes back holding a first-aid kit. “I know how to remove a bullet and stitch. Do you need me to repair your leg, or do you want to go to the hospital?” she asks, opening the kit and grabbing the surgical needle and thread then waiting for an answer.

“Your father signed your contract. Where is he?”

She glances up at me. “I killed him,” she states, then holds out a flask of gin. “It’s all I got.” She hands it to me, and I swig a mouthful, then she takes it back and pours some on my leg before she starts digging around for the bullet.

“Fuck.”

“Stay still,” she says, pushing my leg back down as it moves, trying to get away from the pain.

“How did I not know?” I ask, trying to think of something else besides the agony she’s currently inflicting.

“I showed you what you wanted to see, and you approved it.”

“Approved it?”

“I’m guessing that’s what you did with that lady. You showed her what she wanted to see. Not the real you.”

I throw my head back again and laugh. “Oh, she knows the real me, that’s for sure.”

“Well, why isn’t she here, then?” I look out the window and wonder the same thing.

“Because sometimes the villains don’t win.”

“Do they ever?” She laughs.

“They do sometimes,” I say, smiling.

As soon as she’s done, she gets a mop and bleach to clean the floor while I finish off the rest of the gin. I stare at Sergio on the floor and sigh.

“He was always nice when he came in to help get your books,” Adora says.

“He was...”

“Sorry,” she whispers before she collects the cleaning supplies and heads to the back of the store.

She leaves me staring at my only friend in the world lying dead on the floor only a few feet away.

* * *

Sergio had a family. When he started working for me, I promised him that, no matter what, I would look after them. I knock on the door, and Sookie opens it with a smile on her face. “Lucas. Sergio isn’t here.”

“I know.” I pull out an envelope and hand it to her.

Sookie’s head shakes back and forth, and tears fill her eyes. “No, no, no. I know what this is. Tell him I’m not in the mood for a joke. You tell him, Lucas.”

“I can’t.”

“He rang me, told me loved me. And now...” The tears are flowing down her cheeks.

“He loved you, you know that.”

“How could you?” she screams. Then her fists find my chest, hitting me over and over. I let her take out her anger on me, I deserve it. I got Sergio killed. “How could you take him from me? He loved you, Lucas. Did whatever you needed. He loved you.”

“I loved him too,” I reply. Even if I don’t believe in love, I believed in Sergio.

Sookie collapses into my arms, and I struggle to keep her up with my fucked-up leg, but I don’t move.

“Even after everything, I stayed. I should have left,” she says, sobbing now. A little kid comes running out, and Sookie pulls back from me.

“I never want to see you again, Lucas. Do you hear me?” She picks up her son, Sergio’s mini-me, and puts him on her hip. “Lucas, tell me you understand?”

“Money will be sent to you every month, Sookie.”

“I don’t want your dirty money. I want my husband.”

“You know I can’t do that.” I look behind me, expecting to see him, but I see nothing.

“Here...” she holds out the envelope, “... take your dirty money and leave.”

I place the envelope on the floor and face her again. “I’ll send someone else every month. If you need anything, call me.”

“Fuck you, Lucas.”

“Yeah, I’ve been told that a lot lately,” I say quietly as I head back to the car.

And back to my fucked-up shit hole of a life.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

CHANEL

Right now, I remember everything.

Then, I remember Farris.

Our fight in greater detail now, and the way he spoke to me. The way he expected me to just be okay with him having cheated on me and getting another woman pregnant. Lucas is a lot of things, most of them bad, but I am sure he wouldn't do something like that, and that's saying a lot.

I knock on the door.

Merci's face greets me with a smile as she pulls it open.

"How could I be so..." I pause. "Stupid." I fall into her arms, and she pats my back.

"Chanel?" she asks, confused.

"I loved him before, and somehow, he made me fall in love with him again. How can that be possible? How can I fall for him again after everything he did to me?" I step back to see her eyes wide.

"You remember?" she asks.

I nod and walk farther inside. It's my old apartment where I grew up, but now it is Brody's and Merci's. "Well, shit." She shakes her head. "You two were drawn to each other like a moth to a flame. No one really understood it, Chanel. It just... was."

“I don’t even understand it,” I say on a sigh, sitting on my old couch. “And now, he may very well be dead after the best non-paid date of my life.” I throw my head back, laughing. Men used to pay me to go on dates with them. Some took me to flashy restaurants, some took me to shit ones, but each time it was just a job.

Lucas was the first man to take me out on a real date. Granted, I fucked him, and he deserved that. But Lucas puts in the finer details like he knew I love to read.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“He shot Keir, then went after Sailor. He wanted to kill her.”

“Oh fuck, he’s a dead man,” Merci states.

“Then I left.”

She sits next to me, pulling me in for a cuddle. “You’ve left him before, you can do it again,” she says.

“I’m not sure I want to. How do you love someone so broken, so fucked-up, that you know everything they do is wrong, yet you still want to be around them?”

Merci’s hands fall from mine. “I think you just have to decide if it’s something you can live with and stop worrying about what society says is right and wrong. You need to go on how *you* feel, not on how anyone else feels. Whatever he is or does is just gonna come with being with him...” She pauses. “Think of it like this... he will never judge you because he is worse.” She laughs, but I don’t. “Chanel...” I turn to face her, “... no love is easy. Sometimes, the best kind of love is hard and fucked-up. Yours is just a whole lot of fucked-up.”

“A lot? I think you mean completely.”

“Okay, let me ask you this? How would you feel if he died?” she asks, her eyes looking deep into mine.

“Like shit,” I say, my hand falling to my chest. “I think my heart would break.”

Her shoulder nudges me. “Okay, I think you have your answer. So it’s time, and if he’s still alive, that *he* tries to win *you* over. Don’t go to him.”

“I’ll never go to him.”

“Okay, well, let him try.”

I stand. “I’m going to call work and go back.”

“You don’t think it’s too soon?” she asks.

“No, I need to get back to my life. When Brody calls, can you tell him I remember and to call me?” She stands, kisses my cheek, and follows me out.

I pause at the door. “What do you honestly think of Lucas?” I ask her.

She bites her bottom lip. “In the looks department, he’s the type that would cheat on a woman, and she would be apologizing.” I manage to laugh at her statement.

“He is beautiful,” I agree.

“Gurrrl...” She shakes her head. “That man is F.I.N.E. with all capitals, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do.” I smile as I walk out.

“But you’re right, he is all types of fucked-up.” She cackles. “Déjà vu,” she says as we look out over the stairs leading down. Lucas is there, and he’s leaning against his car. “Call me if you need me.”

I kiss her cheek and make my way down. My steps are slow, and I don’t look up until I reach him. That’s when I see the blood dripping to the ground coming from under his pants.

“It’s only blood,” he says, unfazed. Then he turns, opens the passenger door, and pulls out a bag of books. “You forgot these.”

“You’re alive,” I say on a shocked exhale.

“For the time being.”

“Do you plan to be dead anytime soon?” I ask.

He shrugs. “You never know with Keir. The only reason I’m still breathing is Sailor.”

“Well, I guess you better send her a big thank-you parcel.”

“You think?” he asks, his brows pulled together. “I’ve never had to do that before.” He pauses. “What should I get her?”

I look at the books he’s holding and then his leg. “What did he do?” I ask, nodding to his leg.

“Shot me, then stabbed me.”

“Did it hurt?” Of course, it hurt. I know that, but I want to know what he says.

“Yes, like a bitch.”

“You’re still bleeding. How did you have time to fix it?” It’s only been a few hours, so how did he get the bullet removed and be stitched up and then released from the hospital that quickly.

“Adora fixed me up after they left.”

“Adora?” *Who the heck is she?*

“The book shop owner,” he explains.

“Oh. She knows what you do?”

He pushes off the car with the books still in his hand. “Where is your car? I’ll carry them over.” I point to where it’s parked, and he starts walking as I follow close behind. “She does know. Seems she has been hiding a little secret from me.”

“What secret?” I ask.

How much does he plan to share with me? I am, after all, just someone he fucks.

“She’s the woman arranged to marry Joey.”

My eyes blink a few times before my mouth gapes open at this piece of news. “Holy shit.”

“Yep. Exactly what I was thinking,” he states.

“How did she hide that piece of information from you?”

“Chanel...” I turn to face him. “It’s not Adora I came here to talk to you about.”

“What then?” I ask him. “Us?” I question. “Because I don’t want to talk about us, Lucas. Far from it. I need to think. I appreciate everything you have done for me, but I also haven’t forgotten about everything you did. You killed Farris.”

“So?”

“You took a man’s life. A man who was my fiancé.”

“He didn’t want you,” Lucas argues while opening my car door and putting the books inside before shutting it and looking back at me. “I want you. No other man will want you in the same way.”

“And what happens when you no longer want me?”

“That won’t happen,” he says seriously.

“It could. I could change, piss you off.”

He chuckles. “You already do... a lot!”

I wave a hand at him. “Again, I don’t want to do this right now. Another time.” I motion down at his leg. “Do you need help?”

“With my cock? Yeah.”

“No, Lucas... with your leg.”

“I can’t say no to you.”

I shake my head. “Goodnight, Lucas.” I slide in my car and drive off.

Arriving home a short time later, Brody calls me.

“Sis.”

“Brody.”

“You remember,” he says, and I hear the smile in his voice.

“I do.”

“And...”

“I’m glad you’re getting the help you need, Brody. You deserve it.”

“Thankfully, yes. Lucas helped,” he says, still praising him. If only I had as much faith in that man as my brother does.

“He did,” I agree, opening the refrigerator. It’s stocked with homemade pasta and drinks. *Lucas*. I smile, pulling one of the take-out-style packages

and heating it up before I sit at the table.

“You aren’t still mad at him, are you?”

“Yes, I am,” I reply. “But that’s not something you need to worry about. That’s between Lucas and me.”

“You should give him a chance. I mean, I know I shouldn’t say that considering his track record with women isn’t very good, but Chanel, you should.”

“How are you and Merci?” I ask, changing the subject. “I saw her today, as you know.”

“Yeah, I think we’ll be okay,” he says quietly, and I think we are disconnected because there’s such a long silence, but then he speaks again, “I want to live a good life, Chanel. I want marriage, a good one. Not one like our parents’ marriage. I want kids. Two healthy kids... a boy and a girl just like us.” I stay quiet. “I know you said you don’t want kids, but you would make an amazing mother.”

“I don’t want kids, Brody. I raised you. You were basically my child. And I think if you came out of rehab and got a job and hit the straight and narrow, you’d be a great father. Have you discussed this with Merci? I haven’t asked her. Does she want children?”

“She wants ten.” He chuckles.

“Well, you best be getting a good-paying job then.” I laugh. “Nothing illegal either,” I point out.

I glance at the books sitting on the counter and stand up to run my hand over them.

“Mom liked to read,” I tell him. “Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“When I was little, I used to think she was the prettiest lady I had ever seen. And even when I found her, I still thought of how beautiful she was,” I tell him. “I hated her so much at the end.”

“You look like her,” he says.

“She used to read fairy tales over and over to me. *Cinderella*. She wanted to be pulled from that world but got sucked into it instead,” I tell him. “I’m glad you’re getting free. I’m sure that’s what she would want for you, Brody.”

“My memories of them aren’t the same as yours, Chanel. Mine are mostly of you. We were raised differently. While you saw everything, I saw you trying to put food on the table, making sure I showered. You worked jobs you didn’t like...” He pauses again. “I can’t thank you enough for being who you are and what you’ve done for me.”

“It’s what you do for those you love.”

“If I killed a person, would you still love me?” he asks.

“Of course, Brody.”

“So then, why not Lucas?” he asks, dropping that bomb like it wasn’t red hot. I take one of the books to the couch and open it. The first page reads about a broken girl and a broken guy. I want to laugh, but I don’t.

“I’m going to sleep, Brody. Talk later?”

“Yes, Chanel. Oh, and give him a chance. He does love you, even if he doesn’t quite get it. Everyone around him comments about you.”

I smile and hang up the phone.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

LUCAS

It's been two weeks, and Chanel hasn't bothered to reach out to me.

I leave her be and give her some space.

Pulling up at the bookstore, her car is there. That's something I didn't expect.

I walk in. Adora spots me first and offers a wave.

Chanel's hair is back to dark—the red is gone— but I notice her straight away. She turns, a smile etched on her lips. “Lucas.”

Well, she sounds happy to see me.

“Chanel.”

“You told her who I was,” Adora states. “Have you told anyone else?”

We both look at her, but Adora's eyes are pinned on me.

“No, only her.”

“Don't go telling anyone else, Lucas,” she says, flicking her hair over her shoulder with a huff and then walking into the back of the store.

“I'm guessing you shouldn't have told me?” Chanel giggles, and the sound is like music to my damn ears. “You look like shit! Which I don't even know how that's possible being who you are.”

“I haven't been sleeping,” I tell her honestly.

“Why?” She pulls a stack of books from the counter and holds them to her chest. She notices where I'm looking and smiles. “Seems you've started

an addiction.”

“It’s a healthy addiction. Reading is good for the brain.”

“I guess it’s better than killing women?” Her brow raises, and she waits for me to say something back, but I don’t. “Why haven’t you been sleeping?” she asks again.

“It was good seeing you, Chanel.” I step closer, and she stays where she is.

“Lucas.”

“Yes.”

“You’re ignoring my question.”

“So it seems,” I reply, smiling.

“Is it because of me?” Her voice is weaker when she asks.

“No, but I’m sure if you slept over, I would sleep like a baby.”

“I’m flying out today.”

“You’re back at work?”

She nods her head. “I am. It’s time.” Everything goes quiet again then she asks, “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“Because every time I close my eyes, I see Sergio.”

“Sergio?” she asks, confused. Her eyes shift to the space behind me, she’s searching for him. “Where is he? Is this a joke?”

“No, punishment for my actions.”

“Actions? You aren’t making any sense, Lucas.” She shakes her head. “Where is Sergio? He goes where you go.”

“Keir killed him.” The books in her hand drop to the floor, barely missing her feet as her hands go to her mouth, covering it completely.

“He didn’t?” she says, shaking her head.

“He did.”

“Why?”

“Because of what I did.” She picks up the books and places them on the counter.

“I’m going to cuddle you now.” Her chocolate brown eyes lock on mine, and she steps forward. Her arms find their way around my waist, and she holds me tightly. I drop my head and lean it against hers, smelling chocolate. I take a big inhale, and she chuckles. “I was baking choc-chip cookies earlier.” I wrap my arms around her, wanting her closer, needing her near me.

“You smell amazing.” I feel her smile against my chest, and she doesn’t pull back or let go as she talks into my pecs. “Who would have thought the big, bad Viper would need comfort after everything he has done.”

“I only had one friend,” I tell her.

Her hand pats my chest. “I know, Lucas.” Then she slides it back around and hugs me a little tighter. We stay like that with her just holding me in a bookstore surrounded by crime, fiction, and make-believe worlds.

But our world? That’s my favorite as long as Chanel’s in it.

“I can come over after my shift.” She pulls back, and I let her. “As friends, Lucas.”

“You’ll be back so soon after flying?”

She nods, reaching for her books again. “Yep. There and back tonight. I may not be the best company, but I can bring cookies.”

“My favorite cookies are the ones on your chest.” I glance down, and she throws her head back, laughing.

“You sure have a way with words, Lucas Rossi.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“I’m sorry about Sergio. He had a family, right? Are they okay?”

I look away and answer, “They will be.”

“I could send them something?”

“No, I’m looking after them. Even if she is refusing my money right now.”

“You’re giving her money?”

“Yes.”

“How much?” she asks, confused.

“As much as she needs or wants.” I smile. “So far, I sent through three hundred thousand.” Her mouth opens in shock. “It’s nothing... they would rather have Sergio back.”

She nods in understanding. “I never thanked you. Or did I?” She smiles. “For Brody. He comes home in a week, and he sounds good.”

“It’s nothing,” I reply as she starts toward the door.

“Bye, Adora,” she calls out.

Adora yells out, “Bye,” as I walk out with Chanel to her car. I open her passenger door so she can set down the books. “How is your leg?”

“It’s good. Better.”

“I’ll see you later, Lucas,” she says, getting into her car. I stand frozen in place, watching until way after she’s gone.

How did that feel so... normal?

“You have it so bad.” Adora laughs from behind me. “I mean, I like women too, being bi-sexual and all. I almost fell in love with her myself when she thanked me. Tell me, if you lose out, can I try?”

“I thought you were a lesbian,” I question. I assumed she was gay because she has never even looked at me twice, and no, that’s not me being full of myself. It’s just fact.

“Ha, no. You just aren’t my type, boo.” She turns and walks back into the shop, and I follow her in. “But for real, she’s hot.”

“I know and don’t even think about it.”

Adora flicks her hair over her shoulder. “As if you could stop me.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’ll tell Joey I know where you are.” I smirk.

“Don’t you dare.” Her wild eyes land on mine.

“Does he even know what you look like?”

“No. I saw him once when I was a kid, and that’s it.”

“I need you to deliver something for me. I fucked up, and I need to send her a gift.”

“Chanel?” she asks.

“No, Sailor.”

Adora nods and grabs a pen. “What type of books?”

“She prefers shoes,” I tell her.

Her eyes find mine. “Do I look like I run a shoe shop?” She shakes her head, putting the pen back down.

“No, but I have no idea about fucking shoes, but I am sure you do. She wears ones with red bottoms.”

Her eyes go wide in realization. “I’ll do it on one condition.”

I groan. “What?”

“That you buy me a pair too for helping you.”

“That’s called being a good person.”

“And what would you know, Lucas Rossi... about being a good person?” She cackles.

“Fair enough.” I grab my credit card and throw it on the counter. “Get her the best pair you can find.” I grab a card and write the address on it. “Deliver them here.”

“They can be delivered by post, you know?”

“I want it done today, and you have free time.”

“Fine.” She walks over and changes the sign to ‘Closed’ before coming back and grabbing my card. “Lock up when you leave.”

I go to the back of the store and start looking for my next read when Keir calls. Not only have I not been sleeping because of Sergio, but Keir hasn’t made it any easier.

Any shit jobs that need to be done...

The asshole calls me.

Anything small he needs...

The asshole calls me.

The calls started that same day.

I am almost ready to tell him where to shove it, that I am not his errand boy. But I figure I better not test my luck. “Boss.”

“Get the fuck over here, Lucas,” he barks, then hangs up.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

CHANEL

Thankfully, my shift goes by fast, and I'm back earlier than I thought. Before I even bother changing, I drive past Sailor's on my way home and decide to stop in. It's been a while since I've seen her, and the last time didn't go to plan. When I knock, it's not Sailor who answers the door, it's Keir with Wren on his hip. As soon as she sees me, she calls my name and reaches out for me. I take her, kissing her cute little chubby cheek.

"Oh my God, you are so big now." She giggles.

"Why are you here, Chanel?" Keir asks, attempting to take Wren back, but she wraps her arms around my neck and holds on tight.

"I came to see your wife. See how she is."

"So, your memory is back."

I nod, and he locks eyes with me. I have to look away when he does.

"Chanel." I shift toward the sound of Sailor's voice. "Come in. I just put bub down to sleep so I'm free for some wine if you are." I smile, and Keir backs up so I can step inside. Just as I do, footsteps come from behind me, and Adora is standing there.

"Adora," I say, smiling. She gives me a kind smile back.

"Hey, didn't expect to run into you." She's holding a large bag.

"Do you need help?" Keir asks. But he isn't saying it to be nice. He's saying it like he's asking, *What the fuck do you want?*

“Sorry, I was just dropping this off to Sailor from Lucas.”

“What?” Sailor says, confused. “Lucas?”

Adora holds out the bag. “I believe it’s his apology. That’s all he said.”

Sailor takes the bag with a smile. “I know exactly what is in it. Shoes.” She claps her hands. “Thank you.”

Adora turns to leave.

“Bye.” I offer her a smile, and she gives me a wave before she takes off down the road.

“How do you know her?” Keir asks me.

“She owns the bookshop.”

“I never forget a face, and I know that face.” I don’t respond as I step inside, following Sailor as she takes her bag into the living room. She screams and claps her hands when she opens the box and takes out the shoes.

“They are so perfect. He is totally forgiven,” she gushes.

“It’s not that easy,” Keir says gruffly.

“I forgave you and married you because you bought me shoes. Are you telling me I shouldn’t have?” she jokes.

Keir walks over and wraps his hands around her waist. “Are you telling me it’s not because I ate your fucking pussy like a boss?”

She giggles and blushes, pushing away from him before she turns to me. “Sorry.”

I wave her off as Keir walks over and grabs Wren from my arms. “It’s her bedtime,” he tells me. Then to Wren he says, “You can see Chanel another day.” I smile as they leave.

“I already forgave him, you know,” Sailor says, sitting down and admiring the shoes out in front of her. “But these...” she waves one around on her finger, “... are an added bonus.”

“Has Keir forgiven him?” I ask.

“Ha, no. He still wants to murder him, but I think he understands. He doesn’t want to be seen as weak. And letting Lucas live portrays him as just that, so he’s making him pay. All hours, he calls him for the stupidest shit. But then I remind him, Lucas is in love.” She gives me a soft smile. “And that Keir would do the same if he thought I was killed.”

“He isn’t sleeping,” I tell her.

“I stay out of it as much as I can. I like Lucas, I do. But Keir kills for less, and Lucas should be dead. So I just have to let it play out until Keir’s anger at him has dissipated.”

I nod, but I don’t really get it.

I also don’t want to get involved in their world either.

“So, tell me, now you remember everything. How have you been? I’m so sad I missed you for so long. When I saw you again on the plane, I was so excited. You’ve done so well.” Her smile is kind and true.

“Thank you.”

“And... you even got engaged?” she asks.

“Lucas killed him.” Sailor’s eyes go wide. “Lucas found out that he caused the accident and called me trash,” I try to explain.

“Well, that would explain it, then.” She laughs. “They are so much alike, yet so different,” she says, looking over my shoulder. I turn to see Keir leaning against the door frame.

“I would have killed him,” Keir says. “I’ve sent him home,” he tells me as he takes a seat next to his wife.

I stand, offering a smile. “I’d like to do lunch soon, with the kids, if you’re free?”

“For you, anytime,” Sailor says, her head dropping back to Keir’s chest behind her.

I offer them both a wave before I walk out.

Adora is leaning against her car as I approach, biting her nails.

“Adora?”

“He recognized me,” she says nervously. “And now I don’t know what to do.”

“He just said you looked familiar. He doesn’t know who you are,” I reassure her.

“Lucas won’t tell him?” she asks.

“Only if he asks,” I tell her honestly. “But Lucas has a way with diverting the truth,” I inform her.

“Yeah, okay.” She gets into her car, not saying anything else, then she drives off. As I move to my own car, Joey’s walking down the street, his eyes squinting as he looks at me.

“Who was that you were talking to?” he asks as he gets closer.

“She works at the bookstore Lucas owns,” I tell him, and he nods.

“How are you?”

“Be better if your maniac boyfriend hadn’t shot me.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Not your fault.” He passes me without stopping on his way into the house. I check my phone and shoot Lucas a message that I’m on my way.

He doesn’t reply.

* * *

His house is pitch black when I arrive. I walk up the path to his door, the night completely silent.

He has to be home.

His car is here.

“Chanel.” I jump, my hand clutching my chest over my heart. I look to my left, and there is Lucas at the side of the house with an unopened bottle in his hand.

“You scared me.”

“I was planning to get drunk. Care to join me?”

“Sure.” I put down my handbag and walk over to him. He steps down the side steps and makes his way to the back of the house and over to a little shed. He pulls the door open to reveal a small bar area with a few stools.

“Sergio and I built this when I first bought this house years ago. I haven’t been out here in years.” He flicks on a light, and I can see a thick layer of dust coating everything. He wipes off a stool and nods for me to take a seat.

“How was the rest of your day?” I ask. “I saw Adora again. She delivered your present. By the way, Sailor loved it and said you’re forgiven.”

“Ha. Knew she would love it.” He opens the bottle and looks around. “No glasses. Nothing in here has been washed for ages.”

“Bottle is fine,” I tell him, reaching out and taking a swig before I hand it back. “How did it happen?” I ask. He gives me a puzzled look. “Sergio,” I clarify.

He shakes his head. “A bullet directly between the eyes.” He takes another drink. “I see his face, smiling as if he knew.”

“He’s the first person you’ve lost that you cared for.”

“I cared for my father,” he says, and my body tenses at his words.

“Should we talk about that?”

“Sure, let’s do that,” he bites out. And I know his anger isn’t directed at me, but I’m the only person here right now.

“Did you want to kill me?”

He throws his head back and chuckles. I sit there waiting patiently for him to finish, and when his laughter dies down, he puts the bottle back to his lips and drinks again before locking eyes with me. “You are the only thing on this planet I have never wanted to kill.”

“You sure were pissed when I killed him, though.”

“I was brainwashed. I was mad. It took me a bit to see it clearly. Even then, I hated that I wanted you.”

“Do you still hate that you want me?” I ask.

He pulls a dirty glass out, puts his drink in it, swirls it around, then tips it out. “Clean.” He pours more into it and then says, “Here,” and hands me a drink.

“I don’t want a drink but thank you.”

Lucas shrugs and lifts the glass, drinking it all in one go.

“You want to fuck, then? We do that really well.”

He is dead serious.

“I want to sit here and talk to you without either one of us taking our clothes off,” I reply.

“I don’t make any promises.” He chuckles, then puts the bottle down and walks past me. “Come on, *mia per sempre*, let’s go inside and *not* fuck.” I hear the smile in his voice, but I get up and follow him anyway. As soon as we get inside, he starts pulling off his shirt as he walks to his room. He toes off his shoes and lies on his bed, then taps the mattress next to him for me to do the same.

When I don’t move, his gaze on the ceiling falls to me. “Lie down next to me. I won’t touch you...” he takes a deep breath, “... until later.”

I kick my shoes off and hop in next to him. His hand finds mine, and he grips it, lacing our fingers together and squeezes it.

“How’s your mother?” I ask.

“That’s not why you’re here.”

“No, it’s not.” But in all honesty, I don’t even know why I am here.

“You want to know why we work, but also why we don’t,” he says.

I turn my head to face him, and he faces me. Those eyes that have haunted me and looked at me in the throes of passion are now soft.

“Even after everything. After what he did to you. What I did to you. Then me killing him and moving on.”

“I think that’s the secret question, isn’t it? So... why?”

“I can’t answer that.” He looks away and closes his eyes. “All I can tell you is what I want, and that is you. You know I want you. I will do anything to have you. Is it unhealthy? To you, maybe. To me, it’s a fucking Disney story.”

“That would be one hell of a dark one.”

“Sometimes, the dark ones are the best,” he answers. “Do you think you can stay?”

“Yes.”

Lucas reaches out and pulls me to him. I go easily until my body is lying on his. He pushes the hair from my face and kisses the top of my head.

“Sleep.”

And I do.

Listening to his heart beat fast in his chest until it finally settles, and I know he’s finally asleep.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

LUCAS

Her body is warm on top of mine. I move slightly, and she makes a sound in her sleep. That was the best sleep I've ever had for a very long time. I always sleep well when she's next to me, but having her on top of me all night? That's some sort of new passion we've unlocked.

She groans and goes to stretch. "I can feel you between my legs, Lucas."

"Well, it sure as shit isn't a remote," I reply.

Chanel moves, sitting up until she's on her knees, and looks down at me. Her hair is a mess, her clothes are all crumpled, but she looks like a fucking goddess.

"Maybe I should inspect it." She reaches for my pants and pulls at the waistband. My cock springs free, and her eyes take him in. "It really is a pretty cock," she says.

"Its favorite home is quite beautiful as well," I tell her. "Your cunt, in case you hadn't guessed." She lowers her hand to my cock, wrapping her long fingers around it, and starts to move.

"Why must you call it that?" she asks, leaning down, her breath tickling me.

"Cunt?"

She nods, and her tongue darts out and brushes the tip of my cock. I manage to stay still, even though I want to buck and push her mouth farther down my shaft. But with her, I have learned to be a patient man.

All good things come to those who wait. And she is worth every second of waiting.

“What other word should I use? It is a cunt, is it not?”

Her lips lift and then kiss me again, right where I want them.

“It’s such a derogatory word.”

“Does pussy please you any better?” She nods while kissing the top of my cock. Then, before I can say another word, her mouth opens, and she takes me in as far as she can.

Holy shit.

I’ll marry this woman, have no doubt.

“I see... it does please you.”

Chanel’s head bobs up and down nonstop, and her hands find my bare stomach where she manages to scrape her nails down before one hand goes to the base of my cock and the other grabs my balls.

“Marry me,” I demand while watching her.

She stops, my cock straining as she wipes her mouth. Her eyes go wide, and she shuffles off the bed, grabbing her things and rushing out without saying one damn word.

Well, okay then.

I look down at my cock. “It’s okay, buddy, we’ll get her back.”

* * *

K eir doesn’t call all day.

Which is surprising.

I also have to hire someone to replace Sergio, but that’s next to impossible. I stop by my mother’s before I go out, and her arms wrap

around me, holding me tight.

“My poor darling boy.” She strokes the back of my head and kisses me before she pulls away.

“Does Keir’s mother tell you everything?” I ask.

“Of course, she does.” Mom shakes her head and moves to the kitchen to make coffee. “And how is that lovely Chanel doing? You been seeing her again?”

My mother always liked Chanel, and she has always asked me about her.

“You know, don’t you?” She keeps her back to me.

“Know what?”

“Mother.”

“Okay, yes, I know she’s back. Engaged, the rumor mill tells me. How are you handling that?”

“She’s no longer engaged.”

I put an end to that.

Actually, he probably sealed his own fate. I just buried him with it.

“Keir will forgive you. You know that, right?” She places a cup of steaming coffee in front of me.

“I’m not so sure on that one.”

“Yes, he will. Same as you would. He’s family. He gives you the most leeway out of all the family. He has the utmost trust in the things you do.”

“If you say so.”

“I don’t get involved much in that world... I prefer to stay out of it. I wanted you out of it too, but you had to follow your father and Keir. It was mostly Keir, though. You always looked up to him until you found yourself.” She goes on, “I’m glad your father is dead. I know that’s an evil thing to say, but he was not good for this world or us.”

“Neither am I,” I tell her. Mom walks around the counter and cups my face.

“You are amazing,” she states, then kisses my cheek.

“I haven’t been sleeping,” I tell her. “Until Chanel stayed with me last night.”

“She puts your restless soul at ease, that’s all that is. You and her may not realize it, but your bodies and souls do. They are meant to be. And I can’t wait to see where your story goes.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

CHANEL

“Who does that?” I ask her, and she pulls her brows together as I go on. “Like, seriously, in the middle of going down on him, he throws that out there like it has no meaning. And you want to know the funny thing?”

“Not really,” she replies.

“I would have said yes. I *wanted* to say yes. But I’m trying to use my brain more when I am around him.”

“Okay, then,” the poor barista says, handing me my coffee. I take it and smile sadly at her.

“I won’t come back again,” I say, realizing I just let all that out on a stranger and in public.

Whoops! My bad.

The lady behind me gives me a sympathetic smile before she says, “Maybe you should just marry him if he bothers you that much. Because, girl, I’ve been married twenty years, and he still to this day bothers the hell out of me, but I love him.”

I give her some sort of awkward smile before I walk out, coffee in hand.

“Chanel.” I turn to Lucas standing there, even though he messaged me yesterday and agreed to give me space.

“This does not look like space,” I bite out. “Did you just hear all that?”

He can’t help the quirk of his lips. “Every word.”

My face feels hot as I look away from him. “Why are you here?”

“Because you are.”

I shake my head. It’s night, and I’m tired. I came for a coffee to try to get out of my head because walking helps me from catastrophizing everything. Thankfully, just down the road from my apartment is a really nice coffee place.

“Let me walk you back to your place, this area can be dangerous.” He smirks.

“It’s only dangerous when you’re here. Look at how those people are looking at you.” I nod to the couple we just passed to see them look the other way.

He chuckles next to me. “Maybe it’s you?”

“Ha, no. It’s definitely you,” I assure him as he walks next to me.

“Did you miss me?” he asks, and I look at him and find a new look on his face. I can’t quite read it. *Is he shy?* No, no way, not Lucas. “Clearly, I’ve been on your mind if you’re bitching about me to the barista.”

I roll my eyes and keep walking until I get to my door and pull out the keys, unlocking it before I step inside. When I turn around, he’s still at the door. “Can I come in?”

“If you must.” I sigh and sit on the couch. “You feeling better now?”

“I slept, thanks to you. Though, last night was hard without you there.” Lucas looks around before he stops at my kitchen counter. His arms are crossed over his chest, and his ankles are over one another.

“And you would have gotten a really good happy morning if you didn’t blurt out ridiculous words.”

“I haven’t asked you to call me daddy the last two times we fucked.” He smirks.

“Argh... do not remind me.”

“Remind you of how hard you come or about calling me daddy? Because I’ll take either.”

“You really do have no shame.”

“Nope.” He smiles. “None at all when it comes to you.”

“I’m getting that,” I say. “But did you ever have shame for any of the other women you fucked?”

“Nope. I don’t really care what others have to say.”

“How refreshing,” I bite back at him.

“I care what *you* have to say,” he replies. “I want to go out on another date,” he throws out on his way to the door.

“Why?”

“So I can ask you to marry me properly, of course.”

Oh, good God, that smile does me in.

Why do I love that smile so much?

“No,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Okay. Well, then... so I can fuck you.”

“No.”

“Okay, so we can date? I liked our date.”

I can’t deny I liked it too.

Actually, I loved it.

“Where are we going?”

“I was thinking Disney World.” He smiles.

“No mile-high club,” I state. “And I want to bring my brother and Merci.”

“Now, tell me... is that classed as a date?”

“Double date.” I smile.

“Deal.” Then he strides over to me, bending down until his lips are hovering near my face. He moves and kisses my cheek, his lips leaving tingles in their wake as he pulls away and walks to the door. “Lock it after I leave.”

“Why? The only sociopath stalker I have is walking out the door.” I grin, proud of my comeback. He steps out, and I have the door halfway shut

when I look up to see him winking at me as he leaves. “Don’t go killing any women, Lucas.”

“Those days are over. Only one woman I want to punish over and over again, and that’s in the bedroom,” he calls over his shoulder.

* * *

* * *

“We can go another time,” Lucas says, his back rippling as he lifts an ax, brings it down, and splits the wood into pieces, then does it again. He’s dressed in a pair of shorts—which I might add I have never seen him in before—and no shirt, with a cap on his head.

“What about our date?” I ask.

“I’ll cook.”

“You always cook,” I argue.

“I enjoy cooking for you.” He brings the ax down again, splitting more wood. I walk back to his porch and sit on the garden swing. Brody was meant to get out yesterday, and it’s been a week since Lucas asked me on our date. I told him we had to wait until Brody was out so the date could be a surprise. Brody doesn’t think he’s ready though and asked to stay a little longer.

I’m so proud of him.

“You finished work?” Lucas glances over his shoulder at me. I’m still in my uniform after coming here as soon I found out.

“Yep.”

“Care to shower?” he asks, putting the ax in the shed and taking off his hat to brush the hair away from his face.

“With you?”

“No, with my ax.” He rolls his eyes and steps over to me. He bends down, his chest wet from sweat, and places his hands on either side of me, trapping me in his cocoon.

“What are we?” I ask, my eyes falling to those delectable lips.

I’ve imagined kissing them.

Wondering what they might taste like.

My eyes lift back to his, and I see he’s staring at my lips.

“We are two people who are about to get clean.” He grabs me, and my skirt raises higher up my thighs as he lifts me so my legs can go around his waist.

“What if I don’t want to? Would you put me down?” I ask.

Lucas’s eyes lock on mine. “Do you want me to put you down?” He’s halfway to his back door.

“No.” I smile.

“Figured as much.” Lucas kicks his back door open and carries me inside, then after kicking the door closed, he heads straight for his bathroom. He turns on the shower while holding me and gets in while we’re still fully clothed. “Move in with me.”

“You don’t have enough closet space for me,” I joke.

“I’ll build you a bigger closet,” he retorts. Slowly, he lowers me to the floor, and I start to remove my wet clothes while he watches.

“Can you get my bag?” I ask.

His brows pull together, but he does as I ask, dropping my bag on the floor before he discards his pants and steps back in with me. “Why does your shower have a lock on it?” I ask, motioning to the glass door.

“No idea. It came with the shower.”

I step out and reach for what I’m looking for and then step back in. He looks at me confused. “I need you to step out.” He does, without thinking twice, and stands on the other side of the door. “I want to lock this as I talk to you.”

“Why?” he questions as he stands there naked and dripping water all over the floor.

“So I feel safe,” I tell him as I turn the showerhead to the side so it’s not drenching me and pull my toy from the black bag. He catches sight of it and smiles.

“You want to feel safe while you do what with that?”

“Just show you what I do when you aren’t around.”

“What about when Farris was there? Did you do this?” He nods to it, wanting me to answer, although I am not sure he would take well to a positive response.

I shake my head. “No one has ever made me horny except you.”

I’m not lying either. I had sex with Farris to have sex. There was nothing more to it. I have sex with Lucas because I can’t contain myself. He makes everything in me light up, and it’s a real issue.

Have you ever been in love with someone so broken and fucked-up that no matter what, it just felt right? More right than anything in your life?

I should be glad he isn’t like my father, but I think I understand my mother a little more now. They just shouldn’t have had kids. Either of them. They loved each other, no doubt about that. But their idea of love for their children? Yeah, that was warped.

“Lucas, just sit there and watch,” I say as I turn on the sex toy. His eyes zero in on the space between my legs, and as I open them, his hands clench at his sides. “Tell me, what would we have done on our date?”

“I would have gone on any ride you wanted, then when you said you were hungry, I would have fed you...”

I place it between my legs, and his eyes go feral with need as he licks his lips.

“Carry on.”

“After you finished eating, I would have asked you to follow me.”

He stops as the vibrator hits that perfect spot.

“Lucas.”

“Hmm,” he hums.

When I glance at him, I see his hand on his cock, stroking it back and forth while he watches me intently.

“Continue...”

“I would have taken you to the disabled bathroom, sat your ass on the counter, and ate you for my lunch.”

“Well, I like the sound of that,” I tell him as my eyes fall closed. “Fuck.” I push the toy inside me, and I hear a loud bang. When I open my eyes, he’s gone. I pause my show, but only for a second before I see Lucas coming back, and he’s carrying a tool. He stalks to the door, his cock straining.

“Lucas, tell me more.”

“You need to stop,” he all but growls.

“I can’t.”

“Stop, Chanel.” My hand pauses when I note he’s trying to undo the lock on the door.

“What do you plan to do?” I ask, dropping my vibrator and replacing it with my fingers. I push them in, then pull them out and show him. “Would you taste me?” I ask, my legs still spread. “Maybe even... spank me?” I raise my eyebrows up and down a few times.

“Oh, you are getting fucking spanked, make no mistake about that.”

I laugh at his words.

Eventually, he unlocks the door and pulls it open. He turns off the spray, then reaches down and lifts me, throwing me over his shoulder and walking me to his bedroom, where he tosses me on the bed. When I go to move, I’m dragged back to him and placed over his lap as if I have been a very naughty girl.

I was naughty.

Very naughty.

“Tell me, who is a bad girl?” he asks.

“Why? Didn’t like my show?” I tease, looking at him over my shoulder.

His hand rubs my ass in slow circles. “That was not what I asked. Last time,” he says, still rubbing. “Who is a bad girl?”

“Me,” I whisper, and the palm of his hand comes down on my ass. The spank makes a squeal leave my lips, the sting both sensual and hard. “I answered,” I tell him.

“Tell me, who is a bad girl?”

“Me,” I repeat.

Another smack.

This time, I open my legs a little, and he chuckles.

“Tell me, who is a bad girl?” I feel his cock straining against my stomach.

“Me.” I pause, then add, “Daddy.” His hand comes down and rubs circles before it drops and finds my entrance, which is wet for him. He inserts a finger and then pulls it out, I moan, and he lifts me, placing me on his lap so I’m straddling him.

“Ride my cock like the good naughty little bitch I know you are.”

“Bitch?” I question, raising a brow as I hover over him.

He moves forward to touch my lips, and I bite at him as I lower myself. His mouth opens in surprise against my lips, and he stays rock still.

“What are you doing, *mia per sempre*?”

“I’m making you my bitch, Lucas Rossi.”

“Marry me.”

“Ask me when I come, and I’ll think about it.”

“Mission accepted.”

* * *

He didn't ask, but as we lie here exhausted, my body riddled with everything that is him, I roll over and place my hand on his chest.

"I want to try something, and I need you not to react. Don't ruin it."

His hand finds my thigh as I climb back on top of him while he lies back. He strokes my skin as I lean down, my lips a hair's breadth away from his. The lines of his mouth are precise, and his lips are full, pink, and ready to be kissed.

But am I ready? This is the real question.

"*Mia per sempre*," he says his pet name for me, and my hand hovers over the tattoo that reads just that.

"Stay still," I tell him as he moves his hips, so his cock is at my entrance.

"As you say." His eyes drop to my lips, and I wonder what he thinks when he looks at them.

Does he want to kiss me?

I've only ever wanted to kiss his lips.

What does that mean?

My lips touch his barely, just a feather-light touch. They feel so soft under mine. I move down farther until our mouths meet fully. I kiss him, mouth closed, and he kisses me back. The hand that was on my thigh is now on my ass, pushing me down to him. His lips open ever so slightly, and tingles fly away in my belly at his touch.

He kisses so softly.

When he is so hard in life.

His lips feel like they mark every part of me with only the slightest of touches.

* * *

Kissing Lucas Rossi would be a mistake because I knew once I'd had a taste, I couldn't go back.

Whenever we fight now, he kisses me.

Whenever he sees me, he kisses me.

Lucas never stops stealing my kisses.

That night sealed my fate.

I'm marrying a serial killer, and I don't even care.

Because not only can he kiss the living shit out of me, he can fuck me as well.

And he cooks delicious food.

Could I have asked for a better man? Possibly.

But not one so right for my soul.

One who never judges.

One who always looks the other way.

And this man always has my back.

I moved in, and he built me a bigger closet.

And we kiss every single day.

It's not everyone's happy ending, but I never really cared about what others think.

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About the Author

USA Today Best Selling Author T.L. Smith loves to write her characters with flaws so beautiful and dark you can't turn away. Her books have been translated into several languages. If you don't catch up with her in her home state of Queensland, Australia you can usually find her travelling the world, either sitting on a beach in Bali or exploring Alcatraz in San Francisco or walking the streets of New York.



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