

SR JONES

# Her Savage Defender

### SR Jones

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**Epilogue** 

## Chapter 1

### Carolina

THERE'S a painting in the national gallery by Caravaggio, and whenever I visit it draws me in, rendering me unable to look away for the longest time. It's a mix of beauty and threat.

The artist uses a technique called *tenebrism*, the mixing of light and dark. The contrast can be violent between the two, and often the darkness becomes the most dominant feature of the painting.

The painting is also dark in the themes it touches on. It's beautiful, though. The darkness of it is seductive in a way it shouldn't be.

The man sitting in front of me right now reminds me viscerally of that painting.

Dark and light.

Beauty and threat.

His eyes are bright and intelligent, and he has a warm smile on his face, but there's a sense of genuine danger cloaking him somehow. A feeling that the polite warmth he is displaying is nothing but a veneer. A slash of light on the dark canvas of his true soul.

He's big, which adds to the threat. Huge, in fact. Intimidating. He might be wearing a smart suit, but the ink crawling up his neck and the scarred knuckles attest to him not being an ordinary office worker.

I swallow hard and glance down at my hands folded in my lap.

Daddy called this meeting and thrust this surprise on me, and I'm not sure how to take it.

This man, this *beast*, is to be my new bodyguard.

I don't want close protection. I argued with my father until I was blue in the face, but on this, he won't back down.

"So, you served your country?" Daddy asks the man, in his rich, plummy voice. Daddy is so old school that he still rolls his Rs on some words.

"Yes, sir," the man says.

"So, Samuel. It says here, you've trained and worked with American Special Forces, carried out work for NATO and various governments both in a military and private capacity?" Daddy flicks through some of the pages on his lap.

Great, I think, a mercenary.

"Correct."

"And your skill set is?" Father raises his brows.

I almost laugh. That curriculum vitae and his whole countenance tells you this man's skill set quite clearly. Violence. Danger. Death.

"I can neutralize any threat to your daughter with a high degree of accuracy." Samuel smiles, then adds, "Sir."

My father clears his throat, and his left foot starts to tap. A distinct sign he's uncomfortable. So Father feels the danger crackling around this stranger too. Yet he expects me to be guarded by him. Like a sheep being sent off with a wolf.

"If we do go ahead with this, Samuel, there are some logistics I'm not certain of. For instance, I wasn't sure if we should let it be known my daughter has security or keep it quiet. Her life has been messed up enough due to the decisions I made. She's been forced to take a break from work, and she's a presenter on the national television station here, so it is not great she's doing so. People will already be talking. Perhaps the discreet route would be better. Perhaps ... just possibly someone less ... obvious than yourself?" Daddy clears his throat, and his foot starts up its relentless dance once more.

Samuel, I commit his name to memory.

He leans forward and steeples his fingers together. Under the pale blue of his shirt cuffs, I spy more ink crawling up his wrist on one side. Jesus, is he totally covered in ink?

"Can I be brutally honest?" Samuel's voice is like syrup over nails.

"Of course," Daddy says with a dip of his head.

"You want people to see your daughter has protection. Now, the original threat is against yourself, no? You didn't react, and so they went for your daughter? This tells me the people threatening you are trying to intimidate and scare you. This isn't a situation where, say, your daughter has a stalker who is obsessed with her. This is a situation where some people wish to scare you by threatening and possibly, harming, her. Having visible protection for her is a deterrent. It wouldn't be for some unhinged, lovelorn stalker, but for these people, it will. I'm not claiming it will stop them attempting to harass or hurt you, ma'am." For the first time he turns his full attention on me, and I'm caught utterly helpless in the laser beam of his gaze. "However, it might make them think twice."

"Do you think one person is enough?" Daddy asks. "I did say to Mr. Silvanov that I thought I might need two people."

"I am going to become your daughter's shadow. Better one person who knows her routine, her movements, and the people around her, inside out, than a team of three or four who rotate. I will not be leaving her side."

The panic I've been feeling all week builds inside, threatening to burst out. With fake calm, I stand and walk to the drinks cabinet at the far side of the room. I pour myself a neat vodka, not bothering with ice, and take it back to my seat, sipping it as I fold myself into the chair again.

*Trapped*. Each day, I feel more and more trapped. Ever since Daddy received the threats against me from a cartel of crime lords, I've lost a little more of myself each day. Firstly, I had to stop work. Then I had to cancel my cleaner. Then my weekly facial and manicure. Finally, Daddy told me I had to stay with him and Mother until he had protection arranged.

To top it all off, I found out, at the same damn time, that my boyfriend has been fucking my friend and colleague. So yeah, it's been a shitty week, and my nerves are so frayed they're about to tear completely.

Not working is enough to drive me nuts. Add in not sleeping or eating and far too much wine, and I'm fully aware I'm a woman heading for a breakdown if this carries on. I cannot believe that mere days ago my world was normal. Then Daddy got the threats and my on-again off-again boyfriend fucked my friend. Talk about timing.

I take another drink of vodka and finally speak. "I am certain you will be leaving my side. You won't be sleeping with me."

The minute I say it, I realize I've put my foot in my mouth. My heart rate picks up, and my cheeks

heat. Damn it. I did not mean it that way. Stealing a glance at the man, I will my overheating face to behave.

Samuel doesn't react with a cocky smile or a joke; he simply nods. "Ma'am, I will be sleeping in the room right next to yours. There will be alarms fitted across the threshold to your bedroom, and to your windows. Anyone entering the room trips the alarms."

I blink at him as I parse what he is saying. "You mean I will be a prisoner in my own home?"

"No. The alarm will be activated only when you go to bed. Once you are awake, I will turn it off."

"You?"

He frowns. "Yes, me."

"No. I want a panel in the room so I can turn it off. What if I want to go downstairs for a glass of water?"

"You call out to me. Or ring me."

"On the phone?" I am so shocked by what is being said, I can't think straight.

"You can use the phone if you wish. Or, simply shout. Your bedroom door, and mine, will both be open."

Oh, God, this won't do.

The man is scary, but he's also insanely hot, in a way I find disturbing because he really shouldn't be.

It's very rare I get intimidated by people. Being born an heiress and getting a first-class degree from Oxford will imbue one with a certain sense of confidence. This man, however, makes me feel small and weak. His presence alone is enough to turn most people to mushy incoherence.

No. It's not happening.

I turn to my father and smile. "Daddy, I know you're worried about me, but really? I cannot be expected to try to sleep and relax like that? I must have my privacy." I use the title he prefers me to. I tried to call him Dad once, and he said to stick with Daddy. Mummy is insistent on her being *Mummy* not *Mum*, too. It's a class thing, I think. Posh people in England tend to use the terms, and we are most definitely posh.

"I'll be asleep in the next room, not spying on you. You'll have privacy." Samuel's deep voice resonates in the room.

"Why can't I have a panel in my room? If someone were to enter my bedroom, you'd still be alerted by the alarm, but it means I can turn it off if I want to get a glass of water." The whole thing is annoying me because he's so damn implacable, but what he's saying is crazy. Daddy cannot be taking this seriously.

I also realize that they are talking as if this is already a done deal. How does Samuel know about my house and where I sleep? Damn it, has Daddy already hired him?

Samuel leans even farther forward, his biceps bunching through the suit jacket impressively. "If you go downstairs for a drink and turn the alarm off, someone could grab you down there, and I might not hear. I could sleep right through the whole event."

"No one is going to grab me. The house is very safe, and I have a dog." I point to Brutus sleeping by my feet in his basket.

"That's not a dog," Samuel says.

I bristle. "It most certainly is a dog." God, he's one very annoying, abrasive man.

"Okay. Well, you have three now."

"What?"

"Dogs," he says, and now he does grin. "You have three dogs."

Oh, help. That smile. What is that? This man, this annoying, dark, scary-ass man *cannot* have a smile like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

Then it hits me once more. The painting. Dark and light. The smile is nothing but a violent dash of light against this man's dark canvas, and I can't be lured in by it.

"Since when do I have three dogs?"

"Since I purchased two trained Belgian Malinois, for you at Samuel's recommendation." Daddy smiles at me. He's giving me his patented *please don't make a fuss* smile.

I grind my teeth but say nothing. I love dogs, so having two more won't be a hardship. Still, it would have been nice to be consulted.

Samuel sits back and spreads his legs a little as he relaxes in the seat. The movement pulls the material of his pants around his thick thighs. My God, is he massive everywhere?

The thought immediately has my cheeks heating once more, and I glance away, letting my gaze dart around the room. But like a moth to the light, it simply lands back on the most interesting thing in the vicinity. *Samuel*.

His hair is short and a bit messy, as if he's growing out a buzz cut and hasn't decided what to do with it yet. His short beard, more like long stubble, is darker than the hair on his head, but I can tell the blond on his head is from time spent in the sun. I bet in winter, it's the same dark blond as his beard.

Samuel's skin is tan, and his eyes striking blue.

"When does this new regime begin?" I ask my father.

"Right now." His answer has my stomach plummeting like a plane with both engines cut.

"So, we're a go?" Samuel asks.

My father sighs. "I feel we have no choice, Carolina. You are not happy about this, I can tell, but your safety comes before your short-term happiness."

He wouldn't be saying that if he knew how fucking awful my week had been and how on edge I am.

"How does this work?" Daddy asks.

"Once you sign the contract, it's in effect immediately. I don't leave Carolina's sight until the threat is over or neutralized."

Great. No time to mentally prepare myself for this. My security detail will begin immediately. This huge man is going to be in my space twenty-four-seven. The dark energy he carries with him will fill my home, my safe place.

Panic rises in me, and I try my best to tamp it down. *This won't be for long*, I tell myself. It's to keep me safe, and that's the most important thing.

My gaze alights on Samuel's face, and his focus is right back on me, not missing a thing.

"Don't worry, Carolina," he says, using my name for the first time. "I won't intrude. I will keep out of your way, and you won't know I'm there."

Hearing my name from his lips is disconcerting. He says it with a familiarity he hasn't earned, but also with respect.

"I'll fetch my things, shall I then, sir?" Samuel looks to my father.

Damn it, I'm almost thirty, and I'm being ignored by the men in the room as if I have no say in the matter.

"Yes, please do. We will wait here." My father smiles at Samuel, and he nods then heads out of the room.

The moment he's gone, I turn to my father, but he holds his hands up.

"My darling, do this for me. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you because of my mistake. I'm begging you."

It's hardly his mistake. He commissioned a book from a new author and that book, part fictional, part journalistic re-telling of a crime, got too close to the truth for some high up people in the underground crime world. Daddy couldn't have known the author had put too much detail in the book, and even, of all the sins to commit, so poorly disguised real people.

Now both the author of the expose of how some of the wealthy in London have exploited street gangs, and Daddy, are being threatened. Me too, as of this week.

My fear spikes again. "Daddy, you're scaring me when you talk this way. If the threat is so significant, what makes you think one man can neutralize it?"

"If he can singlehandedly rescue two hostages and take out the perpetrators without harming the innocent women and children in the compound, I believe he can keep you safe."

*He did what?* 

Wow.

Okay, that's heroic.

"He's a bit scary," I say softly. "Lots of tattoos... And his knuckles—all scarred." I shudder, but whether in outright fear or something else entirely, I'm not sure.

"Darling, you're not marrying him. He's simply there to protect you. I wouldn't care if he had his nose pierced."

I let out a decidedly unladylike snort at that and laugh. Daddy hates nose piercings with a passion, bordering on the unhinged.

The clacking of heels on the parquet floor has me turning. Mummy wafts into the room, all silk and Dior perfume. She's beautiful in a way I am not. My last serious boyfriend before the cheating douche was so weirdly enthralled with her; it's why we broke up. Not that Mummy knows as much. She'd be horrified and hurt that she'd inadvertently caused such a thing. Mummy is a darling. A beautiful, spoiled, air-headed sweetheart who knows nothing much of what goes on in the world beyond when the latest Dior couture is dropping, or who the season's *it* designer is.

Still, you can't help but love her because she's just so kind. She also worships Daddy. They're a strange pair, but it works. He's serious, well read, into politics, art, literature, and hunting. Mummy loves saving animals, fashion, beauty, and shopping. He stopped hunting for her, and now only does dummy trails where the foxes aren't real because of her agony over animal cruelty.

I take after him, and hence most men in my life prefer her. It doesn't matter that she's twenty-three years older than me. She's beautiful, flirtatious, and fun, and men prefer that over serious, prickly, and uptight. The only time I'm fun is when I'm drunk, and then I tend to simply spill over into messy and annoying.

Heavy boots scuff the wood that Mummy just tap-danced over, and Samuel re-enters the room with a hefty green bag slung over one shoulder. He places the bag on the floor and flicks his gaze to my mother.

She's a world-famous supermodel. It doesn't help my jealousy knowing most of my boyfriends will have seen pictures of her half-naked many times in their lives. She did *Pirelli* calendars and *Penthouse* as well as runways for the top fashion houses. She's one of the few models to be both a pin-up and a genuine high-end fashion muse.

I glance at her and am shocked to see her eyes widen as she looks right back at Samuel. My mother never looks at men that way. Only Daddy. She gives a tiny shake of her head as if shaking

loose an aberrant thought and composes herself.

Damn, I expect Samuel will be star struck like the rest of them, but it seems it might go both ways.

However, Samuel merely gives a nod at Mummy and in his deep but quiet voice, says, "Ma'am," then dips his head.

Mummy smiles. "Hello. Erm, nice to meet you."

Her stunning, huge eyes, keep darting to me, and her mouth ticks up in a small smile. I'm a little confused until she speaks again.

"You must be a new friend of Carolina's?"

Oh, God, she thinks he's my boyfriend. I almost laugh. He's most definitely not my type. Yes, I might have a bit of a weird fascination with the man, the way a child might with dinosaurs, or say spiders, because they are scary but cool, but I don't want to sleep with him. I really don't. He's entirely far too rough and ready for my liking.

I bet he'd leave you raw. Not in a good way. I like my men like my Daddy— cultured, intelligent, and refined. *Interesting*. If a man can't interest me and turn my brain on, he can't get me going in regions farther south.

"No, darling," Daddy says as he sips his whisky. "This is Carolina's new bodyguard. You know, because of the ... unpleasantness."

I don't think she's been told everything, which is good because she does tend to panic.

"Oh, yes. Well, nice to meet you, young man. Would you like a drink? Brandy perhaps?"

Young man? He must be at least thirty, if not a little older. Maybe mid-thirties.

Not young by any stretch.

"No thank you, ma'am; not while I'm working."

"Are you working now?" Mummy frowns.

"From the moment I arrived."

Is he not going to drink anything the whole time he's here? Maybe he doesn't drink? I do. Sometimes far too much.

"I think you ought to take Samuel here to your house, darling, and show him around." Daddy stands, and his haughty Henningborne profile is as strong now as it was when he was a young man. I got his nose, sadly. It's a strong nose, good on a man, less so on a woman. I would have preferred Mummy's cute button nose, but hey-ho.

I fluff my hair, shorter now than usual. I was feeling bored and trapped by not working, and so I had my hairdresser come to my parents' house and cut it to a long bob. It isn't straight anymore, as the shorter cut and layers brought out my natural wave, and my hairdresser told me to go with it instead of always battling with the irons.

"Darling?" Daddy fixes me with the look. The one that urges you not to argue.

Taking a deep breath in, I smile at my father. "Of course, Daddy. Excellent suggestion. I'll pack my things."

Samuel's brow crinkles.

"I've been staying here," I explain. "Daddy doesn't think it is safe for me to go home, or to work. I'm taking a sabbatical for now. Luckily my employers have been very understanding."

Heading out of the room, I hear my mother asking Samuel questions about where he's from, and he replies, "Moved around, army brat," before his voice fades. The man isn't very forthcoming or chatty.

Then again, I tell myself, as I enter my childhood room, that's a good thing. I don't want to have to make small talk with the bodyguard.

Packing only takes me five minutes because many of my things I never took out of my bag. I always have clothes here anyway for when I might come stay for the weekend. Same goes for the country estate my parents own. The biggest pile of stuff I need to gather are work notes, books, and my toiletries. I have an unhealthy addiction to skin products and have spent the economy of a small nation in my lifetime pursuit of perfect skin. I might not have Mother's natural beauty, but I have damn good skin because I've taken care of it since I was twelve. That was the age my mother sat me down and told me that one day I'd get old and invisible so not to rely on my looks because when they went it was heartbreaking.

I spent years in my teens trying to ensure I stayed young, and it became a habit. All in the pursuit of not becoming invisible, which Mummy told me was a *living death*.

She lied that day. She *never* became invisible and yet I've *always* been invisible; next to her anyway. Age has not withered her.

Not only is she beautiful, but she speaks perfect French because both her parents were second generation French immigrants to Brazil, as well as Portuguese and English. She also has a grasp of Italian and German. From a young age, she spoke to me in a variety of languages and as a result I excel at them too.

My brother has Mother's looks and sadly neither of our parents' happy dispositions. He's an unhappy playboy with a raging drug habit and a sex life that would make the Marquis De Sade blush.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out of my pocket, glancing at it.

Drinks tomorrow night at Zoud's? On me. I can explain.

It's my on-again, off-again, and currently off because he had sex with a twenty-two-year-old intern who I thought was my friend, boyfriend. I roll my eyes and don't even bother to reply. He can get lost. Still, it hurts. My chest pangs, and I try to ignore it. I've been doing that a lot lately. Pushing everything down.

Trouble is, when you push stuff down, you turn into a volcano, and one day, you'll blow.

Finally ready, I pick up my overnight bag and head downstairs. I enter the large living room and smile at my parents. "Right, I'll be off then."

"Text us when you are safely home," Mummy says as if I'm traversing a war zone. She blows me a kiss. "See you for Sunday dinner, darling."

Samuel stands, shakes my father's hand, and then comes to me and holds his hand out. Stupidly, I offer him mine, and he takes it, shakes it, but then indicates the bag.

Of course. I'm an idiot.

My skin prickles with warmth as I hand him the bag, and our fingers touch for a moment. What's that all about? This guy is not my type. Not at all. No f'ing way.

I grab my Prada purse, my car keys in the hallway, and attach Brutus' Hermes lead. I wave at my parents as I head to the front door with my new shadow.

### Chapter 2

#### Samuel

WE HIT THE PAVEMENT, and Carolina walks to the Mercedes she drives, her tiny companion running to keep up with her. While I didn't lie when I said I would be the only one guarding her, it doesn't mean I'm the only new employee she has. One of the men I worked with in the past, and trust implicitly, will be her driver. He's leaning against the car, and as we approach, he stands tall.

Carolina slows her steps and glances at her driver. Simon is smart today, wearing a suit and tie. He smiles at us.

"There's a man by my car," Carolina says, voice low.

"Yeah, he's your new driver."

"What? I don't need a driver." She stops walking completely and faces me. "I'm perfectly capable of driving."

"Not if someone is chasing us, you're not."

"You never mentioned this inside. Did you clear it with my father?"

I suppress my eye roll, kind of impressed she's so on the ball. Taking my phone out, I dial her father. He answers in that upper crust voice of his.

I put him on speaker. "Can you clarify for Carolina that we discussed the need for a driver?"

"Yes, darling. Sorry, my fault; I should have told you."

Carolina grits her teeth but simply says, "Fine, Daddy."

I hang up. "You happy?"

She shakes her head.

What the hell? The woman is annoying me already. This is the downside of protection work. I'm not a patient man when it comes to dealing with people.

Put me in a room with my rifle and my own thoughts for a week, and I'm fine. People, though? Annoying.

She purses her mouth and stares at me.

I had thought this woman bland when I saw her photograph for the first time in Greece, when I was offered the job of guarding her by the company that is paying me. Then I saw her on television and realized she wasn't bland at all. Now, having her in front of me in the flesh, I can't believe I ever thought such a thing. Her expressions are so interesting, she could never be boring.

"You agreed with your father just now. I assumed that meant you're okay with this."

"What else can one do? My father won't back down on this. Lord Henningborne does not change his mind once it is made up."

I nod and say nothing. I'm not here to get involved with family politics.

"Please tell me of things in the future before they happen," she demands. "I don't like being

blindsided."

"Of course," I say easily.

Path of least resistance and all that. The minute she wants to do something that puts her safety in jeopardy, she'll come up against the brick wall of my *no*. I work for her father, not her. More importantly, I work for and with Konstantin and Andrius. I'm now a part of the operation the two ex-Spetsnaz officers set up to provide high-level security for the world's wealthiest people.

Carolina is my client to keep safe; her father is my employer.

His request was clear as day.

Keep my daughter safe. Don't take any crap from her. She's headstrong and demanding, but put her safety first at all times. Don't let her drink too much either, as she gets somewhat uncontrollable.

I informed the man it wouldn't be an issue to keep her safe, and it won't.

"Good, we're on the same page." Carolina runs her hand through her hair again. We reach the car, and I hold the back door open for her as she settles into the seat. Brutus hops up onto the seat beside her, and she scoots to the other side, patting her knee. The dog jumps onto her lap and curls up with a deep groan.

Simon takes the driver's seat, and I hand him the keys as I slide into the back, next to Carolina.

I pat under my jacket, checking the holster at my hip. A reflex action.

Lord Henningborne must have friends in very high places because he managed to get me clearance to conceal carry here, and it is almost impossible. Sometimes, even visiting heads of state can't manage to clear their security to carry concealed weapons. The UK has some pretty strict gun laws, but Carolina's father is a powerful man.

The click of her seat belt fastening has me doing mine up too, and then Simon pulls out into the London traffic.

"It's twenty minutes from here," Carolina says to him, leaning forward slightly.

"I know where it is, Miss," he replies.

He's British and worked with us on a few missions for Brit Special Forces and since has been working as a driver in many war-torn destinations, including running goods through ex-Yugoslavia at the height of the war. If he can do that, he can evade some local thugs threatening us.

Carolina fidgets in the seat next to me. Her scent washes over me, and it's surprising. A mix of spicy warmth and heady florals. I'd have pictured her for a sensible, light citrus scent kind of a girl. I wonder briefly what other surprises she holds in store, then close that line of thought down immediately.

She is fascinating, though.

I've got a file as long as my arm on Carolina, and it contains a fare few photographs. From the pictures, all taken face on, she'd seemed blandly good looking. A beautiful woman undoubtedly with clear eyes, skin, and great bone structure, but not someone I'd look at twice. In the flesh, she's much more intriguing.

Her mannerisms are controlled, clipped, like her accent and her words, but her face is expressive, almost as if she can control everything else about herself but not that. Or, at least, not off camera. Her hair is also different. In the pictures, it's long, sleek, and in perfect place. Now, it's wavy and hangs a few inches above her shoulders, moving every time she does.

Hands folded on her lap, she stares out of the window, facing away from me, but her fingers drum silently on her thighs, a sign of nerves.

I could attempt to soothe her and give her reassuring words, but I suck at that shit, and I'm not her

babysitter. I'm her close protection. My job is to keep her alive. Nothing more. If she wants to soothe herself, she needs to call her shrink.

My phone beeps, and I take it out. It's a text from Leanne. She's a friend, nothing more, but she loves sending me risqué texts or filthy pictures of herself. The old adage that men and women can't be friends is bull because we have been for years. I'm not interested in her that way, and the feeling is mutual. Her type is skinny, long haired, into poetry and music, and often fucked up and bad news. The amount of rock star wannabes she's been through is impressive.

From my side of the equation, Leanne is like a female me. She's inked, pierced, hard as fuck, muscled, and no nonsense. I love her, like I love my buddies from serving, but I have no sexual interest in her. One night, drunk, bored, and out of fucks, we decided to give it a try. After a few minutes of weird kisses and mortifying fondling, we both cracked up and then cracked two more beers. We've been friends only ever since.

Reading the text, though, one might think otherwise.

Hey, fucker, which one do I go for? Tits or ass?

There are two pictures attached. One is of her in a halter top with her large breasts pushed up by a bra, which is a miracle of engineering if her cleavage is anything to go by. The second is of her in tight leather trousers, bending over. I smirk and wonder who took the picture.

"I'd say tits." The words uttered in Carolina's posh accent have me jerking my head around.

She's staring at my phone.

"Just a friend," I say. Crap, not professional looking at these on the job. "I've not had time to turn my phone off to avoid notifications. Last time I'll be looking at personal messages on the job."

Her clear gaze meets mine. "Oh? Seems a shame. That's the most interesting thing I've seen all week."

"You must have had a boring week," I tell her.

"I have, indeed. I'm on house arrest, remember?" She sighs.

"Not now; you have me. You can go anywhere you'd like."

"So long as you're with me," she says with a huff.

"Yes. So long as I'm with you."

I hitch one hip up to slip my phone in my pocket.

"Tell her then." Carolina raises one brow at me.

"Excuse me?"

"Tits. Tell her tits."

I hesitate.

The woman next to me grins. "What? Are you telling me you think ass?"

Christ. She's a weird mixture of personality. Haughty and uptight one minute, joking about tits and ass the next.

I swallow and glance forward in time to see Simon grinning at me in the rearview mirror before he refocuses on the road.

"I don't think it's a serious question. Just Leanne being Leanne."

"Trying to make you jealous? Maybe she likes you?"

"I can guarantee not." I fire off a reply, typing fast.

Working. On a job for the foreseeable. Contact me if urgent, but otherwise I need to keep the phone clear. PS—Can you check on Bella for me?

Three dots appear, disappear, then appear again.

Understood. Stay safe, asshole. I'll go see the lady tomorrow and give her some love. They do

look after her, though, you know? I swear to God, you can't meet a woman because that filly already has your heart. Later. X

"Filly?" Carolina makes a soft hum in the back of her throat. "Is your friend British? That's a very old school British way of describing a woman."

I laugh at that, unable to stop myself as I pocket my phone.

"Bella is a horse. My horse. She's fielded and stabled back home, but I like to know she's getting checked in on. Keep the stables on their toes. My friend, Leanne, does that for me."

"Where's home?"

Her face is curious. Her mother asked me the same question, and I gave her my stock answer. About to open my mouth and give Leanne the Army brat line, which is true to a degree, instead I give her a more in-depth answer.

"I moved around a lot. Spent a lot of time in Texas. Then Colorado, followed by a few years in Germany. Followed by a time in So-Cal and eventually Montana, which is where I suppose I call home, but I go back to California a lot too and have a house there."

She smiles at me, but it's not the guarded one she gives in the few television clips I've seen, or the warm but limited one she gave her parents; no, this one is wide and seems much more genuine. "Ah, Montana. I've always wanted to visit. Looks so beautiful."

"It is." I agree.

She nods, and we lapse into silence. Five minutes later, the vehicle pulls up outside a house that I know cost over a million pounds. Of course, being the daughter of a Lord means she probably has family money, but she bought this with her own earnings from the speaking circuit, her books, articles, and the television work she does.

When we get out of the car, Carolina stretches, the evening sun hitting her hair and making it much more golden. Brutus stretches too and shakes himself.

Simon climbs out and throws me the keys.

"Later, alligator," he says.

"Where are you going?" Carolina asks. "Aren't you staying with us? I mean, me? I mean, here, at the house?" She flushes slightly as she fumbles what she's trying to say.

"I live ten minutes away," Simon says. "I'll be here in the morning, and if you ever need me at night to take you guys anywhere, Reaper, erm, Samuel can call me, and I'll be straight around."

She flicks her gaze my way before looking back at Simon. "Okay, well, thank you."

"No worries. See you both tomorrow." He flashes me an *I'm sorry* glance, for dropping the Reaperman bomb, then turns and walks down the road, hands in his pockets.

"What if he wants a glass of wine, but then we need him to drive us?" Carolina asks me.

"He doesn't drink," I say.

"Oh. Do you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Nothing, just you said you didn't drink while at work, but you're going to be at work all the time. Maybe for weeks. So that means you can't have a drink *for weeks*."

"And?"

She looks away. "Seems a long time, that's all."

I watch her closely. "If a person can't go a few weeks without a drink, I'd say they might want to examine that."

"Oh, you would, would you?" She narrows her eyes, then turns smartly on her heel, and strides up the wide steps to the front door.

Yeah, I damn well would.

I follow her and place my hand on her arm before she can grab the door to the house. "There's a new alarm fitted. Let me get the bags."

I grab our things and lock the car, and then I key in the code on the brand-new alarm system. It beeps twice and deactivates.

The first thing that greets me is the scent. A huge vase filled to the brim with lilies.

"Someone has good taste in flowers," I say, nodding at them.

She shrugs. "I have some delivered twice a month."

Getting regular flower deliveries. Fancy.

Carolina leads me into the kitchen. "I guess you've been here already, so no need to show you around."

It's not framed as a question. She must know as much from the conversation at her parents. "Yes. Your father gave me a key, so I could come and set up security."

"That's how you know where my bedroom is, where your room will be, and all about the alarm you've placed on my door." She folds her arms over her chest and widens her feet a little.

Her stance is body language for *I don't like this*.

"Yes, ma'am."

She blows out a sharp breath. "I swear to God, cut the ma'am stuff, please?"

I raise one brow but nod. "Of course. Do you prefer Carolina or Miss Herringbone?"

"Carolina, for God's sake. Why did that guy call you Reaper out there?"

"Joke name," I reply.

She narrows her eyes at me but doesn't push.

"I'll take your bag up because I'm going to get changed."

"What will you wear? Normally? Like a uniform? I'm afraid I don't know how this works."

I lean against the doorjamb, one hand shoved in my pocket. "When I'm out and about with you, I'll wear a suit, no tie. In the house, jeans and a T-shirt or similar."

"Why no tie?"

"Because it can be used against a person."

She swallows and nods, turns her back to me, and walks to the fridge. Opening the door, she takes out a bottle of wine, unscrews the lid, and pours it into a glass she grabs from a cupboard. Leaning against the counter, she takes a deep sip and sighs as her shoulders relax a little.

Her father's words ring in my ears. If I have to, I'll pour all her wine down the sink. A glass or two is fine; her drunk and out of control is not.

"You may go and get changed," she says without looking at me.

Fuck me, the sense of entitled superiority she shows at times really grinds my gears. A flash of a fantasy passes through my mind. Me telling her to kneel, and her doing so, as she looks up at me with those big, crystal clear orbs.

She wouldn't be so fucking superior then, would she?

Jesus Christ, *no*. I push the thought far away. This is not the time or the place, and most definitely not the woman.

I can *guaran-fucking-tee* she doesn't play that way and that I'm not her type. If she saw my dick, she'd probably cry, and not with joy.

Not answering her imperious comment, I push away from the door and head upstairs, carrying her bag to place on her bed before I get changed out of this fucking prison of a suit.

The next few weeks are going to be a pain in my ass.

## Chapter 3

#### Carolina

I DRINK the whole glass of wine, then pour another one.

Fuck Samuel, or Reaper, or whatever he's called, for looking at me like I'm some lush. And that shit he said... I can go a few weeks without a drink. I went three months last year on a yoga retreat, so *fuck you, Samuel*.

Or is it Reaper? I heard damn clearly what Simon called him, but he cut it off as if there was more to follow. Reaper what? Reaper ... anything is not good. I don't even want to think how or why he got that nickname.

I feed Brutus with his evening tin of dog food. He eats more like a cat than a dog, dainty.

Grabbing some olives and a tube of Pringles, I head into the living room, and turn the television on. I flick through my planner of recorded shows until I find what I want, a period drama that is more steamy sex scenes than accurate Regency detail, but who cares.

Ten minutes later, and the stairs creak. Damn, my guest is on his way back down.

What should I do about food? Offer to cook for him? I rarely cook for myself. I live on nibbles and takeaways, with a smoothie in the morning. Many evenings, my meal consists of cold cuts, a little bread, olive oil to dip the bread in, and bits of tasty morsels such as olives, sun dried tomatoes, and capers.

"Do you mind if I use your kitchen?" Samuel's voice at the door has me turning my head.

I almost choke on my olive.

Holy shit.

Seriously, holy fucking shit.

He's standing in the doorway, one arm up on the lintel, and I cannot parse all that he is.

Firstly, he's massive, on a scale I didn't realize while he was in the dark fitted suit. I mean, I knew the moment I saw him he was big, but oh my God, he's *big*. His raised arm is a map of muscle and ink. So much ink. It crawls all over his skin—dark, dangerous, and compelling.

At his hip is a gun, in a holster, and my heart pounds at the sight. Jesus fuck, this guy isn't playing around. How is that even legal?

Leaning into the room farther, and stretching his arm, he distracts me from the gun with his arm muscles.

He is wearing a sage green t-shirt and jeans. Ink works its way up his neck. He frowns at me and drops his arm, taking two steps into the room and crossing his arms over his chest. The movement makes his pecks bulge and pulls his T-shirt tight, and oh, Lord. Under the cotton, I can make out the clear shape of piercings on his nipples.

I glance instinctively to his ears, but there are none there.

He cocks his head to one side. "Are you okay?"

"What? Erm, yes. I erm, what did you say; sorry?"

"Can I rustle up something to eat in the kitchen? I brought some food. I won't be eating yours."

"Samuel, you can eat my food; don't be silly." I'm offended. And I can't stop staring.

He smirks, one sided and devastating. "I looked in your fridge, and a man cannot survive on olives and Parma ham alone."

What even is that smile? Is that a secret weapon of mass destruction he's been hiding away until this very moment?

Nope. I cannot do this. I will not develop some sort of pathetic, learned-helplessness crush on my bodyguard. I will not.

He's an ass, I tell myself. So not my type. Bet he's never read a book in his life. All that ink, not my thing. I don't even have my ears pierced. We are incompatible as anything, and I'm just having some sort of hormonal moment. I must be due for my period.

"Well then, of course, help yourself... I mean, it's your food. Do as you wish. Use my pans."

Use. My. Pans? Okay, stop talking now.

"Would you like anything to eat?" he asks.

"I have something." I shake the Pringles can.

"Seriously?"

"What? I'm stressed. I don't eat when I'm stressed."

His face grows serious. "I'm making you some food. You don't want it, fine. Try, at least."

Then he leaves the room.

God, he's bossy.

Why are his nipples pierced but his ears are not? Is that normal? Maybe his ears normally are, and he took them out to seem more professional? I'm curious, and I know what they say about curiosity and cats, but I don't care. I grab my iPad, open Google and then I search Samuel... Shit, I don't know his surname.

Okay, his friend called him Reaper. I write Samuel Reaper into the search bar, not expecting to find anything. My eyes widen as a string of results pop up.

I click on the first one, a news report about a medal ceremony.

Samuel—Reaperman—Scott is a Navy SEAL and recipient of three medals for bravery. Oh, wow. Then I read on. He's a sniper. Crap. My eyes scan the words rapidly, not wanting him to walk in on me reading about him. It also says that unlike some other members of the SEALs, he's kept a low profile since leaving the service, and when asked if a book about his life would ever be forthcoming, he told the reporter to fuck off.

I smile a little at that. The man clearly hasn't had media training.

The only picture of him is one where he's wearing so much camo, with a cap pulled down low on his face, it doesn't tell me much.

Pressing the back arrow, I alter my search to Samuel Scott. Lots of people come up, but none of them are the man in question. I try Samuel Scott, SEAL. But it's the same articles, with the same basic information.

I try Samuel Reaperman Scott and the same.

Not about to be deterred, I try Samuel Scott, Montana, and *bingo*. A photograph pops up. It's accompanied by a link to a local newspaper article, so I click on it. The article is about how Samuel gave an undisclosed amount to an animal sanctuary to save it from closing, and the owners were saying how grateful they were.

He's a strange one. He kills human beings but saves an animal sanctuary. The picture with the article is much more recent, dated two years ago, and I stare at it. Holy crap, I'd be terrified of him if he'd appeared in my father's living room looking like this. He has a short mohawk and a beard. His ears aren't pierced, but his eyebrow is. The muscle-t he's wearing lets me see a lot of his arms. His shoulders are like boulders. He's wearing faded jeans with a slight rip at one knee and hefty shoes on his feet. On his left wrist is a hefty watch, and a closer look tells me it might be a Breitling. He has a silver chain hanging around his neck with dog tags on it.

His arms are ridiculously big, and he towers over the two men standing with him.

The guy looks like he's from a post-apocalyptic action movie.

Footsteps have me clicking the back arrow again, wiping my search clean and quickly going into my history and deleting the last hour.

He enters the room just as I finish, and I look up, my cheeks heating a little.

"It won't be long."

"What are you making?" I ask, curious as to what it is he's going to try to force me to eat.

"Chicken broth, Japanese style. It's easy on the stomach if you're feeling nauseous with anxiety." That's considerate of him. Crap, I feel bad now for snooping on him.

He settles in the chair opposite me and takes his phone from the pocket of his jeans.

I've never spent time around a man so full of muscle. It's almost like having another species in the room with me, something wild and untamed. I can't stop myself from sliding him glances every now and again.

Maybe it's a natural response. No matter how much of a feminist I might be, and I am, a man that size could overpower me in an instant. It makes sense to be hypervigilant around him.

Oh my God. What is that?

A pulse of arousal at the thought of him overpowering me has me deeply uncomfortable.

Did my feminism just leave my body at the first sight of a hot, ripped dude? Damn, this is why women never get equality. We set ourselves back by falling for the big idiot with the widest shoulders.

Not that Samuel is an idiot, but he might not be very nice either. In fact, he most likely isn't. I don't think snipers win awards for being soft and cuddly.

He'd protect you though, a voice says.

Shut up, we protect ourselves, my inner feminist replies.

For a while, we sit in a somewhat strained silence, then Samuel gets up and goes to the kitchen. After some clanking of pots and crockery, he calls me.

I sigh. My appetite is nonexistent, but it would be rude not to try some at least.

The scent that greets me is delicious. Ginger and something else, something fresh. He's served the broth on the breakfast bar which divides the wide-open space of my kitchen. I take a seat, perched on one of the stools.

"Dig in," he says.

I do as ordered and try a spoonful. Oh, wow, it's really good. "This is tasty," I say, swallowing and dabbing my mouth with the napkin he's also put out.

It freaks me out a little that he seems to know his way around my kitchen as if he's lived here for years, rather than arrived today.

He shrugs as he settles on the stool opposite me. "It's simple. Chicken, ginger, spring onion, mushrooms, Shaoxing wine, and the noodles. Normally, I'd add chili, but your stomach won't thank me for that."

His smile is brief as he digs into his own bowl. I manage to eat around half of it, which is more than I've had in a long time. I've been living on crisps, olives, chocolate, and wine since the whole death threat situation blew up.

"Is there anything you want to do while you're here?" I ask him.

His brows arch. "I'm here to work and keep you safe. This isn't a holiday."

"Surely though, there's something you want to see in London?"

I'd love it if he gave me an itinerary of things to do because I'm going stir crazy but can't seem to settle on anything I want to do myself. My mind can't seem to make the simplest decision right now. If he gives me a list, then we can do what he wants; simple.

"Negative."

"Negative because you're working? Or, negative as in there's nothing you want to do or see."

"Both," he says. He finishes his broth and wipes his mouth, before taking a sip of the water he has in the tall glass by him.

Jesus, he's hard work. Annoyed, I push away from the bar and go pour myself a glass of wine from the fridge.

"You drink too much." His low voice caresses my back as I take my first sip.

Oh, no, he didn't.

"Excuse me?" I whirl around to face him. "Last I checked, you work for me, and you don't get to tell me what to do."

He crosses his arms and fixes me with his intense stare. "I don't work for you; I work for your father. The contract between us is quite clear. To keep you safe."

"Well, the wine isn't going to kill me."

He huffs out a dark chuckle. "The rate you're going at with it, I wouldn't be too sure."

Oh, God, he's an asshole. "It's my third glass, Mr. Perfect. It's hardly my fifth double vodka."

"You're not eating. You're probably not sleeping. You had vodka at your parents too. I expect you drink because it calms you down. But the thing is, it only causes rebound anxiety as it starts to wear off. The next day you feel even more jittery."

I hate that he's right. I've been here before, in the vicious circle of too much wine the night before and the morning jitters afterward. Instead of acknowledging it, I sneer at him. "Well, genius, I need something to take the edge off, so unless you have some better suggestions?"

I knock back half the glass in defiance, but as I do, the reality of what I've said hits me. Crap, that sounds like a come-on.

He stills and watches me as if considering me like a bug under a microscope.

Mortified, I try to cover it up.

"Perhaps you'd prefer if I did drugs? Maybe we ought to go out, and I'll get some coke."

"Not happening."

I was being sarcastic, but his heavy handedness is like a red rag to a bull. "Okay, I'll call my dealer and have him come here."

I don't have a dealer, but he's pissed me off. Taking out my phone, I pretend to make a call, but the next moment it's taken from me, and he calmly turns it off and pockets it.

"What the fuck?" My voice has raised now to something unattractive like a shriek. "Give me my phone back, asshole." Brutus whines in his basket and glances between us both, wary.

"No."

He's so calm it infuriates me.

I jump off the stool and round the breakfast bar, where I reach for his pocket, trying to get my

phone. He puts one hand out, on my right shoulder, and holds me back with ease.

The stress, hurt at my ex-boyfriend, the wine, it all coalesces to create a deadly cocktail of unadulterated *rage*.

The rage is a cleansing fire, releasing adrenaline that feels good, instead of the kind of horrible, sickly rush I get with anxiety.

Before I can think, before I can temper myself, I raise my other hand and slap him across his arrogant face.

The hand on my shoulder tightens instantly, and he stands, towering over me.

For a moment we're frozen in time, looking at one another.

The world tips, and I let out a gasped squeal as I'm thrown like a sack of coal over his shoulder.

My head hangs down his back, and the blood rushes to it, my temples pounding with humiliation. The blood whooshes in and out of my ears as I try to lift my head. My hands rain down on his back, not like in the movies where the heroine beats uselessly at the man with her tiny fists; I really go for it.

Slapping him was idiotic, but him hauling me up the stairs like I'm a child is beyond what I'm willing to accept. Tomorrow, I'm speaking to Daddy, and he's sacked.

"Quit it," he orders.

"Fuck you," I scream as I add my legs into the mix.

Whack.

The sound rings out, and I freeze as burning pain shoots across my ass cheeks.

Holy fuck, did he just spank me?

I'm not moving anymore as I'm too shocked to process what just occurred.

"That's better," he says. His voice is steady as he kicks open my bedroom door.

He places me on the bed, and I stare up at him, chest heaving.

"Are you done?" he asks.

Am I done? Oh, you fucking asshole, I think. I haven't even begun.

# Chapter 4

#### Samuel

"Am I DONE?" she says incredulously when she finally gets her breath back enough to speak. "Tomorrow morning, you're fired."

I cock my head as I watch her. Her cheeks are red, her breath is coming in ragged inhales, and she's knelt on her bed, watching me warily. The woman is fuming, but she's also wary. Wise choice. Anymore of her shit, and I'm going to be tempted to tie her to that fucking bed.

"Fine."

"What?" She shakes her head. "No, I don't work for you, I work for your father, crap?"

I shrug. "You want to get your father to fire me, go ahead." I take two steps into the room. To her credit she doesn't flinch or move back on the bed. "I can guarantee you, though, no one else he can hire will protect you as well as me."

"If you think you can ... can ... spank me, *like a child*, and keep your job, you've got another thing coming."

"If you don't want to be treated like a child, stop behaving like one." I think this is a reasonable response, but it seems I'm wrong because she screams and launches a pillow at me.

I dodge it easily but watch her unravel, and something unexpected occurs. It tugs on a place I thought long dead. The thing is, I've watched this woman on TV. Short clips for sure, but she is normally a person in control of herself and her surroundings. Right now, she's right out there on the ledge, emotionally.

She needs to let off steam, or she'll crack. Wine and coke are not the optimal release here. I know what is, but I can't go there. Not crossing that line. Even though as she is right now—her hair messy, her eyes wide, her cheeks flushed—she's eminently fuckable.

I glance at the pillow on the floor. Then with a grin, I pick it up and brandish it.

"What are you doing?" she asks, voice shaky.

"Pick up your other pillow and prepare to defend yourself."

"What?"

"Pillow fight," I say.

"Are you fucking insane?" she spits.

"No, but you're on the edge of it. Trust me, okay?" I jerk my head at her pillow. "Pick it up."

She does so, reticently.

"Now, whoever or whatever it is that has you so strung out, imagine I'm it. Come at me."

She shuffles to the bottom of the bed and gives a half-hearted swing of the pillow.

I laugh. "Oh, come on. I felt that slap; you're capable of a lot more fire than this. Go for it." I lower my voice. "Let it out. No judgment. Go for it."

She surprises me when she screams again and then leaps off the bed and runs at me, swinging the pillow around her like a club.

I raise my own and parry her hits, but she keeps coming. I let her get some in, knowing she needs to get it out. Then I whack her on the back, and she responds with an ow, but her face is already lighter.

She retreats as I get in three, four blows, and then she gets me good on the side of the head. I pretend to stagger back, and she comes at me, hitting me repeatedly as I retreat.

"Do you surrender?" she demands.

"Never," I say.

She hits me again and again, getting me in the side. She's giggling now as she does so, and her face is so much brighter.

I'm so distracted by how different she looks, I put my guard down for real, and she knocks the pillow out of my hand with a triumphant whoop.

"I won," she shouts as she jumps up and down.

"I demand a rematch tomorrow, for my honor."

Her laughter slows, but her entire body language has changed. She's relaxed now, not tense and uptight.

"I'll kick your arse again," she says.

I love the way she says arse, not ass.

We are both still laughing on and off as we place the pillows on her bed.

She flops down on the duvet and stares at the ceiling. "Sorry I slapped you; it's been a shitty few weeks."

"That's okay."

"Can I have my phone back?" she asks.

My silence stretches into the room, deflating the fun atmosphere.

She sits up and blows a hair from her eye. "I really don't have a cocaine dealer. I don't do drugs. At all. Be more than my career is worth. I feel naked without my phone."

For some reason her saying that word has my gaze raking down her body as if of its own accord.

Oh no, this isn't happening. I'm not going to let myself be attracted to the woman I'm guarding.

I take her phone out of my pocket and pass it to her.

"Listen, try to get some rest. You're safe now. I'm going to check the alarms, make sure the doors and windows are locked. The windows to your room are alarmed, and the door will be too once I've activated it."

"It makes me feel trapped," she says as her face falls, the smile fading to nothing.

Not liking the sadness on her face, I hand her my card. "Put my number in your phone. Anytime you want to leave this room, call me, and I will deactivate the alarm. I don't care if you call me ten times a night, if that's what you need to feel free. The alarm is important, though."

"How can anyone get in if the downstairs is alarmed?"

"The entire house isn't a fortress, and even though it is as secure as we can make it, there are windows and other ways people could get in if really determined. This way, they can't get into *your room* without me knowing."

"You said that I had to have my door open, though, so how does it work?"

"Laser, but it's not like in the movies. There's no red beam, it's invisible, but if someone crosses the threshold of your door, or tries to get in your window, it will activate. As well as the alarm, it activates a beam of light which will blind them long enough to ensure I can get to you before they can orientate themselves to the room, or do anything to harm you."

She chews on her bottom lip. "I hope so. I know you're Special Forces, and that means you're highly skilled, but you will be sleeping when it goes off."

I go to her, and not thinking it through, I tip her chin up with my thumb. Her lips part, and her pupils widen. I instantly regret my action because it is far too familiar and intimate. Clearing my throat, I let go and step back.

"I will be alert in an instant. I once slept in a tree for three nights. In my role, you learn to doze rather than deep sleep. Your body is constantly alert to threats when you're on a mission. You never fully relax."

Her features soften, and she lets out a soft rush of breath. "That sounds exhausting, Samuel."

"It is, but you get used to it." I don't add that it's not half as exhausting as the sleepless nights after completing a mission when you can't get the adrenaline down even though you're home and safe. Those nights are the worst. It's why I could so easily recognize how on edge Carolina is.

"Thanks. For the pillow fight." She smiles at me. "I'm going to make a hot chocolate before you turn the alarms on and while you check downstairs. Do you want one?"

"That would be great, thanks."

As she makes the hot chocolate, I check the house, and then I slide open the patio doors to check on the dogs. I make sure they have water. They have kennels out here in the garden. They come over to me, tails wagging as if they're ordinary pets. At one word, they'll rip an intruder to shreds.

Tomorrow, I'll introduce Carolina to them.

"Brutus needs his nighttime pee."

I turn around at her voice to see her walking toward me, Brutus by her side. "Oh fuck." She stops short and stares at the dogs, who stare at her, their wagging tails suddenly standing tall behind them.

I give them the command in German for *friend*. Meaning they are to let her pass at all times. Their body language relaxes, then I pick Brutus up and carry him to them. I let each of the dogs sniff him and get to know him.

"Don't put him down. They might hurt him," Carolina says, her voice shaky.

"They're highly trained, and they won't harm him. But if you feel better, we can let him do his business on the front lawn."

"Yeah. They're big."

I hand Brutus to her and bend down. "Good girls," I tell them as I give them both a head pat.

Closing the doors, I lock up, and activate the alarm. These patio doors are the most vulnerable entry point into the house and now have an alarm fitted to alert me if anyone opens them.

I shadow Carolina as she lets the thing she calls a dog out, and then I lock up once more and check the alarm. She darts into the kitchen as we pass by and hands me a steaming mug. I take the hot chocolate and follow her up the stairs.

Brutus manages to defy all laws of physics as his tiny legs propel him onto Carolina's high king bed.

"Does he wander around the house at night?" I'm sensing a flaw in my plans. The thing could wake me up repeatedly.

She smiles at him and ruffles his ears. "No, he sleeps with his mummy all night; don't you, baby boy?"

The dog ignores her, but she answers him as if he replied.

"Yes, yes you do. You're the bestest good boy."

"What is he?" I ask her.

- "He's a Pomchi."
- "A what?"
- "A cross between a Pomeranian and a Chihuahua."
- "Okay, well, goodnight. Call me if you need anything."
- "I will. I'll try to sleep even though I feel like I'm in a prison."

God, the dramatics. I suppress my eye roll but *come on*. I've been in real captivity, and it didn't involve a fucking king-sized bed and a spoiled pooch.

I leave her and head to my room. It has an attached bath, and I strip down. The door is ajar, but it isn't as if I won't get a warning if Carolina leaves her room. The alarm will go off.

Naked, I grab a couple of towels from my open bag on the side and head into the shower. The water flow is hot and hard, just how I like it. It eases my aching muscles. I have another ache, though, one I most certainly wasn't expecting.

Carolina and the pillow fight have me on edge. She's not my type, but damn there's something sexy about her. I like her fire, even though I also want to shove my cock down her throat to shut her up.

Damn, that doesn't help ease the ache any.

I glance down at my hard dick and pour some shower gel into my palm. Might as well give nature a helping hand.

The apadravya piercing is sensitive when my fingers glance over it, but it gives a female partner more pleasure than me when I get the angle just right. Then there are the three small round balls down either side of my thick shaft. Some women love my piercings; others get an eyeful of the thick ring in my head and the silver balls of my frenulum piercing and turn pale. Never had one complain after she's taken it for a ride, though. Although it's been a long time. Maybe that's why I'm horny over some trustfund brat.

She is bratty too. A little. And I do like to tame them when they get that way. I close my eyes and run my soaped hand over my length. I'm big, and that's not being big headed, but it's a fact of life. Another reason most women love it, but some get freaked out. I've been turned down before when I've unzipped and let them get an eyeful. One woman told me she had to make the doctor use the smallest device for her smear, so no way was she letting me near her. Shame. Would have been fun trying.

I doubt miss-heiress next door is a virgin, but I wonder if she's ever played dirty and rough. Maybe. She's a bit Jekyll and Hyde. Prim and proper in many ways, but likes to drink too much, and has a dirty mouth on her too.

God, I'd like to strip that ancestral polish from her bones and reduce her to a dirty, needy, wanton mess.

A cornucopia of filthy images run through my mind, most of them starring the woman I'm here to protect. When a momentary pang of guilt slithers in, I push it away, telling myself what stays in my mind does no harm.

When a fantasy of her on her knees, swirling her tongue around the thick ring through the head of my cock hits me, my orgasm does too. I come with a silent moan, hitting the tiles with a thick spray of cum, followed by three more spurts. My hips fuck into my fist as I ride it out.

As the waves of pleasure slowly leave me, I wash off any remaining cum and the shower gel, and then make quick work of cleaning myself. I hesitate when I think I might have heard something, but there's nothing except the sound of the water. I finish and turn it off.

I'm out of the shower and halfway dry when the alarm pierces the air.

### Fuck.

Racing into the room, I grab the sweatpants off the bed and have one leg halfway in, when the door to my bedroom bursts wide open and Carolina runs in.

# Chapter 5

### Carolina

"I'M SORRY. False alarm. Brutus heard something, started barking, and ran out of the room. He never does that. I can't believe he picked tonight after I said...."

Holy. Shit.

My brain suddenly catches up all at once with the visuals my eyes are relaying.

Holy. Double. Fucking. Shit.

Samuel is naked. Or, rather, he's mostly naked. One leg is half covered in sweats, the other leg, and the entire rest of his body, is nude.

Gloriously, insanely nude.

Boy, there's a lot to take in. The muscles. The tan skin. The ink. The muscles. The pierced nipples. The eight pack. *The muscles*.

My greedily gaze ricochets around the buffet of masculinity in front of me, finally alighting on the one thing I shouldn't be looking at.

Dear God, you could injure yourself on that thing.

He's massive. Not just long, although he's certainly that, but he's thick. And pierced. So many piercings. I don't know whether to salivate or cry.

His thighs are like fucking tree trunks, and his cock is like a branch.

Eyes on his face, I order myself, as my gaze reluctantly leaves the impressive member to track back to his face.

Then my mouth comes back online. "Shit. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I, erm. I'm turning around. Not looking. Eyes elsewhere. Feel free to continue getting dressed."

I'm shouting over the sound of the alarm. I can't hear if he's getting dressed or not, but a moment later, he appears in front of my field of vision wearing the sweats. No T-shirt or anything, just the light cotton sweatpants.

"Where's the fucking dog," he growls.

"Jesus, I don't know. Don't shout at me."

"I'm shouting because of the damn alarm." He pushes past me, annoyance bleeding from every pore, and jogs the few steps to my door.

He presses the alarm pad and turns it off.

"I thought you said your bestest boy slept with his mummy?"

"Are you sure you don't have British heritage?" I ask.

He does a double take and frowns. "What?"

"It's just your sarcasm game is strong."

He ignores me and shouts Brutus.

"He won't come if you're yelling like that. You'll scare him."

"Yeah, well, excuse me if I don't think you're that in tune with your dog, lady. You said he never left your side at night."

"He doesn't normally but those hell hounds you have parked on my rear lawn barked, and it freaked him out. He barked too and then ran out of the room."

His demeanor changes instantly. He goes from annoyed to calm and deadly alert in zero-to-sixty. It's intriguing to see. His face bleeds everything that was there before, and a still, predatory focus takes hold.

Finger to his lips, he creeps into his room and comes out a moment later holding the gun. I gasp, and he shakes his head then indicates for me to stay where I am. He won't be getting any arguments.

My heart is pounding so hard I feel faint. We don't use guns here in England. It's not something we are used to or we see around. A huge, half-dressed Navy SEAL holding one in my presence is a head fuck.

He takes the stairs silently, and then all I can do is wait. After what seems like hours, he climbs up the stairs with Brutus in his arms.

"What was it?" I ask.

He rolls his eyes. "A badger. At least I think it was, but it was bigger than our badgers and with a black and white face."

"Yep, that's a badger alright."

Then I slap my hand over my mouth before saying, "Is it still there? On the lawn? The dogs will kill it."

"No, long gone."

"Oh, phew. Wait, how do you know what it was then?"

He holds his phone up. "Security feed."

"Wait, from what? I don't have cameras."

"You do now."

I stare at him in disbelief. "How long did you take to turn my home into Fort Knox?"

"A few hours is all it took."

"Are there cameras *inside*?"

"No, but there are cameras all around the outside of the house."

I hold my arms out for Brutus. "Come here, baby. Did you get a scare?"

Samuel narrows his eyes at me but says nothing.

"If those guard dogs bark every time some wildlife comes onto the lawn, we're going to be in for a tiring time of it. We get tons of badgers and foxes around here."

"It's the middle of the capital city," he says.

"Yes, urban wildlife is a big thing in London. Are they going to go mad every time some fox, rat, or badger wanders onto the lawn? The neighbors won't like it."

His right brow arches in a manner that tells me he's not impressed with what I'm saying. "Your lawn is the size of a field. I don't think your neighbors will hear either, as far away as the next millionaire's mansion is."

"It's actually very close. Also, this isn't a millionaire's mansion." I bristle at his words.

"Oh, come on. I've seen the property prices around here."

"I paid for this with my own hard work. Not a penny of Daddy's money went into it."

He holds his hand up and chuckles as I lower my face into Brutus' fur and take a deep inhale of his familiar scent, soothing myself.

"I never said a word about your father. I'm simply observing that the houses in this area are large and have a lot of space around them."

I narrow my eyes. "And I bet you aren't exactly poverty stricken. I expect my daddy is paying you a hell of a lot of money to guard me. I do believe many of your kind take contract work after leaving the Special Forces, so don't lecture me."

I turn smartly on my heel and stomp into the bedroom.

He is right behind me. I can feel his heat, but I don't pause or turn around. Instead, I gently place Brutus on the bed and studiously ignore the six-foot-three wall of seething anger at my back.

Why does he rub me up the wrong way so easily?

He reminds me in some ways of a boy I met when I was sixteen. He was eighteen and most definitely from the wrong side of the tracks. He joined the private school I went to for the last two months of his final upper year before he went to university. His uncle paid for the place in a desperate bid to force the boy, Rob, to knuckle down and get through his exams. It worked, but Rob was like a cluster bomb going off in our staid school.

All the boys wanted to be his friend, and all the girls wanted to be his girlfriend. Me included. Full of false bravado and egged on by so-called friends, I'd asked him out and he agreed, to my shock. We said we'd meet outside McDonalds at two on Saturday, but he didn't arrive. I waited for an entire hour and wished I hadn't when he finally turned up with two girls and a group of boys from his class. He frowned at me as I asked him what he was doing, and he said, airily, "Oh, I texted you. I can't make it."

Then he went inside, arm slung casually over one of the girls, as the group laughed at me. I ran all the way home and spent the entire weekend crying and listening to sad songs.

Rob was a bad boy to the core. He had a tattoo when no one else in school did. He smoked, cigarettes and weed. He drank. He had sex with probably half the girls in his class. Then he left as suddenly as he'd arrived. I never got over that sense of shame and the way every time his gaze landed on me, there'd be this weird mix of sneering and pity. As if he didn't quite know whether to feel bad for what he did, or revel in it.

It put me off those kinds of boys for life. Now the grown-up version is in my space, and the fact he's built like a tank, with a body you'd have to be dead not to be impressed by doesn't help me remain calm.

Part of me wants to hate him, and part of me wants to get his attention, have him desire me. Not that a man who looks like him would ever go for a woman like me. I bet his type is blonde, busty, and loud. Funny in the way I'm not. The soul of the party.

Still ignoring him, I climb into bed and pull the duvet up and then curl on my side, back to him. "You can turn the alarm on. I think Brutus has learned his lesson."

I expect him to say something, but he doesn't. After a moment, his footsteps retreat and the beep of the alarm being turned on rings out in the silence of the room.

I hate this. I feel trapped and angry with the man guarding me, but terrified of the men threatening me, so I put on an audiobook and try to lose myself in the story, but my eyes grow heavy and my mind drifts away.

The man between my legs smiles up at me. It's my ex, Patrick, and I try to move away from his tongue as he licks me because I hate him, and he doesn't get to do this now. Still, he's talented and I'm turned on even as I try to move away. His hands hold my hips, though, and they are so very strong. Surprisingly so. Then he grins at me, and his face changes from Patrick's to Samuels. Slender shoulders are replaced by broad, inked muscle and dark smooth hair by messy, short hair.

He moves up my body, his muscles bunching as he pushes himself toward me, and then his massive cock is between my legs, right where I want it. I've never had a guy who is pierced before, and I'm scared it might hurt. I want to tell him to take it easy, but when I open my mouth, I can't speak. No sounds come out.

Finally, I manage to force out a weak and quiet, "No."

He grins at me, and his thick head breaches me. Damn, it hurts.

"No," I say again.

He continues pushing in, and I'm scared now. Why won't he stop? Why isn't he listening to me?

"My kind don't take orders from people like you." His words are dark, malevolent, and as he pushes into me, horns grow out of his head, twisting and turning as they reach for the ceiling, blocking out the light as the room grows dark.

I jerk awake with a gasp, sitting up and wiping hair back from my face. My hand is clammy where my hair has stuck to my head from perspiration. Dear God, what the hell kind of nightmare was that? I'm scared but also, and this is disturbing, *horny*.

The dream image recedes slowly, and all I can see when I close my eyes is Samuel's massive, and I am convinced on reflection, half-hard penis.

Was he turned on and sporting a semi before the alarm went off, or had he just taken care of himself in the shower? The idea has my clit pulsing in a way that is enough to make me moan.

What is wrong with me? I'm like a bitch in heat. If the anxiety wasn't bad enough, now I must deal with sexual frustration too? Ugh.

Poor me, I can't even use my vibrator because he will hear.

My phone beeps, and I pick it up to read the message from Jade, my friend.

Can you meet me tomorrow? I have something I need to talk to you about before I explode. It's important, but I get it if you're busy. I know you've been super snowed recently.

Guilt hits me. I haven't explained to anyone outside of my family what is going on, not even Jade. I wasn't due to have my show air until tomorrow, and at that point, they're going to realize something is up. Until now, my sabbatical status is known only to my colleagues, and other than Lucy, the head of programming, no one knows why. Personal problems is all they've been told.

I pause and think for a few minutes. I can meet her, but I'll have a man with the nickname of *Reaperman* with me. A man who looks like he fell off the set of the next Mad Max movie. Turning up with Samuel on my tail, at the same time my sabbatical becomes noticeable, is too much. Tongues won't wag; they'll salivate. We need somewhere off the beaten track.

Okay, but I can't do any of the usual haunts. You'll understand when we meet. Is there somewhere out of the way we can go? A spit and sawdust type of place you know about?

Jade is into rock music and spends a lot of time watching Indie bands in out of the way bars. Surely, she'll know somewhere.

Her reply is fast.

Yeah, The Grindhouse on Lexway Road is somewhere we won't bump into any of your usual crowd. Meet me there at eight?

I reply, *Deal.* x

Jade is probably the only true friend I have. We are chalk and cheese in lots of ways, but she is a sweetheart, and I love her deeply. She's the working-class rough to my cultured smooth, yet she has more money than me these days since her design business went viral. She's a graphic artist who has created some of the coolest album and twelve-inch sleeves around. People who still like their music old school, on a turntable, talk about her in the same hushed tones they do the artists in the bands.



# Chapter 6

#### Samuel

THE DAY PASSED UNEVENTFULLY. Now it's early evening, and I'm getting ready to take Carolina out. I don't like the idea of us going out because it's risky, but I promised her I would let her do her thing, and that I'd keep her safe, so I push my worries to the backburner and prepare myself for the evening.

"Is this place smart?" I ask her.

"Nah, it's a dive apparently."

She couldn't have surprised me more. I don't envisage her as a dive sort of a woman.

It also presents me with an issue because it's not cold, so a jacket that's not part of a suit may look odd. I need something to cover my holster, though. In the end, I decide on an oversized checkered shirt, buttoned over a t-shirt. The gun is at my hip in the holster, the shirt hangs below it, and the check pattern and its looseness disguise the shape of my weapon.

I bought a few oversized shirts for just this reason. It wasn't easy finding something big on a guy built like me, and I had to go to a specialist store for tall, husky men, and get a triple XL.

A spray of cologne and I'm ready to go. One last check in the mirror to ensure my gun isn't showing, and I go knock on Carolina's door, which is closed. It's daytime, so her alarm isn't set.

"One moment," she calls out.

Two minutes later, she opens her door, and I almost do a double take. Her hair is curlier than usual and swept to one side, falling in tumbles over her left side. She's wearing more make up than I've seen her wear before in any of the footage or photographs. Her eyes are rimmed in a brown shade, and they stand out as a striking blue against that. Her lips are a glossy, shimmery pink, and she smells of rose and something deeper, a hint of pepper maybe.

"Ready. I need to grab Brutus."

"You're bringing him?"

"Er, yes. I take him everywhere with me. He hates being left alone."

"Do you take him to work?"

She laughs. "Absolutely. They love him there. They'd kill me if I didn't bring him."

"They allow dogs in bars?"

"I think it's more like a pub, and yes, lots of places do. Not as many as continental Europe, sadly. They're much more dog friendly over the channel, but it is becoming increasingly common here."

"Don't your men friends mind Brutus in bed with them?" I ask suddenly. Why the fuck did I ask that? Also, where did my mind supply that weird turn of phrase from? I want to take it back, but it's out there now.

"Men friends?" She purses her mouth. "Have we gone back in time? My lovers, do you mean?"

The image of her with a string of men visiting her bed has me both suddenly turned on and also

pissed. A strange possessiveness rises in me, one I'm not used to feeling.

"I'm ignoring that question," she says with a shake of her head.

She moves past me and trots down the stairs, and I follow her, still pissed at myself for asking something so idiotic. When she hits the hallway, she calls for her dog, who comes waddling out of the kitchen on his tiny legs. The thing reminds me of some exotic creature from a Sci-Fi franchise instead of a pet.

"Okay, Brutus, baby. Let's go see Jade. You love Aunty Jade, don't you?"

She bends down and clips the dog's lead on, and I get a bird's eye view of her ass. She's toned, and the dark, tight jeans she's wearing show that off to perfection. Her top is a dark t-shirt with a pair of female lips in red standing out starkly against the black cotton. Her boots are combat style, and on her wrist is a man's watch. Other than a pair of gold earrings that's the only jewelry she's wearing. Closer inspection reveals the watch to be an Omega Seamaster.

She looks hot, truth be told. I ignore this fact and grab her car keys and open the door. Simon is waiting for us, leaning against her car. He came as soon as I told him we'd be needing him this evening. Although officially, he's a driver; if shit kicks off while we're out, it's reassuring to know he will be nearby in the car and can help.

"Evening m'lady," he says with a tip of an imaginary hat.

"I'm not a lady," she says, with a smile.

"But your father is a Lord," I reply.

She climbs into the car, scoots over and Brutus jumps on her knee, the same as the previous time. I follow and sit by her.

"My father is actually a Baron, but often Barons and other peers are called Lord for simplicity's sake. It means, if we were being official, I could be called The Honorable, but I hate all that and have never used it."

"So your father is a Baron who became a Lord?" Color me confused.

"No. His Baron title is hereditary, which means it gets passed down. Barons can also be called Lord X for example and rarely use the title, Baron. There are also live peers, and they are given their title by the Queen after nomination by the Prime Minister."

"It all sounds very complicated," I say. "Kind of interesting."

"There's a lot of crap talked about it. This nation is built on hereditary hierarchy, and I for one don't agree with it."

"You don't?" I ask, surprised. "Even though you're high on the list and have done well out of it?"

"Exactly. I want to do well due to my merits and my hard work; not because my great-great-great grandfather was given some land by an ancient monarch."

We end up deep in conversation about the British class system, which despite being a member of its upper echelons Carolina claims to despise.

"It's all based on so much snobbery. You signed a non-disclosure form, right?" she asks me suddenly.

"Yes, I did. Simon did too."

"Okay, well, here's what I truly think about Lordships and the like. It's out of date, sexist, and racist. Do you know, when Mummy married Daddy, some old uncle in the family said, out loud, *Oh, thank God, she's white*, when Mummy walked into the first family gathering."

"Fuck me, really?" Simon pipes up from the front.

"Yes. Really. She's French Brazilian, but no one knew that until she was introduced by Daddy who had already married her before coming home. Apparently, the entire family were aghast at the

idea of a Brazilian member. Once they found out she had light hair and blue eyes they were happy. They are so disgusting."

"They're still your family," I say to her. "It must be difficult seeing them when they are so disrespectful."

"I never see them. I love Mummy and Daddy, tolerate my brother, and adore my grammy on Mummy's side. The rest of them are awful. Honestly, they really are. I can't bear them. Christmas is the only time I see them. I have one uncle who every year, when the family photograph is taken, shuffles around until he's directly behind me and then puts his hand firmly on my bottom."

She shakes her head. "They're relics, but they don't know it yet."

"We're here," Simon says just as I'm about to answer Carolina.

He peers out of the window to read the parking sign by the side of the road.

"Okay, I can park here because it is after eight. You guys go on in, and I'll be waiting."

He scoots down in his seat and turns the radio on.

I pat his shoulder in thanks and get out of the car, taking Brutus in one hand and cradling him in my arm. I offer the other hand to Carolina and help her out of the car.

We enter the pub, and the smell of ale and something else greets us. Is that smoke?

Carolina sniffs.

"Wow, this place is edgy. You can't smoke legally inside pubs in England now." She smiles at me.

I spy the guy with the cigarette. He's standing by the back door and blowing the smoke out, but the breeze is blowing it right back in.

"Babe." A woman to the right of us shouts and holds her arm up in a wave.

I glance at her and am immediately struck by how she is much more my usual type, and yet ... nothing. She stands and runs up to us, hugging Carolina. Then she falters, takes me in, and stares before stepping back.

"Erm, so are you okay?" she asks Carolina before adding loudly enough for me to hear, "Is he with you?"

"This is Samuel," Carolina says. "He's my bodyguard."

"Your what? Why? Have the TV company shelled out for protection? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. There was a threat, mostly against Daddy. No one is really taking it seriously, but it was felt some protection would be the right thing to do."

"Shit the bed. Well, hi, Samuel."

She flashes me a grin and then flicks her gaze up and down my body as her grin widens.

This woman is hot. This woman is clearly fun and a lot less work and maintenance I'd imagine than Carolina, but for some reason she doesn't interest me half as much.

It's the contrasts within Carolina that I like. The sharp edges where her uptight, upper-class ways meet an earthier, sexier self.

"I'll take the table behind you," I tell Carolina. "Let you ladies talk."

"Okay, thank you."

She flashes me a smile, and her friend shouts over to the barman.

"Hey, Joe, can we have two beers please?" She glances at me. "Would you like a drink?"

"Coke for me," I say.

When the drinks are brought over, I gesture for the barman to come to me first, and I pay him. I might be guarding her, but I was taught from a young age that a lady doesn't buy her own drinks.

"Ah, thank you!" Jade holds her drink up in a salute at me when she receives it.

I nod and hold my drink up in return, then I settle back in my seat and watch.

# Chapter 7

#### Carolina

As soon as we have our beers, Jade leans in and I wait to hear what it is she needs to tell me so urgently. Instead, she glances at Samuel and grins from ear to ear.

"Wow, Carrie. You got yourself one hot sex on a stick, hunk of meat, protection there. Jesus."

"I suppose so if you like them tattooed, pierced, and arrogant, which I don't."

"Pierced?" Her eyes widen, and she glances back at Samuel. "Where is he pierced? And, more to the point, how do you know?"

I take a swig of my beer, enjoying the cool bubbles as they slip down my throat. "I might have seen him naked," I say with a smile.

"As in, completely?"

"I think that's about the only way to be naked, isn't it?" We both giggle a little. "Look, you said you had something serious to tell me, and I don't want to get derailed talking about my bodyguard."

"Oh, no you don't. There's plenty of time for me to tell my news. Not that it's news as such; it's more that I want your advice. I'm a bit worried about something to be honest. But first, because I've had a bad week, let me talk about this. It's fun. So where is he pierced?"

I really shouldn't tell her this. It's a betrayal of trust in a way. Not that Samuel intended for me to see him naked, but me telling all and sundry about his piercings is a douche move.

"Come on, Carrie, it's me. Besties for life. You know I won't tell anyone. You've told me all sorts of things that I've kept to myself. Really bad things, like the time you put laxative in the drink of your fellow presenter because he was such a sexist bastard. If I would never talk about that, I'm hardly going to talk about your bodyguard's piercings, am I? You can trust me."

I take another drink and sigh as I put the bottle down. "His nipples. And his... You know."

She sucks in a breath. "So, you've seen the goods? He looks like a big boy. Is everything big all over?" She flashes me a cheeky grin.

"Let's just say he's perfectly in proportion."

"He is exactly my type." She licks her lips.

And I realize belatedly that the reason I didn't want to tell her about his intimate details is because I feared deep down that she would find him attractive.

I bet she's just his type too.

We've never clashed over men before because we have completely different tastes. I tend to date bankers, literary types, lawyers, and once a doctor. She dates bikers, lead singers in bands, and the kind of writers who live on welfare because their poetry is so unusual as to be unmarketable.

If she sees a guy with tattoos, piercings, and a grunge kind of look, she's head over heels in two minutes. Whereas normally, I prefer them clean cut and in a suit, or at the very least, smart casual.

We've often laughed at how different our tastes are.

"I'm just going to the ladies," she says to me with a wink. Then she leans in close and whispers in my ear, "I might stop by his table to say a proper hello."

I immediately bristle at the thought but don't say anything because in doing so I'm admitting not only to her, but to myself, that I'm deeply attracted to my bodyguard. That's just messed up.

It has to be some sort of hero worship situation I have going on. I'm sure the moment the threat has passed, and he's nothing more than an ex-bodyguard to me, I will probably look at him in an entirely different way. Yes, that's what I tell myself. This is nothing more than a little bit of hero worship, and it will pass soon. Happy with my understanding of my own psyche, I take a sip of drink and sit back in my seat without a care in the world as Jade sashays across the floor to where Samuel sits.

Her hips are curvier than mine, and she has a deeply sexy way about her that I could never muster in a million years. She hits his table with a grin and leans over him, saying something. Samuel's smile in response is easy, laid back, and hot as hell. It's the kind of smile he hasn't given me so far, and I find myself bristling with jealousy.

Damn it, what is she saying to him?

He laughs, and his teeth are gorgeous. I mean, can teeth be gorgeous? If they can, his surely are. They're even and his smile is wide, and he owns sexy lines either side of his mouth. The kind of lines that women pay good money to try to get rid of, but in this unfair world we live in, they are like catnip on men.

They chat for a few minutes, and my jealousy starts to burn. I would never fall out with Jade over a man, but this feeling is uncomfortable. If she makes a move on him and he reciprocates, my life is going to be horrible for the next few weeks. Of course, I'm not stupid enough to think I love the guy or anything like that. The idea, however, of listening to him and my best friend get down to it at night while I lie alone in my bed, getting over being cheated on, is not something I look forward to.

He leans back in his chair and lifts his arms behind his head, crossing his hands and clasping them, which makes his muscles appear more prominent. Is he doing it on purpose? Does the guy know the sort of effect his body has on women? I can't imagine that he doesn't. It's the kind of body that a lot of male movie stars would spend months perfecting before they had a role in some superhero franchise.

Jade says something else, and he nods to her as she gives him another grin and then struts off toward the ladies' restroom. He watches her go, and that pang of jealousy grows ever sharper in my stomach. His eyes slowly raise to meet mine. His lips quirk into a smile, and he raises his glass and tips it at me.

I look away and glance down at the table top as if the graffiti scratched into it is the most interesting novel I've ever read.

*Katie woz ere* and *Davy sucks cocks* is suddenly so fascinating to me I can't look away. I can feel his gaze still on me, though, heating my skin. It's as if, despite only knowing him mere hours, I'm somehow attuned to him.

Jade returns from her trip to the bathroom, and as she passes Samuel, her fingers trail over his shoulder and down his arm. I love that girl like my own blood, but suddenly I want to rip her fingers clean off her hand. God, I need to get a grip. I'm not usually this possessive, which is probably why I keep getting cheated on. The idea of checking someone's phone or questioning them as to where they've been, isn't something that normally crosses my mind.

My life is busy, hectic, and interesting. It means I'm often up in my own head, as I think about things like facts and figures, future plans, and all kinds of interesting information about art. I don't

have time to sit and dwell as to where my boyfriend might be at any given moment. My mother has said to me a few times that I drift through life as if in a world of my own. I suppose in many ways I do. That world is a world full of art, beauty, and all the things I'm fascinated with. Then again, maybe it would be different if I fell head over heels in love.

Is it sad to be past my mid-twenties and have never been remotely in love? I've had plenty of boyfriends, and a lot of guys that I *really* liked, but I've never, in truth, lost my heart. Not in that can't-think-about-anything-else-but-him way my friends have. The very fact that I'm upset and angry at that cheating bastard doing it to me again, but I'm hardly crying into my pillow for hours on end every night, proves I didn't actually love him. The panic is more at losing a friend and having been made a complete fool of than the thought of losing him.

This, though, seeing my best friend flirt with a guy who I have the hots for in a way I've never had for anyone before is stinging in a way I never expected.

Jade takes her seat and glances at me still smiling, but it slowly fades. "Darling, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. You know, just trying to get over the fact that I've been cheated on *again*, and with a supposed friend."

"She wasn't a friend, though, was she?" Jade shakes her head and picks at the label on her beer bottle. "If she'd been a friend, she never would have done that. I would never do that to you. I don't care if you married Jason Momoa himself, and he hit on me one night when I was so drunk I could barely see, I still wouldn't do that to you. You matter more to me than any guy."

It's rare that I allow myself to be vulnerable, but for some reason I feel like I need to right now. "Do you mean that?" I ask.

Her brows raise and her eyes widen, but her lips tighten into a thin line. "I can't believe you're asking me. Of course I mean it. Bitch, I would never do that to you. Why are you even asking?"

I give her a wry smile. "I don't know. Maybe because you're flirting up a storm with my bodyguard." I fix her with a narrowed gaze.

"Who said I was flirting?"

I scowl. I saw.

She laughs. "Babe, what gives? You said he's not your type. I mean, he literally is *not* your type. If anyone had said to me: show me a man who is the definition of not Carrie's type, I would have created him out of my imagination. But if you don't want me to flirt with him because he's guarding you, I get that. I'll stop." She holds her hands up in peace. Then a little smile crosses her pretty face. "Unless, there's more?"

"It's possible he might be a bit more of my type than I ever imagined." I glance down at the table and scratch the wood with my thumbnail.

"Seriously? No shit. I've seen you eyeball him. Can't keep those pretty blues of yours from flicking his way all the time."

I look up at her from under my lashes, my cheeks heating. I'm that obvious?

"Darling, you don't have to say another word. Your face tells me everything. Girl's gone and got a crush on her bodyguard." She gives a slow chuckle. "I won't even *look* at him again. I'm going to say something to you, though. He is hot as fuck. I swear to God, Carrie, if you don't make a move on him, I will never forgive you. Just be careful is all."

Make a move? Not happening. I'm scared to because I don't think I could deal with him. I don't think I could even take his pierced, massive, oversized appendage. "You know what, forget everything I said." I flash her a smile. "I won't ever be doing anything with him, so it's unfair of me to ask you to back off. Go for it, and have some fun."

It would be good if she did. A way out. My stupid little crush can be completely squashed if my best friend and Samuel get together.

"Absolutely not. You have the major hots for him, and I'm not going anywhere near that man." She crosses her arms and cocks her head to one side as she regards me.

I'm about to get a lecture. I know her body language by heart, and she's about to give it to me with both barrels.

"I don't think there are any rules in place that say someone can't have a relationship with their bodyguard. I'm sure I've read about plenty of celebrities who get up to that kind of thing. Anyway, you already told me that your father hired him. You're not his employer. Maybe, he'll be the one who says it's inappropriate. If that happens, fair enough. But I swear to God, Carrie, you turn down a chance to ride that specimen of magnificence, and I don't know if I can continue being your friend."

I crack up at that. "You know I'm a wuss when it comes to rides," I say through my giggles.

We're both laughing now.

"Yeah, you are terrible. You even panicked on that children's log flume. I've never seen an adult get a panic attack on a child's ride before."

"Exactly. I'm not the sort of person who takes a walk on the wild side. And that guy"—I point my finger discreetly in his direction—"that guy is definitely an adult ride."

"Yeah, he's a super fast roller coaster of a ride."

"Exactly. You do know that people have died on those things?" I give her a dark look. "Not helping your cause here."

"Imagine it, though, what a way to go. Death by massive pierced dick."

I've just taken a sip of beer when she says that, and some of it comes through my nose. I'm spluttering and laughing and coughing all at the same time. My eyes start to stream too. She hands me a napkin, and I dab at my nose and my eyes, and as I glance at her, in the background I see Samuel watching me with a fierce look of interest on his face.

I hope to God there's no way he could overhear our conversation.

"Anyway, enough of my fantasy love life. What did you want to talk to me about? Are you okay?" I finally get myself under control.

She bites her bottom lip, a sure sign of nerves when it comes to Jade. "You know that guy I was seeing a few months back?"

"The artist," I say, making speech quotes with my fingers.

The guy was an experimental artist, who made things out of discarded crisp packets and chocolate wrappers. Now don't get me wrong, there are people who make art from discarded materials all the time, and it's wonderful. This guy's stuff, though, looked like something that an eight-year-old might have created. He thought he was the next coming of the modern art movement. Unlike many of Jade's conquests, he possessed plenty of money due to a trust fund he was burning his way through. The first time I met him, I took an instant dislike to him, and was quite open and honest with Jade about my feelings. A few weeks later, she ended the relationship because she said he was too intense. When I asked her what she meant, she said that he was ringing her all the time and wanting to see her

"Yeah, that's the one," she says. "He's been bothering me."

"What do you mean by bothering you?"

everyday, and she just couldn't hack it.

She runs her fingers through her long, thick hair and blows out of breath. "It started with him texting, calling, and leaving messages. At first, they were stupid things. I'd be sitting there in the evening, and he'd message to ask if I was watching the same TV show for example. Or he'd message

pictures of whatever it was he was eating for his evening meal. I ignored him or tried to. Now and again, I sent him a brief reply because I felt weirded out by it and didn't want to antagonize him, but I also didn't want to encourage him. I've had enough of him, and that's why I ended the relationship."

She swigs her beer before continuing. "Anyway, about a week ago, I left my house and there was a bunch of flowers on the bonnet of my car. There was a note from him that said that he was missing me and thinking about me. I've been getting the flowers every day since. Always in a different place. Sometimes on my car. Sometimes in the hallway of my apartment building, and even at work. What's really freaked me out, though, is that yesterday I didn't get the flowers. I thought maybe he'd finally given up. On my way home I popped into my usual coffee shop to grab a drink like I always do. The barrister gave me a strange look, and after giving me my coffee, he hands me this bunch of flowers from behind the bar. He said this guy had dropped them off and insisted that I get them."

None of this sounds very good, and I wrap my hands around my bottle as I wait for her to continue.

"The thing is, Carrie, I never went to that coffee shop with him. I definitely never took him there, and as far as I'm aware I never mentioned it. It's purely a work-related place. I pop in there on my way home from work. At weekends I go to Remo's, which is my local coffee shop around the corner. And the only place I went with him. Then, I get an e-mail with a link to his latest art installation. I say installation loosely, because it's in his own home, not a gallery. It's called: "If I can't have her nobody can." Let's just say it's misogynistic at best, and at worst full-on woman hating. He's moved on from using the crisp packets, the chocolate wrappers, and all that kind of stuff, and taken to modern art painting and photography. Here, take a look."

I look at the picture on her phone, and a burst of nausea hits me. It's a montage of photographs of what looks like a shop mannequin, but posed in strange positions, with the face nothing but a blank white mask, and a wig that matches Jade's own long dark hair.

"Well, that's somewhat disturbing," I say.

"You don't think I'm overreacting?" There's hope in her voice.

I pause before I answer because I don't want to scare her unnecessarily, but if anything I think she's underreacting. The art is horrible and creepy. As I'm looking at her phone, she swipes left and some more pictures appear. It looks like two pairs of legs from a mannequin at strange angles, and in the middle of them is a bird's nest where if it was a normal woman her private parts would be. This dude is a freak.

After the photographs come paintings. All with women have blank faces, hair like Jade, and bird's nest for pussies.

"I don't want to panic you, but this stuff isn't normal."

"I know." She sighs. "It's my fault. I always like them a bit edgy, and look where that gets me."

"Don't you dare victim blame yourself," I tell her sternly.

I think for a moment and then glance over at Samuel, whose eyes are flicking around the room, alert at all times.

"Maybe what you need is a bodyguard." I arch one brow at her and contemplate her reaction.

She gives a soft laugh. "I think that might be going a bit too far, don't you?"

"It's not as if you can't afford it. I guess these guys aren't cheap; although, I don't know how much they do cost because Dad is paying. I could ask."

She shakes her head. "Leave it for now. I just wanted to get your reaction and see if I was being oversensitive. If weird things continue happening, or he doesn't back off, then I'll give you a call; I promise. I've already been to the police and have given them the evidence of the flowers he's been

leaving everywhere, and all the notes and messages. They said there's not a lot they can do unless he makes a threat, but they are aware of his behavior. I suppose if he escalates, then I'll have the police deal with him."

As far as I'm aware, the police aren't great in these kinds of cases. Often things must escalate to a point where the woman gets hurt before the police can act.

In fact, I resolve to talk to Samuel when we get home. I can at least ask him how much his services cost, and if he has anyone within his organization he could recommend if Jade does decide to go down that route.

We chat about mundane stuff for a while, and then she fixes me with a serious look. "I want you to have some fun, but do be careful. Don't let yourself fall for tats and muscles over there."

I bristle a little at that. Does she think I'm so innocent, or worse, uptight, that I can't have some fun without falling head over heels in love? I'm about to say something but I realize she's looking at me with genuine, soft concern in her pretty eyes. Instead of going on the defensive, I simply smile at her and shrug. "I suppose one ought to be careful when playing with matches. One could get burned."

"Darling, that man is not a box of matches." She taps one long finger on the table. "That dude is a Molotov cocktail, and he's already lit."

With those words, she stands and heads to the bar to get another round in.

Two hours later, and I'm kissing her goodbye on the cheek outside the pub. Samuel opens the car door for me, and I slide into the back seat, Brutus jumping onto my lap as usual. Halfway through the evening, Jade bought crisps, and Brutus ate his body weight in ready salted snacks. I doubt he'll want much of his evening meal.

I lean forward and call out to Jade as she walks away. "Are you sure we can't give you a lift?"

"Honestly, I'm fine. I'm going to call a friend; he only lives about five minutes away."

By *friend* I'm presuming she means *lover*. I wouldn't mind dropping her off for some fun times, but maybe she will be embarrassed with Samuel in the car and Simon driving. I don't push it any further, but I do give her one last wave as I watch her walk down the street.

No matter how I try, I can't get those images of the mannequins out of my mind. I'm worried for my friend.

# Chapter 8

#### Samuel

CAROLINA IS quiet on the drive home, a pensive mood drawing down over her like the twilight smothering the day.

"Something wrong?" I ask.

I expect her to say nothing and brush off my question, but she surprises me when she turns to face me, giving me her full attention.

"My friend has this guy who's bothering her. He is an ex-boyfriend, and he keeps leaving flowers on her car and at her work. He's also left them at a coffee shop that she's never been to with him. It means he has to have been following her at some point. He's supposedly an artist, and he's done some quite awful photographs, which are misogynistic in the extreme if you ask me. He sent them to her and said it's his latest project. I think there's a veiled threat in there. I told her I'd speak to you about hiring somebody, but she brushed me off. Can I ask you... I know my dad is paying for this, but how much are your services?"

I watch her expression, curious when I answer her. "I'm costing your father three thousand a day." She chokes, which is impressive as she's not eating or drinking anything.

As she recovers, her eyes watering a little, she coughs a few times.

"Dear God. Really?"

"Yeah, really. That includes an off the top fee for my employers who organized this. It also includes a social media check and management, which they run from their base on Corfu."

"Wait, what?" Her face grows thunderous. "People are monitoring my social media?"

Oh crap. Her father didn't tell her. Great. "Your father requested it as part of the package. It's important, to be fair. You post something on social media, and it can the world know where you are and puts you in danger."

"How does it work? I post something, and your team on the ground tell you, and you come and tell me off?"

"Yeah, except they will delete anything that could show your whereabouts. You haven't posted anything, however."

"No, of course I haven't." She lowers her voice, but she's *pissed*. In fact, it feels like the sudden calm tone is a warning, like the way a snake stills right before it strikes. "I'm not stupid. My father tells me there's a threat against me, and I need to take a sabbatical from work as being seen on television might be too dangerous; I have the sense not to post on social media where I am at any given time. I'm not some airhead model or idiotic singer, you know? I don't know what sort of people you normally guard, but I am an educated, successful woman in a highly competitive field, and I'd damn well like to be informed of things like that in future."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Understood?"

My jaw clenches. Jesus Christ, she has an attitude. That's not why my jaw is clenching, though. It's because like this, her eyes blazing, her cheeks flushed, and her face alive with anger, she's magnificent.

That understood. So damned superior, but so hot. No one, and I mean no one, talks to me like that. Most especially not women.

I give a soft laugh and her eyes only spit more fire at me. "Your friend told me you were a woman who knows her own mind."

"What? When? Jade? What are you talking about?"

I laugh again. Then I lean in close and lower my voice as I don't want Simon hearing this. "She told me you were a handful and that you knew your own mind, and then she said ... what was it? Oh yeah, she said that if I had to, I had her *permission* to *take control*, if it meant keeping you safe."

She stares at me, and her mouth parts as her lower jaw goes slack. "When she was flirting with you?"

"She wasn't flirting with me."

"It sure looked like it from where I was sitting."

"Yeah, she said she didn't want you to know how worried she was. Asked me about the threat, and I told her I couldn't give any details. She then told me to do what I had to in order to ensure your safety, even if you didn't like it and that if you got too headstrong, to...erm... Well, it doesn't matter." I smirk at her.

"What. The. Fuck. Did. She. Say?" Carolina narrows her eyes at me.

"She said I had her permission to take you in hand."

My dick jerks at the thought of the exact words her friend used. Words I don't repeat now because I believe if I do Carolina will launch herself at me, and not in the way I've decided I want her to. When she comes at me, I want it to be in heated lust, not raging anger.

"I'm going to fucking kill her."

"Nah, she's worried about you."

"She's a liability is what she is, telling you something as outrageous as that." Carolina looks me up and down, and her mouth tightens. "No man takes me in hand. Remember that."

I lean in even closer and brush a strand of hair from her ear, and as I do I bend my head until my lips are mere centimeters away from the gold cuff in her upper lobe. "Is that a challenge?" I whisper.

I'm playing with fire here. I don't cross lines like this, not unless they're enemy lines, and I don't want Carolina to be my enemy. This could get me fired. That doesn't really matter, not in the sense this work pays less than the contract work I could pick up immediately. I don't need the money either way. I'm a wealthy enough man in my own right. Being able to enter closed off enemy societies and take out high-ranking target pays incredibly well.

"Oh my God." Carolina jerks her head up and stares at me. "No. Of course not. Listen. Can we get back to your expenses and if you think your men can help my friend?"

I lean back, giving her space. I want her, but I'm not a creep. Right now, her signals are mixed, and I'm not sure if she wants me or is afraid of me, or even better—a heady mix of both.

"They can help for sure. It's exactly the sort of job the company was set up for and one of the cofounders has a real thing apparently about helping damsels in distress. I imagine he'd make your friend a priority."

"Don't you have a thing about helping damsels in distress?"

Her question isn't pointed. It doesn't seem to be a jibe in any way. I consider it. "I suppose not, in

the sense that I've learned never to underestimate women. I've come across women in combat who were much deadlier than their male counterparts."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. I can't talk about shit in any depth, but let me just say when a woman is highly trained to kill, and determined, she can be a tenacious adversary, and an unseen one. Most people don't think of women as killers. They underestimate them."

"Not you?"

"I don't underestimate women, no."

She narrows her eyes. "Bullshit."

Simon clears his throat and puts the radio on, the sound of soft music filling the car. Thank fuck. I don't need him to hear me arguing with my assignment.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

She laughs, and it's genuine, as if she can't believe how idiotic I am.

"Oh, come on. You're all, *you will do as I say*. And that thing last night. The carrying me up the stairs!" Her voice is lowered now, but her eyes are shining as she gets angry. "That shit tells me you most definitely see women as second class. The whole *me man*, *you woman* act."

She sits forward a little and grins at me. "Cat got your tongue? Huh? I'm right, and you have no comeback."

She's not wrong about me carrying her up the stairs. That was a dick move. The slap to her ass? Major dick move. "Okay." I hold my hands up. "You've got me. That was wrong. And I won't ever do anything like it again. Major asshole move on my part. In my defense, I was coming up on almost fifty hours with no sleep, and at that point you were working yourself up into a rage, so I took action. In retrospect, it was the wrong action."

"Apology accepted. You could get sued for that kind of thing, though. It proves my point. You wouldn't do that to a guy. So you de-facto see women as lesser."

"I fucking would do it to a guy if he was being a whiny pain in my ass."

"You would not. Would you?"

"We were on tour once, and we were embedded with an army unit. Engineers and the like. British and Australian. We'd gone ahead and cleared the way and then circled back. Or we thought we'd cleared the way; turned out we hadn't. Anyway, not all, but some army units, they don't see a lot of actual combat. They go in after the forward units, Marines, Special Forces or whoever, have cleared the way. When we came across enemy combatants in what we thought was a deserted village, one of the guys started having a rolling panic attack. Whoever the fuck said panic attacks can't last longer than ten minutes because you run out of adrenaline hadn't met this dude. He was hyperventilating, panicking, and asking fucking nonstop garbled questions the entire time we were trying to deal with the threat. I knocked him out and put him over my shoulder. So yeah, I would do it to a guy, and I have, but not as nice."

"You'd knock me out?" Her eyes widen.

"Jesus no. Of course not."

"Why not?"

I stare at her. "Are you insane?"

"No. Why wouldn't you knock me out?"

"I don't go around knocking women out."

"Ha. Got you." She jabs her finger at me in triumph. "You do see women as different."

I'm pissed at her now, but I'm also weirdly enjoying this, and my blood pressure is up. It's

pumping through my body in the way it does when I'm about to go into a new assignment and hunt down some fucker to take out. Except I don't want to take Carolina out, but I do want to capture her.

Play with her in a way we will both enjoy.

"Does anyone ever win an argument with you?" I ask her, smiling.

"Do I amuse you?"

"Yeah, you kind of do."

"Christ, you're annoying."

I give her a shit-eating grin. I'm purposefully dialing up the asshole now and kind of enjoying it. She's fun to spar with and gives as good as she gets.

This is a verbal version of our pillow fight last night, and both feel an awful lot like foreplay.

We pull up outside the house and disembark from the car. I wave Simon off and, not even thinking, put my hand on Carolina's lower back and guide her to the house. She doesn't shrug me off.

As we approach, I see something dark laid out on the white step leading to the door.

I take hold of Carolina's arm and slow her down. "Wait here," I order.

She immediately does as I say and stops dead in the driveway, clutching Brutus to her tightly.

Thankful she understood the urgency in my tone and realized this wasn't game-playing, I undo the bottom two buttons on my shirt. Reaching inside with my other hand, I take out my gun. Weapon raised, I move carefully toward the house. Even though I'm moving forward, my eyes focused on what's on the step, all of my senses are on alert. I'm listening for any sounds behind me, even aware of the wind direction against the parts of my skin which are exposed. My peripheral vision is excellent, and I keep an eye out for movement to the sides.

As I reach the step and look down, my heart sinks. There's a dead dog on her doorstep. It's the spitting image of her beloved Brutus, and a less subtle message would be hard to imagine. I don't want her to see this, and I need her inside where she's safe. Glancing around me, I walk back to her.

"Do you trust me?" I ask her.

"I don't really know you," she replies.

"Carolina, I'm not playing now. I want you to trust me, okay?"

"I understand." She looks at me, her eyes wide with fear.

"I want you to walk toward your house but do not look down. Do not look at the step; focus on the number on your door." I point to the number five lettered in gold against her shiny black door. "Stare at that letter as if your life depends on it, and don't look elsewhere. Promise me."

"You're scaring me," she says.

"I'm not trying to scare you. I don't want you to see what's on that step. You don't need to see it, and you don't need that in your head. I can't get rid of it right now because I don't want to let go of my gun; do you understand? I need to get you in the house and the door locked behind you so I can come out here and deal with this and clean it up, but first we need to get inside so I can make a sweep of the house and check out all the alarms."

It's dark enough that if she's focusing on the number on her door intently, her peripheral vision will not clearly pick up what's laid out on the step. The light to her front door is perched above the lintel, meaning most of it falls on the upper part of the door, and if she's staring right at that, her lower range of vision will be in the dark.

"Eyes up and ahead, walk forward but stop before you climb the stairs." Keeping my gun raised, I shadow her every step until we reach the three white stairs leading up to her front door.

I take hold of her elbow with one hand, keeping the gun held aloft with the other. I guide her to the right of the dead dog and help her climb the stairs, making sure I don't let her step anywhere near the

body.

"You can open the door now," I tell her.

She takes the key out of her pocket and fumbles getting it into the lock twice. She's holding Brutus with one hand and trying to get the key in with the other, but she's shaking badly.

"Here, let me."

I take the key from her and open the door. She rushes in as if being chased by a swarm of bees, and I follow her, closing the door behind us quickly. The alarm beeps, and I enter the code to turn it off. So long as all the windows and the patio doors are still armed, it's very doubtful anyone entered the house. I'm still going to make a full sweep of every room to be sure.

Reaching around into the kitchen, I flick on the switch and flood the room with the brightness afforded by the down lights in the ceiling.

"Take a seat in here and wait for me."

I leave her looking pale and shaken, even though she didn't see the dog. I don't have time right now to comfort her, and I refocus on the task at hand. I make a quick clean sweep of the entire house, checking out every room and each access point. Once I'm sure the house is safe, and I've grabbed a refuse bag and some cleaning products, I head back to the kitchen. I leave the cleaning supplies by the door.

Carolina is sitting at the breakfast bar, with Brutus on her lap, and her right arm wrapped tightly around him. In her left hand is a glass of wine, and she sips at it every few seconds.

She glances up at me, and her face is the palest I've seen it.

"What was on the step?" she asks.

I wrestle with what to do. If I don't tell her, her imagination could provide something even worse. If I do tell her, she's going to be sick with fear for Brutus. I decide in this situation half the truth is the better truth.

"They left a dead rat on the step, and I didn't want you to see it. Nobody needs to see that; it was disgusting."

She relaxes visibly and then a flash of anger crosses her face. "Samuel, we get a lot of dead rats around here. You've just scared me half to death." She puts the glass down on the counter with a forceful clank and brings her hand to her chest as if trying to soothe her heart. "It probably wandered on there and died. Maybe ate something."

"I can assure you that rats don't die naturally the way this one did. I don't wish to go into detail because it was gory. Somebody killed it, and somebody put it there. I've been doing this long enough to understand when I see a threat. Excuse me for trying to protect you from it."

"Alright, I understand more clearly now." She holds her hand up, placating. "But even if it has been killed horribly, I'm a grown woman and can deal with it. Trying to shield me in that way just made me more scared."

Christ, this woman. Does she argue about everything? Losing my cool, I stalk over to her and bracket her with my arms either side of her. "Do you *really* have to turn every single fucking thing into an argument? Is this a pathology you have? You always must be right? I'm trying to do my fucking job here, Carolina. You are not making it easy for me."

Her eyes blink rapidly, but she says nothing.

"Now, I'm going to go out there and check the perimeter of the house and get rid of the rat. You are going to stay here, sitting on that stool and not move. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she says with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

"Good."

I turn on my heel and stalk from the room, grabbing the cleaning things and leaving her ungrateful ass to sit and drink her wine. I'm so livid with her, I'm tempted to tell her the truth, but I know that would be an epic dick move, so I don't.

I close the door behind me and lock it. I need to check the front and back of the house, and I don't want someone sneaking in the front door while I'm around the back. I highly doubt anyone approached the house from the back because the dogs would have gone crazy and ripped them to shreds. I still need to make sure.

Heart heavy, I use the bin bag to pick the little dog's body up. Once I've shaken it down into the bag, I tie it firmly and place it in the trash. Poor little thing. It didn't do anything to deserve that. This is a message for Carolina because they know she will tell her father. At this point, I'm starting to wonder what the endgame is for these guys. The book is out by now, and even if Carolina's father pulled it, there are so many people who have read it or have it on their Kindles. Furthermore, pulling the book might cause even more publicity for it. It worries me. I feel like there's something that we're missing here.

It's not my place to investigate this. It's my place to keep Carolina safe while the police and detectives involved do the investigative work. However, the whole thing seems a little off to me. If I don't know the full facts, then how can I protect her? Could her father possibly be keeping something from me?

Hating this line of thinking, and the twinge of worry it causes deep in my gut, I focus on cleaning the steps. I scrub at the blood until it's all gone and there's not even a hint of it anymore. Then I draw my gun and commence a thorough inspection of the boundary of the building.

When I enter the backyard, the dogs tense on full alert. I let them get quite near until I give the command to stand down. They do so immediately, but they get within about five feet of me. Their teeth are bared, and they snarl and growl low under their breath. I believe they'll deter any but the foolhardiest intruder.

I bend down and call the dogs to me. "Good girls," I say as I pat them. "I'll put some steak in with your kibble tonight. I think you've earned it."

Satisfied all is safe, I head out of the back garden and close the gate behind me, before I enter the house through the front door once more. I pocket the key after locking the door and walk into the kitchen. I don't know what I was expecting to find. Possibly more arguments from Carolina. I didn't expect this.

She's sitting, staring at the wall in front of her, but I can see from her profile that tears are streaming down her face. They're making the side of her face shiny and wet.

My heart twinges, and something that I haven't felt for a long time fills me. It's not just sympathy for somebody who's upset; it's a need to make it right. A need to take the hurt away for her. This is not normal for me. I'm not a hero who swoops in to save the day. Yet, I'm compelled to stop her crying. As if I can't bear it.

This woman acts tough, but maybe her argumentative streak is a cover for a much more vulnerable interior.

Walking toward her, I take the stool by her and sit. I'm not sure what to say, and I don't want to make things worse. I suck at this kind of thing.

"It's all cleaned up now." I go with the facts at first.

She glances up and gives a brief nod. Wiping at her eyes briskly, she stands, walks to the fridge, and pours more wine. That's on top of what she had to drink in the bar and the large glass she's clearly finished while I was checking outside. I'm not moralistic, but if she gets messy every night, it's

gonna make my job harder. If she's in a deep sleep because she's drunk, and I need to move fast, she's a liability.

Her father's words, and her friend's, echo in my head. They both clearly know she has a self-destructive streak and the tendency to drink too much when she's stressed or upset.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Christ, why did I think protecting someone and keeping them alive would be easier than taking people out?

I thought I wanted to change my trajectory and do some good for once. I'd grown weary of taking lives. Sickened by it on one level. I thought I could save them instead, but no one tells you that to save a life, you have to interact with the person. Being a bodyguard seemingly isn't just about carrying a gun and going bang-bang at the bad guys. I'm a shrink, policeman, and babysitter all rolled into one, and that's not what I envisaged when I took this job. "Carolina, I understand you're stressed, but I really don't think you should keep drinking."

She slams her hand on the counter. "Jesus, just *stop*. You're not the morality police, and you're not the boss of me, so shut up." She takes a big sip of the wine.

"It's nothing to do with morality; I promise you that. If something happens, then we need to move fast; your reactions are going to be blurred."

She sets the glass down and turns to face me. "Do you know what it's like to have a panic attack?"

I don't, so I shrug. I've had anxiety, of course. That moment before you go into battle when all your adrenaline's pumping and every system in your body is on edge. The thing is, though, I can turn that to my advantage. I don't get scared of it, but instead I greet it. I tune into it and let all the heightened sensations guide me. That's the thing about people, we all react to stimulus so differently.

"When you get really, seriously, bad anxiety, you can't think straight." Carolina runs her fingers through her hair, teasing out some of the waves. "It's like you don't know what to do first. Your brain can't focus on a course of action. All there is, is this anxiety and panic churning inside you. Your heart's going too fast, and you can't quite catch your breath, and everything feels *too much*. It's overwhelming. I'm going to be more useless to you feeling the way I do right now, all churned up inside like something eating away at me, than I am a little buzzed. Some wine isn't going to harm me, but this absolute fuckery that I'm feeling right now is what's going to stop me from being able to react."

She starts to pace. "I literally can't bear feeling like this. It's like I want to tear my skin off. I'm trapped in this house waiting. My Daddy is at risk too. All we can do is sit around and wait while what? While people leave dead rats on my step? Threaten my father with his life. I've already had to stop work, so I don't have that distraction. My relationship fell apart too this week, and I can't do a damn thing about that either." She shakes her head and blows out an exasperated breath. "Although that wasn't anything to do with this, it still sucks. My ex is an absolute idiot, and I'm better off without him, but I'd like to give him a piece of my mind, and the bitch he cheated with, who, by the way, works with me." She laughs, and it holds a worrying tinge of hysteria. "I fantasized about making her look like a cheap slut in front of everyone at work, but I can't because I can't go into my job. It's all falling apart, and I don't know how to deal with it. Everyone thinks I'm so together. *Oh Carolina, she's so calm.* They don't know the half of it. Well, now, you get to deal with the messy side of me. That's your job, right? You're the babysitter. Well tough—tonight you got the brat."

She hits the wall with the flat of her palm and screams. "I'm a fucking mess, Samuel, and I don't think a pillow fight is going to cut it. So excuse me if I take my wine to bed and drink it like the big girl I am."

I shouldn't do it. I need to keep my mouth shut and let her take that glass of wine and drown

herself in it.

Keep your damn mouth shut, Reaperman. You don't need this. She's a fucking mess. This isn't the sort of complication you need in your life. Don't do it.

"I can think of something that will take the edge off better than that wine or a pillow fight." *Shit, I said it.* 

Her head whips around, and she walks right up to me.

Expecting her to slap me, I still when she fists her fingers in my hair and whispers in my ear, "I thought you'd never offer."

# Chapter 9

### Carolina

I WASN'T EXPECTING him to offer, or angling for it, but the minute he said that line, with his voice rougher than usual, *I knew*.

I wanted it.

Wanted him.

He's not my type. Jade is right—he's a lit Molotov cocktail, but so am I. If we're going to explode, might as well do it together.

For a moment, he stills. It's a brief second in time. I saw a video once where a panther was stalking its prey and just before it pounced, it paused, no movement *whatsoever*.

But just like that panther, Samuel doesn't stay still for long. His big hand snakes around the back of my neck and cups my throat. It's warm and solid, and he uses it to angle me the way he wants me.

His lips crash down on mine, and there's nothing tentative or tender in his kiss. It's an all-out assault on my senses. He claims my mouth in a way that makes my legs go weak. His lips press against mine, and he licks the seam of my mouth, demanding entrance. I part for him and let him in. He tastes faintly of mint and a hint of sugar, which I imagine must be from the cola. God, I bet I taste of wine. I'm going to clean my teeth before this goes much further.

The next moment all rational thought leaves me as his tongue sweeps inside and lays waste to my defenses. I'm not surprised this man was in the Armed Forces because he's conquered me like a marauding army taking new territory. And this is only the beginning. Only a kiss.

He walks me backward until I hit the counter behind me. His thumb strokes over the side of my throat and caresses the artery there. His other hand fastens around my waist, resting on my hip and holding me in place.

He's so much taller than me that he's bending over me to kiss me and I'm looking up at him. The boots I'm wearing this evening have a square heel that's a good couple of inches in height. I'm not exactly small, and I'm used to guys being not that much taller than me. Being towered over this way is novel, and I love it.

He tears his mouth away from mine while we stare at one another, both of us breathing hard. "Are you sure this is what you want?" he asks.

While I appreciate his sudden manners, I don't want that from him. I need him to obliterate this panic within me. I want him to take over my body, and work me until I can't think of anything but the sensations he's provoking.

"Yes, I want this. Why don't we take it upstairs?"

He steps back and nods. "I need to feed the dogs and make sure everything's safe down here. Why don't you go on up and get yourself ready?"

I pick Brutus up in my arms, and body zinging with nerves, I walk out of the room.

"Put Brutus in your room, close the door, and come to mine when you're ready." His order is no nonsense.

This is my house, and yet he's ordering me around as if it is his. For once, though, I don't feel the urge to argue. And anyway, Brutus would be a passion killer. He once ran up behind a guy who was screwing me and licked his butt. The guy was horrified, and I never saw him again. Not that it mattered, because he was a lousy lay. On that occasion, Brutus did me a favor. I don't want him doing the same tonight, though.

"Come on, little fella," I say as I kiss the top of his head. "Let's get you settled down for the night." I turn to Samuel. "Don't be too long down here." I throw him a smile and then shoot up the stairs.

In my bedroom, I decide to take a quick shower. Tying my hair up, I clean my teeth as the water warms, and then I jump under the spray and use my favorite body wash. It smells of holidays and reminds me of the sun and long, lazy days on the beach. It's a sexy scent but light. Coconut, vanilla, and something mildly citrus.

After I've dried myself, I decide to use some body oil. I bought it on a whim, and it has a slight shimmer to it with a golden undertone. It makes my skin look sexy and sun kissed. I use it sparingly, not wanting to leave an oil slick on the bed, but wanting the light glow it gives me and the softness to my skin. Once I've applied that, I remove my makeup and then apply a tiny bit of ever so subtle new makeup.

A dab of blusher to my cheekbones, along with a brush of natural mascara, and a lip balm that gives a faint wash of pinky-brown to my mouth. I dab my lips with a tissue and smack them together again. Finally, I fluff my hair out and place the scrunchie on the vanity.

Now. What to wear?

I could put my same clothes back on, but he's going to know I've had a shower. Why even bother pretending that I'm not going to any effort? I stroll into my bedroom and open my top drawer. I rifle through the contents until I find what I'm looking for. It's a pure silk, black nightdress. It has thin straps and a sweetheart neckline and falls to just above my knee. I've worn it out as a dress during the summer before. It's simple but sexy. I hesitate and wonder whether or not to put panties on. Then I decide against. What's the point if they're only going to be taken off? I'm beyond playing games tonight, and I hope he is too.

We really shouldn't do this, and I wonder if he gets found out if it will mean he's moved on to a new assignment. Part of me welcomes the idea. This man has come into my life and turned it upside down. His presence is at once both an irritation and a permanent turn-on. The other half of me would hate to see him leave.

Nervous and unsure, I exit my room and close the door behind me so Brutus won't go wandering around, setting any alarms off. I knock on Samuel's door. Or rather my door, in my house.

God, this is a head-fuck.

I hesitate and turn back to my room. I could go to bed, back out now and everything goes back to normal. Samuel will guard me, keep me safe, and perhaps in a few weeks when this is all over, we will say goodbye, and I can start my life again.

The internal war rages for all of two seconds. Then the door opens and Samuel grins at me, and my stomach does this flip flop thing, and I'm lost. Stepping over the threshold, I give in to the pull.

# Chapter 10

#### Carolina

Samuel walks slowly back to the bed and takes a seat. He's wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. He's clearly taken a quick shower too. His skin still looks damp in places. The crisp white of the towel contrasts beautifully with his tan skin and the blues and blacks of his ink. I try to take it in, but there's so much. One arm has only a little, but the other has a lot. His chest too. At one side of his chest it goes right over his shoulder and snakes up his throat and neck.

He leans back, resting his fists on the mattress as he looks at me. "Nice. I like it."

Self-consciously, I run my hands over the silk. "Thanks."

God, I sound like a teenager.

"Lift it up."

"What?"

"The hem of your dress. Lift it up."

I swallow. "Erm, I'm not wearing panties," I say stupidly.

"I was hoping that would be the case. Let me see that pretty pussy."

I flush. Dear Lord, I am not used to dirty talk. Not at all. My ex never even told me his fantasy when I asked him. Said those things were private.

Nervous, I do as he says and grab the hem of the silk, raising it slowly up my legs.

"Beautiful," he growls as he stares at the apex between my thighs.

"Spread them." His order is given in a firm tone.

I do as he says and widen my legs a little.

"No, not your legs, princess. Spread your lips for me. Show me how wet you are."

Oh, crap. I cannot do this. Too much. Too full-on. I'm a *half-a-bottle-of-wine-before-sex-and-then-do-it-in-the-dark* kind of a girl.

Shaking now, with both anxiety and epic amounts of lust, I reach with the hand not holding onto the silk and slowly spread my lips apart.

I didn't think it would be possible to feel this amount of competing emotions and not explode. I'm a little bit ashamed, a lot turned on, slightly angry, and a whole lot of shy.

When Samuel stands and walks to me, I brace myself. He sinks fluidly to his knees and stares right at my exposed pussy, up close and personal.

"You have the prettiest pussy I've ever seen."

I'll take it. I'd rather he said it about my face, but if it's my pussy, then so be it.

He leans in close and trails his finger right down the center of my cleft, ghosting over my clit. I shudder. "Nice and wet, but not wet enough yet."

"For what?"

"For me, princess. To take me."

Then it hits me. His size. The piercings. Oh, God, I'm going to get torn apart.

I tense, and he must sense it because he raises his face to me. "Relax, I'll take it slow. I promise." "The piercings, though. They'll hurt, right?"

He smiles. "No, not if we do it right. In fact, they should give you a lot of pleasure."

I open my mouth to say something, but my words are lost as he runs his tongue over my clit and then around it. He takes his mouth away. "Let go," he murmurs.

I move my fingers, and he presses his mouth against me. He kisses me right on my pussy, like he's kissing my mouth. Then he sucks my outer lips into his mouth, and I gasp at the warm heat. I'm glad I got waxed a few days ago. I had my usual Brazilian with a tiny landing strip. It means everything is extra sensitive.

His tongue spears through my folds, and he licks me like I'm his favorite ice cream. Just as his kiss in the kitchen claimed my mouth, he's claiming my pussy now.

"Goddamn you taste good," he mutters against me. "So fucking good. I could do this all day."

"Then who'd protect me?" I ask with a weak laugh. My legs are finding it increasingly hard to hold me up. He's working my clit like a pro, and I feel as if I'm going to come.

As my thighs shake, and my fingers grip his shoulders, he suddenly stops.

What?

He stands, his chin slick from me. "Get on the bed."

I do as he says and lie down. He climbs on over me and kisses my thighs, my pussy lips, my stomach, and he pulls my nightdress up as he moves over my body, until he's lifting it over my head, my arms raised for him.

Now, I'm completely naked.

"Do these hurt?" I ask as I gently tap a nipple ring.

He shivers. "No, it feels good. You fancy some?"

I laugh. "My nipples are so sensitive, I'd faint. No thanks."

"Sensitive huh?"

"Very." I'm not lying. I've made myself come before by playing with them. Never had it happen with a guy, though. I got too caught up in my own head, I think.

He kisses my breasts, and I brace for him to go all out on my nips the way he did my mouth and pussy. He doesn't, though. In fact, Samuel ignores them. He spends ages kissing around my areola and stroking the underside of my breasts with his thumbs, but he doesn't touch my nipples.

He moves farther up my body and takes my mouth in a very different kiss than before. He kisses me slowly, almost languidly, but the whole time, he's stroking down my sides and touching my body, making me shake.

His tongue teases me, tasting then retreating. He kisses along my jaw and out to my ear where he nibbles the shell, making me squirm at the overload of sensations.

As he kisses his way down my body, he pulls me into a sitting position and straddles my thighs, keeping his weight off me. He palms my breasts and squeezes them together.

"You have great tits," he says.

I haven't. I wish they were bigger. Sexier, but he seems happy enough with them. He plays with them, squeezing, and then he finally—oh, God—*finally*, he takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks, adding a light scrape of teeth.

"Shit, yes." I grab his hair, my back arching as he sucks me hard.

Most guys treat nipples either too gently, or too harsh. Samuel's technique is perfection. He sucks

hard enough to be just on the right side of pain. It's intense, and I feel that pulse in my clit that tells me he's doing this right. It's like there's a direct link, and as he moves his mouth from one breast to the other, it only increases. He sucks at me with wanton abandon, stopping to flick my nipple with his finger, and when I gasp, he does it again and again.

This time when he sucks it into his mouth, I come. It's weak, and nothing like an orgasm with clit stimulation, but I moan and try to press my hand between my legs. He captures it, though, and grins at me.

"Did you just come?"

I nod, my face heating.

"That's hot."

Before I can beg him for some direct stimulation, he pushes one thick finger inside me.

"Oh my God." I widen my legs and raise my hips, needing more.

He adds a second finger and works them in and out of my pussy, and the weak remaining contractions are heavenly, but nowhere near enough.

I want more, need it.

Samuel gives it to me. He leans down and licks my clit as he slowly works his fingers in and out of me. When he adds a third, I panic a little, but he shushes me.

He pauses in his attention to my clit. "I'm getting you ready, princess. Need you relaxed and loosened up."

His tongue resumes its magical flicking of my clit, and his fingers open me, spreading me obscenely, as he crooks them inside me and hits a spot that sets all my internal nerves alight. Oh, crap, he's good at working my G-spot. Better even than my G-spot vibrator. It's not long before I feel another orgasm building, but this one threatens to be much more powerful.

I'm panting, and my legs are shaking.

He pauses in his licking and kisses my thigh. "Relax, and just let it happen."

I'm finding it hard to give in to this because it's so different from previous encounters I've had. It's as if Samuel is the tide and he's carrying me out to sea with him, and although it's a beautiful sunny day, and the ocean is calm, I know there are uncharted depths below.

This all threatens to be too much, at a time when my entire life is too much.

"It will make you feel good." He promises.

His tongue resumes its torture, and his fingers do their magic, and as worried as I am about letting go the way he demands, my body takes the decision out of my hands. The orgasm hits me hard and sudden, making me cry out in shock as I clamp down on his fingers.

Fuck me. I press down on his hand, a slut for this, for him.

I've not even finished coming down fully before he's withdrawing his fingers and lining up his cock.

"Shit," he stops. "Condoms. Give me a minute."

He grabs his wallet from the bedside table and takes out a condom. Does he always carry them, I wonder. It is sensible to do so, but it makes me think about all the other women he might be with. I bet he's a manwhore.

Not liking the thought one bit, I push it away.

He gloves up, and I lift my head to enjoy the sight of him rolling the condom over his massive girth and length. Jesus, he's big.

I hope this doesn't necessitate a trip to the emergency room.

"You look worried. That's not the expression I want on the face of a woman I'm about to get

intimate with."

He watches me with his head to one side, taking in every tiny movement of my features.

"You're just so big. I don't want to end up in hospital."

"If you can give birth, I think you can take my cock." He laughs.

Well, when he puts it like that...

I love the way he makes everything sound just the right side of filthy.

"I'll enjoy watching you work to take it," he adds.

My clit pulses, despite just having had an orgasm.

He wipes one finger between my pussy lips and dips it inside. "You're soaking."

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. It's a good thing. Otherwise, I'd have had to use lube."

Lube? To do me in the pussy? Jesus.

As he lines himself up at my core, he takes hold of himself and rubs the head of his cock, with the ring, over and around my clit.

Oooh, that feels so good. The ring is cold even through the latex, and it is smooth as it rubs over me, setting already fraught nerves alight once more. He's watching with an intent, hungry expression on his face, and it makes me feel exposed and depraved the way he's staring at my pussy with so much focus.

I've never had a man look at me there with such naked interest.

"Your clit is so fucking swollen," he says. "Your lips, too. All plumped up for me. When I've fucked you, I'm going to suck on this pussy and soothe it until you fall asleep."

Oh, wow, well, erm. I have no clue what to say to that.

He keeps rubbing that damn ring around my clit, until I'm whimpering.

Then he places himself right at my entrance. "Hold yourself open for me, princess."

I place my fingers on my pussy and pull my lips apart.

"No, your legs, baby, spread them wide and hold yourself open that way."

Grabbing hold of my inner thighs, I spread myself as wide as I can.

"Fucking look at you. A buffet spread out all for me. Mine to eat, fuck, and worship."

He uses his hand to push his head in slowly and carefully. He's so big. I've never taken anyone this size before, and none of my toys are as thick as him.

The ring makes it even more difficult to take. He finally has his head in, and he's breathing hard as if he's trying not to come.

"Holy fuck, you're tight," he says. "Like a goddamn virgin."

He pushes in more and lets go of himself as a few more inches force their way into me. His hands grab my hips, and he angles me up. "Put your arms around me, princess," he orders.

I do as he says and wrap my arms around his neck.

"Hold on."

As he pushes into me, I feel the ridges of his six small piercings along the length of his shaft. When he's seated inside me, he moves a little, no thrusting but moving his hips one way and then another.

Oh my God. What is he doing to me? It's insanely good. He's hitting parts inside me I didn't know existed. He makes short, deep thrusts, and then he glides out and smoothly pushes back in.

Breath rushes out of me as he fills me so deep.

"Fuck yes," he says through clenched teeth.

I'm sweating as he starts to fuck me properly. Perspiration slides between my breasts, and he

shocks me when he bends his head and laps it up.

His cock is deep in me now, and that ring at his tip is hitting something inside me that is making me see stars. I'm breathing so hard and fast, I start to feel a little lightheaded.

"Breathe, princess. Slow and deep. I don't want you to pass out on me. Do you need a break?"

I shake my head.

My body is reaching for something, climbing for it. It's just out of reach, but it's within my grasp, and I'm not sure I'll be able to handle it when I get it.

He changes his angle and gives me a run of short, deep thrusts, before another long slide in and out. He's using his cock like a toy and knocking sounds loose from me I've never heard myself make before.

"I'm going to come," I warn him.

"Oh my God. Oh, shit. Samuel. Fuck."

"Call me Reaperman," he growls.

It feels so wrong to call him a name that means death and destruction, but it's also hot, in a profane way.

"Reaperman, I'm going to come," I pant.

"Do it, princess. Come all over my cock."

I cry out, moaning and begging as I fall over the edge and spasm around him so hard it scares me.

"Fuck. Jesus. Yes." His control deserts him as his thrusts turn sharp and erratic. He fucks into me like he's an animal, taking what he needs and with a growl, he comes.

His cock is so big I can feel it pulse in me as he fills the condom with his seed.

I'm still lost in my own long, overwhelming release.

When he pulls out of me, it's with a squelch, and I push up to look down between my legs. The bed is wet, and it's all me because he's wearing the condom.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry."

He laughs. "Don't be. I'm not doing it right if that doesn't happen."

"You did it right." I fall back onto the bed and throw an arm over my face as my breathing slows.

I shriek as warmth engulfs my pussy. "What are you doing?"

He pauses for a minute. "What I said I would. Soothing this poor, swollen pussy. So pretty. So used and abused, and I'm going to make it all better now."

I can't come again, but him sucking me like this is oddly pleasant and soothing. I don't want him to do it until I fall asleep, though. I want to hold him and feel his arms around me.

"Come up here and give me a cuddle," I demand.

"Okay. Let me get rid of the condom and take a leak, and then we can snuggle."

He comes back a few minutes later, climbs into the bed, and pulls me into him, my back to his chest. His arm dwarfs me as it wraps around me, the muscles huge.

His cock is nestled between my ass cheeks, and I feel a sudden frisson of fear. Will he want to take me there too? There's no way that can happen. No way I can fit his monster cock there. I've done it before a few times, and each time it hasn't been great. There's no way I want to try with his size.

"I don't do ass sex."

What the fuck? I slap a hand over my mouth. Why did I blurt that out?

He laughs. "Did I ask?"

"No. Just erm, your, you know, where it is now, made me think. I don't like it. Is that an issue?"

"No issue. Not even a finger?"

"Oh, a finger is okay. I think. Maybe. Not a dick, though. Not your dick."

"I could be offended with the way you emphasised that."

"Oh, come on. It's massive. You must know that. I can't take that up there."

He huffs out a laugh. "Well, luckily for you, I'm fucking obsessed with this pussy." He palms it, his hand cupping me as he holds me there for a long moment.

Then he moves his hand up to my belly and protectively rests his arm over it.

"Did it help?" he asks.

"What?"

"The sex? Are you more relaxed?"

I laugh.

"Yeah, I am."

"Better than wine, huh?"

Then he adds, "I'm going to fuck the stress out of you every day. More than once. It's my duty as your bodyguard to ensure you're relaxed and ready to react sensibly in any situation, and I take my duties seriously."

My mouth twitches up into a smile as my eyes close.

### Chapter 11

#### Samuel

Why the fuck did I ask her to call me Reaperman? That's not some kink I have. It's not a weird thing I normally have where I like to get off to the name my fellow warriors gave me. It just felt as if I wanted *her* to say the name I'm most accustomed to these days.

I wonder if she'll think I'm fucked up.

Then again... I am kind of fucked up. I like it a bit nasty, and we haven't even scratched the surface yet.

She stirs in my arms, making a soft sound, and I hold her closer. My hand drifts up to her luscious tits. She doesn't like them, I can tell. Probably thinks they're too small. Why do all women think all men are obsessed with big tits? We just like tits. Full stop. Hers are pert and firm with perky, pink nipples that I want to bite and suck until she can't take it.

Christ her pussy, though. She came so hard she almost strangled my cock. It's so perfect, and when she gets turned on, she gets wet as fuck and swollen too. My mouth waters. I want to eat her again. I can't go down on her while she's sleeping, though. Not yet. We're too new, and I'd have to make sure she'd be okay with shit like that.

I can't resist letting my hand drift down there, though, and feeling her. She's still wet.

Her moan goes right to my dick. She pushes against my hand and moves her lower body. She's rubbing herself on me. Is she awake?

I whisper her name. No response. Should I move my hand? Yeah, I should move my hand.

I start to pull it away, but she tightens her thighs around me and moans again. Then she rubs her pussy on my hand, sliding her bare lips over the edge of my palm, up and down. She mumbles something unintelligible. She's definitely asleep, I'm awake, and this is wrong, but fuck me it is so hot.

She needs to wake up. Or I need to move my hand.

Her legs open a little, and she moves onto her back, so I take the chance and move my hand.

"Carolina? Princess?"

One arm goes up over her head, but the other slides down her body, taking the sheet with her. Then she presses her hand right against her pussy. It's dark in the room, but I left the bathroom light on and the door ajar, so I can see enough. She rubs herself, and her breathing quickens as she says something, and her head moves from side to side. Then she stops.

Damn. I realize I've been holding my breath. Christ, my dick is so hard. I touch myself and almost hiss at how sensitive I am. The head is already leaking. The whole room smells of sex, of us, and now her pussy is all wet and ready again, and the scent is heady as fuck.

"Mmmmm." She moans, and her hand presses down again. She starts to move her hips, her hand

still, but her lower body moving. Then she stops again.

The woman needs relief.

"Hey, Carolina." I shake her.

"What? Shit. Erm, hey. What's up?"

I almost reply with the cheesy line, *I am*, but bite it back.

"You were dreaming."

"I was?"

Then she looks down at herself and gives a dismayed gasp, moving her hand as if her pussy is on fire.

I grab it and still her movement. "Don't stop," I say, my voice as hoarse as if I've gone out for the night and had ten Jim Beam's and a pack of Lucky Stripes.

"I'm so embarrassed," she cries.

"Don't be. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen. Here, your poor pussy needs you. You have to soothe it. Make it feel good."

I guide her hand back down, and she starts to rub herself again, her eyes closing.

"That's it, good girl."

My hand goes to my dick, and I stroke up my length.

This is so fucking hot, but I want to see more clearly.

I pause and flick the bedside light on. It illuminates what she's doing so perfectly.

Her eyes shoot open, but I put my hand over them, closing the lids gently.

"Just feel. Don't think or worry. You're so beautiful like this."

She nods, and her hand resumes what it is doing. I can see much more clearly now. She's rubbing her pussy with the flat of her hand, cupping her mound. She's not flicking her clit, or sticking fingers inside herself; instead, she's massaging her pussy, and it makes me crazy.

I start to stroke my dick again, my hand moves from her eyes, which she keeps closed. Her breathing increases, and she widens her legs, her hand pressing down harder. Then she gasps and pushes against her pussy, as she pushes against her hand, one finger slipping inside as she fucks against her hand almost desperately.

My orgasm blindsides me as I lose it. I grunt as cum shoots over her belly and hip.

When we both finish coming, she glances at me, and her cheeks are tinged with red.

Reaching out, I rub my cum into her flesh. "I want to come like this all over your pussy," I tell her. "I want to mark you all over these pretty lips, and then I want to come on your tits, and then your asshole. I want to fucking drown you in it."

"You have a very filthy mouth, do you know that?"

I grin at her. "I am a sailor."

Her laugh is deep and rich. "God, I'm exhausted, but I need to pee."

She clambers over me and runs to the bathroom.

When she gets back, I pull her against me. She sighs and snuggles close. My eyes drift as I hold her tight.

I wake with a jerk. My heart is pounding, and the sounds of gunfire are still receding even as my eyes open. I know I'm not in the sandbox but safe. *Where am I, though*?

For a few long seconds I'm suspended in that awful not knowing. I'm not at home in Montana; this room isn't familiar. Definitely not on duty, even as the smell of gasoline and burning flesh still teases my sense.

Just a dream, I tell myself.

The body next to me stirs. I glance over and see Carolina with her face scrunched up against the pillow, her arms around it, one trailing over me to rest on my stomach.

Oh, yeah, England. I'm in England.

Christ, my heart is still racing. I glance at my phone, it's only six in the morning, but I won't be getting anymore sleep. I carefully remove Carolina's arm and slide out of bed.

I pull on some sweats and a T-shirt and head downstairs.

There's no gym in Carolina's house, and I can hardly leave her to go for a run, so I set about doing reps of various moves, with downtime of marching on the spot in between. I vary it with burpees, squats, jacks, and planks. After a punishing forty-five minutes, I walk around the living room ten times to cool down and stretch.

Thirsty now, I go in search of some refreshment. The only juice in Carolina's fridge is out of date by two months. I add OJ to my mental grocery list. The woman lives on the worst food. She really shouldn't look as good as she does. Maybe it's the olives keeping her glowing? All that omega three. I laugh to myself as I make do with water from the filter jug. Then I set about using her coffee maker.

I rustle up an omelette and have that for breakfast. After I've eaten, and on my second cup of coffee, I check my emails on my iPad.

There's one from Silvanov, the head partner in the security firm I work for.

Thanks for the sit rep yesterday. I've talked with Andrius about the friend and her situation. Sounds like it could develop. Keep an eye on it, and if things worsen, tell her to call us. Cassie will speak with her. We are still training the first tranche, but we do have a few of your guys on board. Priest recommended Legend if she needs someone ASAP.

So far as the client goes, social media is all clean and good. No threats detected. Nothing being said on the dark web either that we've picked up. Nothing about the dog or who might be responsible. The father has some ideas; will discuss later. Agree with your assessment. Seems out of place. Keep alert.

BTW - We need to come up with a fucking name for this organization. Can't agree on one. Any suggestions feel free to throw them in the ring.

K

I smirk at the way he even swears in emails. Silvanov is abrasive at times, but I respect him. What you see is what you get. Plus, he's the very definition of still waters running deep. If you didn't know him, you'd only see the asshole. But after spending time in his company, I've seen how much he loves his wife and kid.

If anyone had told me two years ago I'd be working for an ex-Bratva Pakhan, I'd have laughed at them. Yet, here I am. Life throws weird curveballs at times.

I don't know much about his past, but he's doing the right thing now. He's even renouncing his Russian citizenship and keeping his British citizenship as he applies to become a Greek resident.

Andrius, his other partner, is more like me. I clicked with him more easily. We are both similar. We keep our cards close to our chests. Neither of us put on a show of strength in the same way Konstantin does. He is the kind of person who walks into a room and leads things from the get go, while Andrius is in the corner, watching, calculating, making mental notes. I'm similar. It's what comes from my line of work.

Watching, waiting, calibrating, readjusting. It's what I do.

I'm having to do some of that now. Readjusting. There's a change in circumstances, one I haven't informed my employers of yet. Thing is, I've crossed a line, and by rights, I should tell them to send someone like Target in to replace me and walk away.

I won't.

I haven't even scratched the surface of whatever this is between me and Carolina, and I don't intend to walk away. It's rare I find myself with such an overwhelming attraction to anyone. She's broken through the thick veil of fog that simmers between me and the world. Everything is muted but not her. She's loud and vibrant. Carolina is glorious technicolor compared to the mundanity I see everywhere else.

Even on my land in Montana, where I can breathe and enjoy the beauty, more and more, the veil descends, dulling everything. I realize with a shock it's been absent these past two days. I might be livid with her at times, but at least I'm *feeling*.

The realization is profound and unsettling.

I started to get concerned at the dulling of everything. The only times I felt alive in the past year or so were either working, focused on a target, or riding far too fast to be safe. Galloping over the fields is exhilarating, and I would push too hard, too fast.

The rest of my time I spent as if in semi-hibernation.

Not here. Not with Carolina.

I scrub a hand over my short beard and contemplate sending an email back to Konstantin stating sit rep: *All is well, but by the way, I'm fucking the client*.

Yeah, he's going to lose his shit. Which is hypocritical if you ask me because I know a little of how he met his partner, and he basically kidnapped her, but he's the boss, and I'm the employee. It all brings me back to—do I tell them to send Target in?

That way, I can either walk away before things get too deep, or I can stick around and ...what? Date her? This isn't that.

I don't know what it is, but it's not that. We aren't going to go from last night to dinner and a movie.

The idea of Target here, in her space, guarding her, has my hackles rising.

No. Not happening.

I shut the cover on my iPad. What K and Andrius don't know won't hurt them. It's not as if I'm unmotivated to do my job properly. You could say I'm more so now.

I've been inside the woman. Felt her come around me, held her tight as she slept. No one else can watch over her the way I can.

More, she's the first person I've shared a sleeping space with in many years. Normally, on the rare occasions I do bump uglies, I'm out of there as soon as the bumping is done. This time, I wanted to stay, and what's more I slept for hours, which is rare.

I swear to myself, no more screwing. We will go back to client and protection. I'll guard her, and when my work here is done, I'll do this right. Until then, we aren't touching each other. She'll understand. I'm sure of it.

\* \* \*

Three days later, and I'm sitting in the same space in the living room, at ten am in the morning, wondering how the hell I got into this damn mess. My *no-more-fucking* rule of three days ago lasted all of a few hours. I went upstairs to wake her up, and give her coffee in bed, and one thing led to another.

It keeps happening.

Days of it.

Sex.

Dirty, sweaty, hot sex.

I don't want to stop. I'm not sure I can.

I ought to. I really should. I'm getting in too deep, and I think she is too.

"Hey."

Carolina's silky voice reaches me from the doorway. I turn to her, and my heart lurches. She's wearing one of my button-downs, and it looks incredible on her.

"Come here," I say as I crook my finger.

She smiles and walks over to me. Her hair is fluffier than usual, and she smells of coconut. She's obviously had a shower and washed and dried her hair but hasn't styled it yet. Her face is devoid of makeup, and I take a good, long look.

This is Carolina stripped down and at her most vulnerable.

Her skin is amazingly flawless, and her bone structure is exquisite. Not many women can look this good without a little cosmetic help.

"You're beautiful," I tell her.

"No, I'm not." Her reply is immediate. As if she's used to saying it in response to compliments. What the hell?

"You absolutely are."

"No." She shakes her head and smiles at me. "It's okay," she says. "I don't mind. I know Mummy is the beautiful one, and my brother. You should see him. He breaks hearts wherever he goes. I'm the smart one."

My scowl must make her pause because she brushes her hand over my brow, smoothing.

"I'm not saying I'm hideous." She laughs. "I know I'm not gorgeous in the way a lot of my family are. I've been called a *handsome woman* enough times to know the truth. When the papers write about you as a handsome woman, and the daughter of a great beauty and world-famous supermodel, you get the hint."

Fuck me. I want to tear those bastards in the media apart. The irony of it is she *is* beautiful. From the first moment I saw her photograph, long before I felt any attraction to her, I had her down as beautiful but not interesting. Now, I've got to know her, I realize I was way off the mark. She's both.

I pull her onto my knee, and she straddles me, the shirt riding up to show her thighs.

"You want to know something?" I ask her.

She nods.

"I think you're more beautiful than your mother."

She gives a bark of laughter. "Don't be ridiculous." She smacks my chest, and she really doesn't seem upset but more incredulous. "That's silly."

"No. I mean it. Your face is so damn ... alive. When you talk and get passionate, a million expressions can cross your features in a moment. It's like there's a whole universe alive in you. It's rare, Carolina, to meet someone so ... vital."

Her smile drops, and she blinks rapidly. "Damn it, Samuel. Don't go saying shit like that. You'll make me cry."

I pull her in, done talking, and take her mouth in a heated kiss. She moans against me and responds immediately.

It's not long before we're moving against one another, grinding and trying to get relief. I pick her up and place her on the thick sheepskin rug she has by the fire.

"Are you going to fuck me on the rug?" she asks, her eyes blazing.

"Yeah, I am."

"Oh, wow. I've always wanted to do it on this rug. It's why I bought it."

I frown. Not that I like talking about him, but she had a boyfriend until recently.

"Why didn't you?"

"It's not clean." She mimics a deep voice, and I gather that's what her ex said.

What an idiot.

"Looks clean enough to me. I bet he never did you on the beach then?"

"God no. Would you?" Her voice is breathy.

"Yeah, I fucking would. And on the grass. Right out there on your lawn."

She laughs. "We'd probably get arrested. In fact, I ought to pull the blinds."

"No. Don't. And don't move either. Take that shirt off and lie back, legs spread, and wait for me."

"The postman might come. Someone could see."

"Yeah, let them."

I take the stairs two at a time, and when I return, condom in hand, she's done as I said. She's on her back, knees drawn up and legs spread.

Her pussy is wet, so she's evidently not too concerned about being seen.

Christ, I need to taste her. I drop to my knees and crawl to her, before falling between her legs and sucking her pussy into my mouth.

"Oh, my God. Your mouth should be illegal." She pushes against me, pressing her pussy to my face, and I inhale her amazing scent.

I want her, so I work her ruthlessly until her legs are quivering, and she comes gasping. Not wasting time, needing to be inside her like my life depends on it, I tear my clothes off and roll the condom I fetched down my length.

Then I flip her over so she's on her hands and knees, and with my hand between her shoulder blades, I push her down onto her elbows, so her ass and pussy are in the air. Christ, what a view.

I trail my finger through her juices and push inside her, adding a second and watching mesmerized as they disappear in and out of her. She's wet and ready for me, but the view is so damn hot.

"Stop teasing," she moans.

I laugh and slap her right ass cheek. "Yes, ma'am."

Lining myself up, I push into her and take it slow, relishing her grip on me.

If the postman does indeed walk up her drive now and peer in the window, he's going to get quite a view. Her on her elbows, me piling into her from behind. It only adds to the moment.

"I bet you'd like it if you were seen, wouldn't you?" I increase my speed, and she groans in response.

From this position I can angle myself so my ring thrusts against her G-spot each time I push in. I angle my hips and thrust again.

"Oh, God." She wails the words.

I'm too far gone to take satisfaction in her coming undone like this. I fuck her hard and fast. She's moaning, whimpering, and her legs are shaking, and I'm almost mindless with need.

I chase my orgasm like a junkie chasing a hit. I need her to come first, though. I hold onto her hips and focus on hitting that spot relentlessly.

She screams, actually screams, and collapses onto her front as she comes so hard her pussy pulses around me, setting me off.

I pull out of her and rip the condom off and grab my cock as it erupts. I spray her pussy and her

asshole with wave after wave of cum.

Fascinated, I watch her pussy pulse. Christ, it's literally twitching as she breathes harshly, her cheek pressed into the rug.

Gathering up some of my cum, I push it into her, and she whimpers. I do it again and again. Soon, she's pushing against me, and I alternate with strokes over her clit. With the thumb of my other hand, I scoop up a thick glob of cum and press into her asshole. She said fingers were okay. She freezes.

"Relax, princess. Fingers only," I promise.

My thumb gathers more cum to use as lube, and soon I'm knuckle deep in her. My cock is hard again, but I don't have another condom.

"You on the pill?" I ask, voice harsh.

"Yes."

"I'm clean."

"Me too."

I jerk my dick. "Can I fuck you bare?"

"God, yes. Fill me up."

Her words set my libido ablaze, and I thrust into her without warning.

"Fuck," she yells.

I stop. Did I hurt her?

"Don't stop, asshole."

I grin and push in farther. Reaching around her front, I play with her clit as I fuck her and push my thumb in and out of her fluttering asshole.

Even though I've only just come, I'm so hot for her, I won't last. I strum her clit, and she fists her hands in the rug, panting like she's running a race.

When she comes, her pussy and ass contract around my cock and thumb, and I groan as I unload in her.

Wave after wave of pleasure floods through me, and I come harder than I ever have in my life.

I collapse over her back, taking us both down to the rug, and rolling onto my side as I stay inside her. "I want to stay here forever," I say. "With my cock buried deep in you."

She gives a drunken laugh, all slurred sounding and dazed. "Yeah, it might make life difficult."

I hitch my hips a little, and the feel of her around me is exquisite even though my dick is now ultra sensitive.

I cup her pussy in my hand, and we stay connected this way for a long time, as our breathing slowly returns to normal. The buzz of the doorbell has her shrieking and rolling away from me, my softening dick slipping out of her.

"Fuck. I hope no one saw this."

She races out of the room, and I try not to laugh. Pulling my sweatpants on, I head to the window and peer out.

There's a man at the door, and he looks like an entitled asshole. I wonder if he's her boss or something at the television company. I bang on the glass, and he looks at me, eyes widening as he takes me in. I hold up two fingers, in the universal signal for give me a minute. Then I race upstairs and grab my gun. I pull a T-shirt on and a loose shirt covering the holster and go to answer the door.

The man waltzes into the house as if he owns it. "Where is Carolina, and who are you?" he asks.

"Who are you?" I demand, blocking him from going any farther.

"Joseph. Her boyfriend."

Boyfriend? Is this dude the ex?

I step back, and then my evil side takes over. "Come into the lounge."

The lounge that has a used condom in the empty grate of the fire and reeks of sex.

He walks into the lounge and stops dead when he enters the room. I glance down and see the shirt Carolina had been wearing discarded by the rug. The condom in the empty hearth isn't obvious, but if he looks close enough, he'll see it.

"Carolina," I call out. "Someone's here to see you."

Her footsteps echo on the stairs a few moments later, and she walks into the living room, stopping dead two steps inside the door.

"Joseph? What are you doing here?"

"Can we talk in private?" he asks, shooting me a disgusted glance. "Without your friend here?"

"This is Reaperman," Carolina says, surprising me by using that name. "You can talk to me with him here. He's my bodyguard."

# Chapter 12

### Carolina

JOSEPH STARES AT SAMUEL, and his disgust is slowly tinged by a look of nervousness as he takes in all Samuel is. Even if Joseph wasn't a cheating sack of shit, he'd pale in comparison to the magnificence that is my bodyguard.

"Bodyguard? Why?"

"None of your business."

"Is this why you aren't at work? I thought it was because of me and Lexy. You've missed this week's show."

I laugh. "Oh, dear, you do have an inflated sense of your importance in my life, don't you?"

"Don't be a bitch, Carolina. It doesn't suit you."

Samuel takes two steps forward. "Call her a bitch again, and you're leaving."

"Only Carolina gets to tell me to leave." Joseph stands up to Samuel, even though I know him well enough to tell he's nervous.

"Call me a bitch again, and you can leave," I say with a sickly-sweet smile. "Now, I'm really rather busy. What do you want?"

"Busy. I bet you are." He narrows his eyes at me. "I want to talk, in private. Things with Lexy were a mistake. It wasn't all my fault, though. You'd been so busy. We were neglecting one another. I should have talked to you. But instead, I took the easy way out of it all. The wrong way."

"By burying your dick in another woman's pussy? Yeah, I'd say it was the wrong way." Samuel rolls his eyes.

Oh, boy, not helpful, hot bodyguard.

"Samuel, can you give us a moment, please?"

He gives me a disgusted look but nods. "I'll be right across the way in the kitchen if you need me."

Once he's left the room, Joseph looks at me. "Close the damn door. I don't want that fucking neanderthal listening in to what I have to say."

"You're awfully demanding for someone who has cheated on me, more than once, lied to me, humiliated me at work."

He walks to the door and closes it with deliberate calm. "Yes, well, you got your revenge I see."

He points to the fireplace, and I glance over to see the used condom.

"Don't bother trying to deny it; this place stinks of sex."

I laugh. "I wasn't going to deny it."

"How desperate, having sex with your bodyguard. So D list, dahlink."

My arm is moving before I can consider whether it's a good idea. I hit him square across the face.

"At least he can make a woman come, you pathetic limp dick."

A look I've never seen before crosses Joseph's face, and I take a step back, but not before he's hit me in return.

The back of his palm slices across my face like a blade. The pain is immediate. My cheek is on fire. I stumble, and more pain hits me, my leg screaming as I knock into the table, sending it over. The heavy vase on it crashes to the floor. I grab the curtain and try to balance.

As the door bursts open, my ass hits the floor, and I stay there, dazed.

Samuel storms into the room like a tornado. He takes one look at me and grabs Joseph by the neck. He walks him backward until Joe's back hits the wall. Samuel doesn't let go, and Joe's eyes begin to bulge.

Shit. Samuel is savage when it comes to defending me.

He claws at the hands wrapped firmly around his throat.

"You hit her? You fucking *hit* her?" Samuel shakes Joseph like a ragdoll and then lifts him clean in the air.

He's going to kill him. Then he'll go to prison, and the best thing to happen to me in years will be gone.

"Let him go," I shout as I pull myself to stand.

"I'm going to fucking *end* you," Samuel seethes. He drops Joseph but then punches him in the gut. Joe bends double, gasping, and Samuel hits him with an uppercut to his jaw, sending Joseph crashing back, over the chair, to land sprawled on the wooden floor.

"Stop it, for God's sake," I scream as I grab hold of Samuel.

He whirls on me, eyes ablaze. "You still care what happens to this piece of shit?"

"No." I shake my head. "I care what happens to *you*. If you go to prison for killing him, what will I do then? You can't come into my life like this, bursting in and upending it all, showing me fucking heaven, and then get yourself thrown in prison."

"Heaven?" His breathing calms as his gaze focuses on me more intently, and the fire raging there tamps down.

"Yes. You great big idiot. These days with you have been the most exciting of ... well, my entire life. Don't waste it on him. He's not worth it."

"How touching." Joseph stands, rubbing his stomach and wincing. "He's still going to rot in prison because I'm filing assault charges."

"I think I'll have quite the bruise." I touch my cheek gingerly. "You do, and I'll tell everyone you hit me. What sort of a man are you? You beat on your ex and then cry to the police when her bodyguard defends her? I expect the newspapers would quite like that story."

"I came here to help, you ungrateful fucking bitch. You can forget that now. Learn the hard way what I know."

He heads to the door, but Samuel has hold of him in three long strides. "What do you know?"

"Sorry. I don't talk to men who beat people up, or whores. And by the way, before you lay one more finger on me, I have connections in *very* high places. I can have you out of this country before you can blink, and you won't ever see Carolina or her dry pussy again."

"It's not dry with him," I add conversationally, and Joseph sends me daggers with his pretty green eyes.

"Can't kick me out of the country if you're dead." Samuel taps the side of his head, like the meme, and I burst out laughing. "Come on, Joseph, don't make me bust up my knuckles. Spill."

Joseph stares at me as if he's waiting for me to come to his rescue, which is patently absurd.

Samuel sighs as if all patience is lost and grabs Joseph forcefully. He reaches for his gun, and shoves it right in Jo's open mouth.

Joseph squeaks around the gun, and Samuel taps it against his teeth. "I literally don't give a fuck. I will blow your brains out all over these cream walls if you don't tell me right now."

Joe starts to talk, babbling around the gun and making no sense. Samuel withdraws the gun and wipes the muzzle on Joe's shirt.

"In English, please."

"Lexy is crazy."

Is that it? What he came here to tell me? He's lost it.

"So?" I don't understand him at all. "Firstly, I don't think so; I've worked with the girl for the past year. Yes. She's clearly stupid if she got involved with you, but even if she is crazy? So what? She's not my problem. I'm not her friend any longer."

"I don't think you're getting the importance of what I'm saying. She's really deluded. Scarily so, and she didn't like me. Her sleeping with me had nothing to do with me."

Now, I'm utterly confused.

"Then what was it to do with?"

"You."

He sags a little and runs his hands through his hair. "She's obsessed with you. Wants to be you in so many ways. She thinks you're so sophisticated and, how did she put it?" He taps his finger against his mouth. "Oh, yeah, she said you're classy. A class act. She went on about how no matter the lengths she went to, she'd never command the respect you do because you were born into it. I thought she was young, naive, maybe a bit envious, and I'll admit, I took advantage. She only wanted me because you had me. Haven't you noticed how she's taken on so many of the specific intern roles you used to do way back in the day? How she shows up on nights out where it's the top brass, but she pushes her way in? Then hangs around you, being all creepy. The way she's changed how she dresses?"

I did notice that one. Lexy has begun to copy my style, or what she thought was my style, which is to say the clothes I wear for work. I figured she simply thought it was the way to dress at the production studio.

"Someone took a photo of you the other day, and it was on some gossip site. All it said was you had your hair cut. She's now cut her hair."

He holds his hands up and glances at Samuel. "Just taking my phone out, alright?" Slowly, he takes his phone out, hands shaking slightly. "See?"

It's a pic of Lexy with hair exactly like my new cut.

"I went to her apartment two nights ago because she was sending me some weird messages about you, and she asked me if I wanted a drink and something to eat. I said I needed the bathroom at one point, and walked past her bedroom and noticed a room at the end I hadn't really paid attention to when I'd been there before. I went in on some weird inkling and ... well. Look."

He swipes again, and I almost faint. "Oh. My. God."

The entire back wall of the room is nothing but my face. Cuttings of me. Paparazzi pictures. But also what are clearly stills from television appearances that she must have screenshot.

"Let me see." Samuel grabs the phone and stares at the picture, his jaw working.

"You can leave now." He shoves the phone back at Joseph and grabs him by the scruff of the neck as he walks him out of the room.

A moment later, I hear the front door go, and then Samuel stalks into the lounge.

"This whole thing just changed. There are two threats now. One is personal. That's a whole new

threat level. We aren't leaving this house."

He takes out his phone and places a call. "Simon. Want to earn some extra bucks? Yeah, pounds, whatever; this is serious." He listens for a moment. "Good. I need you outside, with someone you trust implicitly, watching the front of this house, twenty-four seven from now on."

He's silent a moment as he listens to Simon speak.

"Not sure how long. I'm going to be making a few calls to the police. For the next few days I think, at least."

He listens some more. Says a terse bye and hangs up.

"I can't believe this," I say, shaking my head. "Life just keeps on coming at me." Trapped. Stuck in this house, like a sitting duck. Thank God, I have Samuel with me, but this still sucks. Big time. I need a glass of wine. I glance at the clock on the wall. Shit, it's not even lunchtime. Samuel will blow up if I pour wine now. I'm craving it, though.

The thought stops me short. More sex would take the edge off, but am I really at the point where I either need to fuck or drink to deal with life. At some point, have I gone beyond the hard partying, but intellectual, stereotype that is the public perception of me, to something much more serious.

Do I have a problem?

The craving is quite strong, and I realize that most days now, I drink. Wine o'clock with the girls from work. A glass or two with dinner in the evenings. Mummy doesn't drink much, but my father loves his wine, whisky, and gin. Mummy might have a tiny glass of champagne or prosecco now and again, or a small gin and tonic. If she really wants to tie one on, she'll have a cocktail, but she makes them weak and rarely finishes the whole thing. My brother, though, he drinks and does drugs, and our Grandmama on Daddy's side drinks like a fish. She must be pickled in gin by now.

Crap. I'm so blindsided by the sudden realization that I may have something of an issue with alcohol that I don't really contemplate the fact I have a stalker, on top of the death threats from my father's publishing business.

"Lord Hennigborne? Yes, sir, Samuel here." Samuel's words bring me back to the reality of this moment. "Some new intel has come to light. You need to share it with the police, I do believe. You are?" He pauses and frowns. "Since when? Who is it? Sorry? Marcus?" His frown turns positively thunderous. "From the guys you hired me through? Okay. Yeah, send him over."

He hangs up and turns to look at me. "That's unexpected."

"What is?"

"Your father has hired on some more help from my agency."

I frown. "Another bodyguard?"

"No. He's not working in that capacity. He used to be intelligence. Has a lot of ways of finding out need-to-know intel and worked with a wide variety of agencies. Silvanov sent him over."

"Silvanov?"

"Yeah," he says. "One of the men I work for. The guy I told you about. The ex-Bratva dude." He has mentioned them, but I had forgotten his surname. Samuel continues. "They've sent Marcus over to help your father look into this because apparently the police are being useless, and your father found something out he thought might need further investigation."

"What?"

He sighs and rubs his jaw. "Your guess is as good as mine. He'll be here in thirty minutes. I'm going to get changed."

He grabs the condom and the shirt, and as he passes me by, he kisses me on the head. "This will get sorted; don't worry, okay?"

Then he pauses. "The alarms are all set. Please come immediately and get me if anyone turns up at the door before I'm done in the shower."

Less than ten minutes later, he's downstairs, wearing jeans and a fitted T-shirt, holster on clear display with no button-down to cover it. He leans against the door, hand resting on the gun at his hip. That shouldn't be sexy, but it is.

"You were super quick in the shower."

"I was in the Navy." He smiles at me. "You want a drink?"

I nod enthusiastically.

"Tea, coffee?"

"A glass of wine," I say. "Don't judge me. Today has been a head fuck."

He sighs but says nothing as he heads into the kitchen. Today isn't the day, but I've decided I am going to tackle this problem. I don't want to end up like my grandmother, bitter and lonely, and having the first drink of the day as soon as *the sun is over the yardarm*, as she says. Once this shitshow that is my current life calms down, I'll deal with it. I swear it to myself.

Samuel hands me the glass of wine, white, which is what I would have asked for, and a packet of dried fruits and nuts. "Eat if you're going to drink," he says.

He's bossy, but I am growing to like it.

He putters about in the kitchen, while I nibble at my nails and drink the wine, managing a handful of the snack. I feel too nervous and queasy to eat much.

When the doorbell goes, I jump a mile, even though I'm expecting it. Samuel strides to answer it, and moments later enters the living room with a tall, ruggedly handsome man by his side. The man is muscular but not as broad built as Samuel, or quite as tall. He looks a little older and has dark hair.

"This is Carolina," Samuel says.

"Nice to meet you," the man answers. "I'm Marcus, and I'm working with your father to investigate what is going on."

His accent is British, Yorkshire or Lancashire, I think. It's hard to tell which exactly. Northern, though, for sure.

"So what information do you have?" he asks Samuel.

"You share anything you find out with me from now on." Samuel is pissed; it's evident in the set of his jaw.

"I answer to Andrius and K, not you."

"Fucking call them then because I can't protect her if I don't know everything."

Marcus scrubs his palm over his face.

"Now." Samuel sets his jaw.

Marcus stalks out of the room, and I hear his low voice but not the words as he talks. A few minutes later, he re-enters. "Silvanov says he'd mentioned Carolina's father had some thoughts on this and was going to call you today to discuss as things became clearer. From now on, I share everything with you, and vice versa."

Samuel gives him a viciously feral smile. "Thank you, fuck face."

"Do you mind giving us a few minutes?" Marcus addresses me.

I nod and walk to the door, but Samuel's voice stops me. Low and firm.

"She stays."

## Chapter 13

#### Samuel

I'LL fucking give Andrius and K it with both barrels for pulling this. I don't give a shit if Lord Uphis-own-arse demanded Marcus' involvement be kept quiet, or that K was going to get around to telling me at a snail's pace; I'm most definitely a need-to-know part of this equation.

"What is this new threat?" Marcus asks, as he sips at the tea Carolina made for him.

She offered drinks and niceties and tried her best to clear some of the tension from the air. It hasn't worked.

"Ladies first," I reply as I gesture for him to speak.

"Don't take it out on me, Reaperman. I was simply following orders. The client asked for my involvement to be kept on the downlow."

"Stupid to keep shit from the person protecting the Lord's daughter." I shake my head.

"Yes and no. It wasn't a long-term plan, for fuck's sake. They were going to call you today. Stop getting your panties in a twist. They simply wanted me to have a few days to look into this as it is highly sensitive."

"So? Spill." I fold my arms and wait.

"It seems the people threatening Lord Henningborne and by extension, Carolina, are not from the crime syndicate we believed them to be."

"I thought it was a few influential people who had become too involved with local street level gangs and were upset that they might be identifiable from the, somewhat similar, descriptions of the fictional characters?" Carolina sums the whole thing up succinctly.

"Yes. That's what your father thought. Then something odd happened."

"What?" I lean forward.

"He bumped into one of the people at a function the day before yesterday."

I flash back to that day and remember I spent most of it in bed with Carolina.

"Daddy met one of the men he believes to be behind the threats?" Carolina's face pales.

"Yes." Marcus sips at his tea. "By accident, obviously. Your father wasn't scared, and he followed the man when he went to the gents restroom and confronted him. Asked him what the fuck he thought he was doing. The guy seemed to genuinely have no idea what your father was talking about. Your father showed him some of the threats on his phone, and this dude was livid. Went ballistic. Phoned around the others who were allegedly involved, and none of them were behind it. Of course, your father thinks they might simply be denying it so as not to face the consequences, but that hardly jibes with them being incredibly powerful, and in many ways, dangerous people."

"This is so weird," Carolina says. "There were strong hints in those messages to let Daddy know exactly where they were from without making it obvious to the police."

"Yes, well, it gets weirder." Marcus pauses to eat one of the biscuits arranged on a plate on the table by him.

Seriously? I get the urge to ram it down his throat.

"Jesus fuck, get on with it; you can eat later."

"I'm hungry. Reaperman, chill out. You're going to give yourself high blood pressure."

He finishes chewing, sips some tea, then carries on talking.

"Then your father gets a new message, and this one raised the stakes by threatening more, crazier stuff, if the book wasn't pulled. So he sent this to our guys on Corfu, who forwarded it to a man we work with sometimes. This man is a genius at hacking and figuring out encryption and other issues."

I realize he's talking about Damen.

"Turns out, that message had a very weird origin."

"Go on," I press.

"The message came from the publishing company's head office."

Carolina stares at him, her mouth slack. I can understand her expression because what the fuck?

"Hang on, you mean someone in Daddy's firm was sending the threats?"

"This is where it gets sensitive. The publishing part of the company has been making a loss recently, and there's been a lot of pressure from two of the board members on the media side to sell the publishing arm. They want to focus more on the things that are lucrative; games, mostly. Your father has doggedly refused to sell off the publishing wing because he, rightly in my humble opinion, views it as providing the company with a certain level of kudos. Gravitas if you will."

"What the fuck do you know about business?" I ask Marcus.

"Not my area of speciality but I've been looking at the books, and the publishing arm is denting the profits overall, but it also attracts investment and publicity, and as I say, kudos for the organization overall. There's been a civil war, if you will, in the ranks of the board. This book was garnering a lot of publicity and making it harder to push to sell the publishing wing. It appears that someone from within the organization seeded the threats and sent them out in the hope the book would be pulled. Losses made, reputations damaged, and the publishing wing closed."

Carolina lets out a low laugh. "That's audacious but crazy. So many ways it could go wrong."

"It has gone wrong," I point out. "They've been discovered."

"Not exactly," Marcus answers. "We don't know who is doing this. That's why I'm here. To try to find out. The upshot is, however, that as things stand right now, there doesn't appear to be a genuine threat. You need to stay on a bit longer, but you might be heading home soon, Reaperman."

He grins at me and in that second, I know. He's figured Carolina and me out.

"Yeah, maybe not. Remember the second threat I told you about?" I don't even bother to call him on his shit stirring because I've realized something in the last few minutes as he was talking. I'm not going anywhere. Not unless Carolina tells me to. I don't want to leave. Not here. Not this. *Us*.

I want to stay and see how this plays out. More, I want her to come back to Montana with me and visit and give us a chance to try at something without the spotlight of the media she's always going to have on her here. I don't know, though, if she'll consider it.

"Yes, what is that about?" Marcus suddenly focuses. He's not an idiot, and I have a lot of respect for him, outside of this crap he pulled, and I blame Andrius and Konstantin for that. Not Marcus.

"A dead do ... rat was left on the doorstep a few nights ago, when I first started protection detail here." Crap. I don't look at Carolina, but I think she'll have picked up on my slip. "I figured it was a warning sent to me, and the family, that even with protection, Carolina could be reached. It seems, particularly in light of what you've shared, it wasn't related to the threat to Lord Henningborne.

Carolina's ex came around, and he thinks her colleague is stalking her. It makes it very different. Personal. Messy."

"Yeah," he blows out a whistle. "Very different indeed."

"The police will speak to her, though, won't they?" Carolina says. "If we show them the pictures of me all over her wall. We should have sent the *rat* in for analysis. Fingerprints and the like."

In retrospect, I should have, but the poor animal had no collar or identifying marks, and I wanted it out of her way as quickly as possible.

"Was it a dog?" She's staring at me now, and her gaze is like a laser.

I can't lie to her. By omission to save her heartache, maybe, but not when she's directly asking me.

I nod.

"Oh God." Her moan is awful and goes straight to my stomach.

"Where is it?"

"In the bin," I say.

"What?" Her shriek is piercing.

"Carolina, I can assure you. It was dead; nothing could be done for it."

"That's not the point. If Brutus went missing, I'd lose my mind. He's so important to me. The dog might be micro-chipped. We could give its owners some peace."

I hadn't even thought about that at the time; I simply wanted to dispose of it safely without alerting her to what was really on her doorstep.

"It might also lead us to who did it," Marcus adds.

Shit. I'm starting to realize I fucked up. All I thought about in that moment was not letting her see the poor thing, and it hits me. Even then, right at the start, I wasn't thinking clearly because if you'd have asked me a week before what I'd have done in that situation, I would have said called the police and handed the dog over. Instead, I cleared up all the evidence of anything so that Carolina wouldn't have to face it.

"The trash hasn't been taken yet." Carolina looks out the window. "The poor thing will still be in there." Her eyes turn glassy as tears well.

This is why I didn't want her to know.

"Let me deal with it, if you're okay with that?" Marcus asks me, and I nod. "If the dog has a microchip, we can inform the owners of its death, but it might also help us put a timeline together of when the dog went missing and where."

"I can't believe Lexy would kill a dog, if it is her. I thought I knew her. A little at least." Carolina takes a big sip of her wine, and for once I don't have the urge to tell her off. I think I'd be day drinking too if I was her.

"I think it was her," I say. It all adds up. The dog being so like Brutus is fucked up. Cold if it was the gang as originally suspected, but much more in line with the white-hot hatred of obsession.

People think stalkers are all male, but they aren't.

"Most female stalkers want a bond. It's common they pick someone they work with, or who has a caring, mentoring role of some sort over them. Perhaps a teacher or a therapist." Marcus shrugs. "Does she work under you?"

Carolina nods. "She's an intern, and I guess I took her under my wing. When I think about it now, I can see there were times she'd get intense, or overly familiar, but I put it down to her being young and, to a degree, naïve. There's something almost childlike about her."

Marcus taps his fingers against his thigh. "It's odd, though. Why suddenly do something so

aggressive? Has she done anything like this before?"

"Not so far as I'm aware," Carolina says. "I mean, she screwed my boyfriend, so I suppose that counts as not too friendly behavior."

"Not the same thing, though," Marcus says. "Her having sex with your boyfriend probably wasn't an act of aggression against you. It's more likely it was her way of feeling close to you. As if you shared something, as fucked up as that sounds. So what changed?"

"Do you have Joseph's number?" I ask Carolina.

She nods and hands me her phone with the number on the screen.

"Can I call him from your phone?" I ask her.

She nods again.

He answers on the third ring. "Hey, babe."

"She's not your babe anymore," I snarl.

"I'm hanging up."

"No, wait. I need to ask you something." I put him on speaker.

His sneering laugh sets my teeth on edge, but I don't respond.

"Did you say anything to Lexy? Anything at all that could have made her upset?"

He scoffs, "Of course I did. I told her she was a crazy bitch."

"I mean before then. Did you ever say anything to her about Carolina that may have made her angry?"

Silence. It tells me more than words could, but I need the details.

"Joseph. Do we need to play games with guns again? What did you say?"

"Christ, okay. You're a psycho, you know that?"

"Talk."

He sighs, and then he spills.

"About a week ago, before I saw the room, we were hanging out. I was getting sick of her constantly asking me about Carolina. It was starting to get really boring, and so I said to her that Carolina didn't give a shit about her. I might have lost my temper a little, and it made me more blunt than necessary, but I told her that Carolina wouldn't give her a second thought outside of their interactions at work. I may have hinted that Carolina thought she was creepy."

Carolina stands and waves her arms in the air. "What the fuck?"

"I know. Listen, I'm sorry. Okay? I fucked up. I have to go, though. I'm late." He hangs up abruptly.

I hand Carolina her phone back. She stares at the screen and then throws it across the room and storms out.

"Jesus, she's a fiery one." Marcus smirks. "Better go after her. See if you can smooth things over. I'll start looking into this woman for you, okay? Hey, this might turn out to be a short gig after all. Both cases might be solved ASAP, and then you can head on home."

He grins, and I want to punch him.

"I know you know." I roll my eyes at him.

"Hard not to, the way you two look at one another. Do the guys in Greece know?"

"Nope."

"Fair enough. They won't hear it from me."

"I'll let you out. I can set the alarm then." I follow him into the hallway and almost trip over Brutus who is staring up the stairs where Carolina must have disappeared.

"I'll look into this young woman. See if there are any other stalking incidences in her past.

Usually with men there are. Not always with women. It's a different pattern."

"I thought you were intelligence," I say. "You're sounding like a shrink."

"Both, my friend. I got a degree in criminal psychology a long time ago. Worked for the cops for a bit, then moved into intelligence. Stalking was my specialist area of interest for a long time."

I consider him for a beat. "There's a friend of Carolina's you should meet. She's having some issues with a guy. I'd be interested in your take on it."

"Of course. Let me know."

He nods at me before turning and jogging down the steps. He pauses to rifle through the bin. "What color bag is the dog in?" he shouts.

"Yellow tie trash bag."

He hauls something out a few moments later, nose wrinkling. "Got it."

I lock the door, set the alarm, and go to find Carolina.

## Chapter 14

#### Carolina

Not wanting to deal with Samuel immediately, I run a bath. When he knocks on my door, I shout to him to come back in an hour. "I'm having a soak," I say.

Normally, he'd join me, but he picks up on my leave-me-alone-vibes, and the tread of his footsteps echoes down the hallway.

One hour later, on the damn dot, he knocks at the door again, and this time he doesn't wait to be invited in.

"You lied to me," I say as soon as he enters the room.

"Not a bad lie. I didn't want you to be upset."

"I can't do this if you're going to lie." We haven't talked about a *this*, or an *us*, but we are both aware one exists.

"Okay. No more lies. I promise."

"Not even if you think it is to protect me. I don't want it."

"I promise."

I brighten. "You were kind of savage, you know. With Joseph."

"He deserved it. Did it put you off me? Seeing me like that?"

No more lies.

"No. It turned me on."

He seems taken aback by that.

"Does that disturb you?"

He smiles. "No. It's not what I was expecting, but it doesn't disturb me."

I watch him carefully. "You have bad dreams. Nightmares. You talk about wind speed, and distances, and sometimes you shout out."

He flinches. "I say shit you can understand? Clear words? In my sleep?"

"Yeah. Haven't other girlfriends told you the same?"

His gaze softens. "Carolina, I haven't slept with anyone the way I do with you, as in all night long, for a very long time."

For some reason, even though the jealous devil inside of me likes to hear that, his words hurt my heart. "Why not?"

He shrugs. "I haven't been in the head space to want that. To want anything intimate really."

"But you do with me."

It's not a question because he's as intimate with me as two people can get. We don't only screw like rabbits, although we do that too. But we've talked into the wee small hours. We've taken baths together and gone for walks with Brutus. We've watched one of his favorite movies and one of mine,

and we both hated the other's choice. It's been an intense few days, and I feel as if in some ways I know him better than friends I've had in my life for decades.

"I do," he says. "I'd like to think we can carry this on."

There it is. The words I've longed for but also dreaded.

He smiles at me and takes hold of my hand. "Carolina, I'm falling in love with you. I know it sounds fucking insane because it's been such a short time, but it's the truth."

"I am with you," I reply.

"It looks like things might be starting to get sorted for you here. If we can deal with Lexy, and the threats against your father turn out to be fabricated, then you won't need a bodyguard. But I hope you'll still want me around."

This man. This big, inked, powerful man who is every single stereotype of a bad boy, and savage as fuck when he needs to be, is putting it all on the line for me. The vulnerability in his gaze makes my chest hurt because he's opening himself up for rejection, and I'm about to deliver it.

"Samuel."

"Call me Sam." He squeezes my hand. "Few people do, but those closest to me do, so it seems right coming from you."

Christ, talk about hammering each emotional nail in.

"Sam...I want what you're talking about. I do. No one has made me feel the way you do in this short time we've had together."

His face falls, and his mouth tightens. "I'm sensing a but."

"Yeah, there's a but. I can't commit to you."

He huffs out a laugh. "Jesus, is that all? I'm not asking for marriage, Carolina. Simply a desire on both our parts to take this forward."

"I can't do that."

He lets go of my hand, stands, and begins to pace the room. "Why not?" His tone is hard.

"It's me, not you." Oh, for pity's sake, did I really say that?

He laughs again, but this time it's bitter. "Jesus. Sweetheart. I clearly read this all kinds of wrong, and for that, I'm sorry. No need for you to say any more. I'll call Target or someone in, and they can take over looking after you."

I stand and walk to him, about to tell him how wrong he is. To explain how badly I worded this. I'm a nervous wreck, and it makes it difficult for me to speak what is on my mind clearly. What I said and the way I said it isn't what's in my heart. I *do* want him, but I need to be strong and well in myself first. I want time to confront my demons and get myself in a place where I don't need a glass of wine first thing in a morning, but my phone goes, and when I glance at the screen I see it is Lexy.

My heart skips a beat.

"It's her." I pick the phone up and show the screen to Samuel. "What do I do?"

He's immediately all business. "Answer it."

"Hi, Lexy." I try to keep my voice steady and friendly.

"Hey, there. How are you doing? How come you haven't been at work? I've been worried about you."

I put her on speaker and raise my brows at Samuel. I don't know what the hell to say.

"I, erm ... have some personal stuff going on." Then I get inspired. "I split up with Joseph. He cheated on me."

She makes a scoffing sound in the back of her throat. "What an epic dick. I'm sorry, Carolina. He wasn't good enough for you. The man is a loser. I know you must be hurt, but at least now you know

how unworthy of you he is. Most of us in the office could see it, you know? I wanted to talk to you about it so often, but I didn't feel I had the right. I'm sorry you found out this way, though. It must be hurtful. Even if in the long run, it will be so much better for you to be rid of the dead weight that he is. Do you know who he cheated with?"

"I don't. He admitted that he cheated but didn't tell me who with. I suppose it doesn't really matter now that we're over. At least I know it isn't anyone at work." I'm pushing it now, but I wonder whether she has any guilt at all about what she's done. "I trust my colleagues, and I don't think there's anyone in the office who would stoop so low as to do that to me. We all get along so well; it wouldn't make any sense. And if what you say is true, and a lot of you have been thinking that he's not worthy of me, then it makes even less sense."

There's a long beat of silence, and I can hear her breathing for a creepy few seconds before she speaks again.

"Exactly. Even if he had told you who it was, it would probably be a lie." She gives a bitter laugh. "I expect he'd tell you it was someone you knew just to make you feel bad. You can't believe anything that man says. Honestly, I didn't know him that well obviously, but he just seemed such a nasty piece of work to me. Why don't we meet for a glass of wine? Get out and make yourself feel better?"

I glance at Samuel, and he nods.

"Sure. Erm, when?"

"This evening?" she asks. "Eight, at Isabel's?"

"Okay, see you then."

Isabel's is a private members club, but I'll be able to take Samuel because I can sign him in as my guest.

"What's the plan?" I ask him.

"I'm not sure. I'm going to call Marcus."

He rings his colleague and puts him on speaker.

"You must be psychic," Marcus says. "I've just finished talking to a vet. I called a local practice, and they asked me to bring the dog in. They scanned the micro chip, and records show it went missing from another practice in the area after the dog had been put to sleep due to having cancer."

"She didn't kill the dog?" I ask, and the relief is immense.

"No. She stole it from the veterinary practice when it was waiting to be taken to the crematorium.

"How the hell did she know they had a dog of the same breed as Brutus?" I ask.

He chuckles. "She volunteers there once a month, and I think it was pure coincidence. I think what happened is that she got upset, for whatever reason, and she took the dog and decided to leave you a message. It's fucked up, but it isn't the same level of dangerous behavior as having killed a dog would be. There's more. She's also wanted in France for harassment and financial fraud. They're looking at extraditing her."

Holy shit.

"We were calling because Lexy rang," I say. Samuel shoots me an annoyed glare, but I shrug it off.

"What did she want? Hang on a minute," he says. "Yeah a Big Mac and fries, and a Coke please."

"Healthy," I say sarcastically.

"A man's got to eat," he replies.

A moment later, he pays, and there's the crinkle of a paper bag being handed over. "Okay, go on. I'm driving again," he says.

"She wants to meet," Samuel says before I can speak this time. "We've arranged for Carolina to

meet her at eight this evening at a private members club, but I'm thinking we simply send the police."

There's a pause. Marcus sighs. "That's a shitty idea."

"Why? They want her for extradition. To France. Let them deal with her."

"It's hard to make those sorts of charges stick, and if Carolina can get her to say something about what she's been doing to her, on tape, then she can be charged here if the case in France falls through."

Samuel scowls. "No way. It's not safe."

I hate the idea of her doing this again to someone else. I'm not a coward. Never have been. It's one thing I can confidently say about myself. "No," I interrupt. "I want to meet her. How dangerous can it be if you are both with me? She didn't kill the dog; we know that now. Yeah, she's messed up, but she isn't totally crazy. Let me see if I can get her to say anything incriminating."

"I don't like it," Samuel argues.

"Maybe you're too close to the situation to be able to see it accurately and professionally," Marcus says.

"Fuck you." Samuel hangs up.

"What the hell?" I demand. "You're so heavy handed sometimes."

"Excuse me for trying to keep you safe." He huffs out a breath.

"I want to do this."

"I doubt very much she's going to give you a confession. It doesn't work like that. It's a big risk for a very low likelihood of a payoff."

"Please, Samuel. It will help me feel as if I've taken a little bit of control back over the situation.

He shakes his head, but in the end nods.

When he walks out of the door, he shoots me a few terse words. "Get ready; once I know what we're doing I'll come and tell you."

As he disappears from view, I get a sinking feeling. I need to tell him what I meant when we were talking about a relationship, but the way he closed down has me scared to bring it up again.

I'll talk to him later, I tell myself. Once I have this meeting with Lexy over with.

By the time evening arrives, I'm a nervous wreck. I'm wearing jeans, a halter top, heels, and a silky jacket. Samuel is in his room getting ready. Marcus is meeting us at the club, and apparently so are the police. It seems Samuel got half his way.

Marcus sent us a file of information over on Lexy. She's not as young as she told everyone at work. She's late twenties and is wanted in France for stalking, financial fraud, and harassment.

I knew she'd lived there for a while, but it seems her time there was spent committing crimes against a family she became obsessed with. She's facing a multitude of charges there, and Marcus says the police will most likely extradite her, but making some of the charges stick might be hard with what he's seen of the evidence.

It means within the next day or two, I could be free to go about life without my bodyguard once more. It hurts to think of him not being here.

It's crazy how fast and hard I've fallen for him. Outside of romance books, I didn't believe things like this happened. I wouldn't exactly call it love at first sight, because first sight was a strange mixture of lust and trepidation. It grew into something strong, however, within a few days of knowing him. Am I still falling, or am I already irrevocably in love? How do I even know? I've never been in love before, and I've spent so long running from my feelings that when I stop and try to face them, it's hard to identify them. One thing I do know is that it will be strange being in this house without Samuel. Then again, if things go to plan, I won't be here either.

The knock on my door makes me jump. God, I'm nervous suddenly. Maybe Samuel is right, and this is crazy.

"Come in," I say as I check myself in my dressing room mirror one last time.

Samuel, or Sam as he asked me to call him, stalks into the room, and my breath catches. Wow, he's so damn striking. In the suit jacket and pants he's wearing, he looks good enough to eat.

I walk up to him and place my hands on his chest. "You look great in that," I tell him.

He gives me a small smile.

Okay, that does it. This conversation can't wait, not totally. I need to at least let him know he misunderstood me, and that I didn't say what I wanted to.

I take a deep breath. "We need to talk later, but for now, I want to say, I wasn't clear earlier. You misunderstood what I was trying to say. I do want to give us a chance. I just think I need some time first to work on myself." I blurt it all out before I can second guess myself or chicken out.

His eyes are focused on me in that intent way he has. "Work on yourself how?"

I dredge up my last remaining shreds of courage. Damn it, this is so hard to say.

"I'm going to go to rehab for a while."

Silence. Nothing but his gaze and silence.

Then he nods and pulls me into his arms. "I think that's a brave thing to do."

I step back and look up at him. "You do?"

"I really do."

I study his face. "You don't seem happy about it."

"I'm happy for you."

"You should be happy for yourself. Rehab means you won't be getting messy me, but put together me."

"Rehab means I won't be getting any you."

Anger flares in me. "What do you mean? You won't be willing to wait for me?"

His eyes soften. "Of course, I'll wait for you. I'd wait however long it takes. I know, though, that rehab often means people change. In big ways, as well as small. Many relationships end. Some might not even begin at all."

He gives me a sad smile, but then he tips my chin up. "And that's okay. If that's what you need, then you must do this. I will wait for you; I promise you that much."

His kiss when it comes is tender and full of sorrow. We tumble back into the room together and hit the bed. We shouldn't do this because we need to be out of here in twenty minutes, but his touch is too much and never enough all at once.

We don't undress, but without even speaking, we find the quickest route to being together. He pushes my jeans down and my top up, and I unzip him and all the time our lips are locked together. Then he's inside me and I'm clinging to him, my face now in his neck. All is right in my world for the long, beautiful minutes we move together.

This isn't sex, this is making love. I blink, not wanting tears to ruin this, and when I come it's gentle waves that wash over me, threatening to tug me under as he breathes hot and damp against my skin finding his own release.

Afterward, a melancholy mood descends on me as I correct my clothing, smooth my hair, and reapply my lipstick.

That felt like a goodbye.

We meet Marcus ten minutes away from the club in a parking lot, as arranged between him and Samuel. Marcus says the police want me to wear a wire and to try to get Lexy to admit some of the

things she's done, if I can.

Samuel seriously isn't happy about this, and his face is taut with pissed off lines.

It's not that I believe there is any danger. Not in a busy bar, with Sam there. I doubt she's going to incriminate herself, though, and I'm nervous as hell about seeing her. However things work out, the police will be waiting in the parking lot of the club to arrest her as soon as they get what they need. She is definitely being charged in France, but if I can get her to admit some of the things she did to me, and that poor dog, then she will be facing charges in the UK too.

"I really don't like this," Samuel says. "It's going to be hard for the mic to pick up anything that's being said with the music in the bar. If Lexy discovers that Carolina is wired, it puts her in more danger."

"What danger?" Marcus says. "We'll be right next to her. Either at the bar, or at the next table. Lexy isn't going to be able to make a move without us intercepting her before she can do any harm."

"I don't get why they need it if they're extraditing her to France."

Marcus finishes attaching the mic to my stomach and pulls my halter top down to cover me.

He sighs and turns to Samuel. "Dude, we've been over this. There's always a risk when you try to imprison someone in a different country. It might be difficult for the French authorities to make the charges stick. Even if they can, but she manages to get a good lawyer, they can argue that it's extreme to make her serve time in another country. This way, she faces justice here too. She faces a legal comeuppance for what she has done to Carolina. I would have thought you'd have wanted that."

Samuel narrows his eyes, and a muscle twitches along his jaw. A sign I have come to recognize means he's losing patience entirely.

When he speaks, his tone is as sharp as glass and dark as coal. "All I care about is that Carolina is safe. I don't care what happens to Lexy, so long as whatever it is makes Carolina safer."

I place my hand on his forearm. "I want to do this," I say. "What she has done is sick. She might do it to other people if we don't stop her. I can't keep my mind from wandering to that poor little dog. Honestly, I think she needs to be in some sort of institution."

"That might be one of the ways she tries to spin her defense," Marcus says.

"If it gets her the treatment she needs, and makes her less of a danger, then that's a good thing." I'm getting tired of us going around in circles, and my anxiety is building. "Can we please just get to the club so I can get myself a drink and wait for her?"

"Of course." Samuel takes my hand and leads me back to the car.

When we reach the club, I sign both men in and then leave them, in order to head into the main room on my own. There are three areas to the club. A dining room, a bar, and finally a small nightclub area. I'm meeting Lexy in the bar. I'm surprised that she is a member here. It's not cheap, and it's not easy to get on the list. I hate the place and rarely come. Mummy got me the membership a few years ago as a birthday present.

I stroll into the bar as if I don't have a care in the world and place my order. I decide on a double vodka and tonic. I really am going to tackle this drinking issue, but tonight I need the burn. I don't think I'm an alcoholic. I don't top my morning OJ up with vodka, but I do drink too much, and I am a mess in other ways. My relationships are often chaotic. I party too hard. I fuck things up, with men in particular. The rehab center I've been looking at on my phone isn't one of those places where you have to be a drug addict or alcoholic to attend. They have room for people who are simply overwhelmed with life too. It means I can spend some time trying to get my head on right before I then try to start a relationship with Sam.

Taking my drink, I walk over to a table that is in a corner far from the bar, where the music is

quieter. I'm hoping it means that what is said can be picked up on my wire. There is also a table behind it and one next to it that are free, either of which the men can take.

I sip at my drink as I wait, my nerves building to an almost unbearable crescendo. It's like razor wire scratching underneath my skin.

I've taken to ripping up the napkin provided with my drink, when a shadow falls over the table. I look up, and my heart lurches. Lexy is smiling down at me, and she's wearing my hair. It literally looks like she has pulled the hair from my head and placed it on her own. It's so disconcerting that for a moment I forget myself and simply stare.

She pats her head and gives a small, self-conscious laugh. "I asked for a wavy bob, and it seems you had the same thought." She takes a seat, carefully placing her glass of wine on the table and smiling at me over it. "Isn't it a coincidence that we have exactly the same hair? We're alike in so many ways. Not in some, of course. I haven't had the same life you have. In others, though, in our tastes in things, and our ambition, we're very similar."

My earlier fear morphs into something else. Something dark and tinged at the edges with blood red rage. This woman is shameless. She lies in the most brazen manner I've ever witnessed. She must also think that I'm an idiot. No one would believe that she's miraculously had the exact same haircut, and color one might add, as I have in the last few days. I don't say anything to point any of this out to her. I need to get her onside, so that she'll talk to me. If I get her upset from the start, that's not going to happen.

"You didn't bring Brutus," she says with a sickly-sweet smile.

"No, I left him at home for once. He is probably fast asleep in the kitchen." It's something of a white lie. He won't be fast asleep because he does not like being left. He will be pacing the house waiting for me to return. I didn't think it was safe to bring him tonight, though.

Out of the corner of my eye, I note Samuel and Marcus taking their seats. I glance at them briefly, and they look like two guys grabbing a beer after work. Neither of them fit the club or its usual clientele.

"It would have been nice to see him." She smiles at me. "He's a lovely little dog. I've been thinking of getting one like him myself. I can't have a big pet in my apartment, but the landlord says a cat or a small dog would be acceptable."

I grind my teeth and plaster a smile on my face. The last person who should be allowed any pets ever is this woman in front of me. "I know that you don't really like me," I say. I need to get this moving and try to get her to admit to some of the things that she's done. Sitting opposite her is uncomfortable at best, but her mentioning Brutus has me worried for my dog.

"What do you mean?" She seems genuinely shocked by my words.

"I know it was you. Who slept with Joseph. I wanted to give you a chance to admit it yourself."

She stares at me for a long beat, sucking her lower lip into her mouth as she contemplates me, her eyes cold. "You're very wrong to say that I don't like you. I admire you deeply. I have been a bit upset with you recently. That doesn't mean, though, that I don't overall think highly of you."

"Why have you been upset with me?"

She takes a sip of her wine, and when she looks back at me, I'm shocked to see tears shimmering in her eyes. "You took me under your wing, Carolina. You made me feel safe, as if someone had my back in the hostile environment of the media world. I thought you were my friend, but then slowly, you just started ignoring me. Do you know what it's like to be in the sunshine of your regard, and then just be forgotten under the cloud of indifference?"

"I wasn't indifferent, Lexy. I was busy. Stressed. Life you know? It wasn't personal."

Something glittering and dark flashes in her eyes. "And that's the issue, isn't it," she spits at me. "For me it was always personal. Deeply so."

"I'm sorry, I mean it. I never meant to hurt your feelings. I know what you're doing, Lexy. Please, don't get yourself into trouble. You need to stop this. You need help. I'm begging you, Lexy, please let me help you."

She takes a sip of her wine, but her eyes flicker around the room. Her hand grips the stem of her glass as if she's holding on for dear life.

"Carolina, what did you do?"

"I don't understand."

"Who are you here with? Have you called the police?" She agitatedly runs her fingers through her hair. "I need to leave." She stands, pushing her chair back so hard it falls onto the floor.

Samuel shoots to his feet too and moves toward our table.

Lexy downs her wine in one smooth, huge gulp. A part of me is deeply impressed with that, but then she raises the glass high. Everything slows down.

The glass in her hand above me.

The rush of air into my lungs as I breathe.

Samuel approaching in my peripheral vision.

Pain.

Blinding, obliterating pain.

Oh God, it hurts so much.

I shakily raise my hands to my head, as I'm dimly aware of Marcus taking Lexy to the ground and Samuel hunkering down by me, his eyes wide and his face pale.

Darkness teases the edge of my vision, and there's a dull roaring sound in my ear, like the waves crashing on the beach. Then everything goes like an out of tune television set, and the darkness wins.

## Chapter 15

#### Samuel

BLOOD, there's so much blood. Dark and red, pouring down Carolina's face like a river. I grab a napkin and with shaky hands dab at the flow. My gut instinct was not to come here. I tried to say no, but Carolina overruled me, and Marcus insisted it was safe. You can't trust someone as deranged as Lexy to behave purely because they're in a public place.

My gut is rarely wrong, and I should have trusted it and overruled them both.

This is on me. The woman that I love is bleeding because of me.

I almost want to laugh. I was sick of taking lives and wanted to start saving them. But once an angel of death, always an angel of death.

This is all I am, a bringer of destruction.

And now, I've brought it upon the woman I was supposed to be saving.

Christ, I don't deserve love. What made me think that I did?

All those lives I took. All those people I snuffed out like *nothing*. As if they were candles and I was the god of their flame. What made me think I had the right to do that and then expect a happy ever after for myself?

I'm dimly aware of a siren somewhere outside. I'm still dabbing at the blood, but more keeps coming. I part her hair, trying to see, and a hand grabs mine, stilling me.

"Don't. The paramedics will be here in a moment, and you might make it worse." Marcus is standing by me.

Where is Lexy? I'm puzzled when I see she's being handcuffed by two policemen. How the hell did they get here so quickly? Oh, yeah, they were outside in the parking lot. It's totally safe, Marcus said. I want to break his teeth.

I can't leave Carolina, though. I watch her as her eyes flutter closed, and my heart trips over itself in panic.

"Reaperman, the paramedics are here; let them do their work." Marcus pulls on my arm, but I don't move.

I need to clean this blood from Carolina's face. Her eyes are closed now, not fluttering, I think she's resting.

"Samuel, come on, man. Let them get to her."

"How did they get here so quickly?" I ask.

"It's been over ten minutes. Come with me." He forcefully pulls me back, and I drop the napkin as a man and a woman take my place by Carolina.

They are placing those sticky heart monitor things on her and assessing her head, listening to her chest. Why are they listening to her chest? Christ, I feel so fuzzy headed.

"Man, come on; you need to snap out of this. I know she means something to you, but she needs you to be with it right now. You can't go into shock on me."

I'm dimly aware of what Marcus is saying to me, but it's not really registering. The hard slap he gives me a second later, though, that registers.

It also works and snaps me out of the strange state I'd fallen into. Unfortunately for Marcus, that means *everything* comes rushing back in.

He's the one to blame for this. He's the one who said it would be safe and put the ridiculous idea in Carolina's head in the first place. I lunge at him and grab him by the throat. "You're a fucking dead man," I growl.

"Get the fuck off of me," he snarls.

"This is your fault," I yell.

"No one could have seen this coming. Who would have thought that she would have smashed a glass over Carolina's head in a bar full of witnesses."

"You knew she was crazy. I told you this was a bad idea. You didn't listen to me."

"This is not normal behavior for a female stalker. This level of violence is highly abnormal."

I still have hold of his throat, and I shake him.

He doesn't back down, and he grabs my hands, holding them tight. "No one could have seen this coming. Not me, and not you. So let go of my neck right now."

The paramedics have moved Carolina from her chair and are loading her onto a board. I shove Marcus away from me, pointing my finger in his face. "This isn't fucking over. You and me, we have a problem."

I rush after the paramedics as they begin to carry her out of the room. "Where are you taking her?" I ask.

"London General," they tell me.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"Too early to say. She has a nasty cut, but it's not hit an arterial vessel, or there'd be a lot more blood loss. However, the fact that she has been unconscious isn't a good sign. She needs a head scan, X-rays, and for the cut to be sewn up."

I look down at her and am relieved to see her eyes are open. She groans and moves her hand toward her head. The paramedic holds it and tells her to keep from touching it.

"Who are you?" the female paramedic asks me.

"Her boyfriend," I say decisively. "And her bodyguard."

She raises her brows. "You didn't do a great job of the second one."

"Don't I know it."

"You want to travel in with us? Got a seat in the bus."

"Yes, I would."

I turn to Marcus. "Call K and Andrius. Fill them in. Tell them you fucked up. I'll be in touch later."

"Christ, you're an asshole."

I flip him the finger and follow Carolina out of the bar. Everyone is rubbernecking, but I ignore them, only focused on the woman I love.

The woman who isn't getting away from me again, no matter what she thinks. She can go to rehab, but I'll be waiting for her on the other side.

Three days later, and I enter the now familiar front doors of the hospital. I'm carrying chocolates and a bottle of alcohol-free wine for Carolina. She's being released today and has to face rehab of a very different nature to the one we were discussing mere days ago.

It's insane how life can spin on a dime. Everything can change within a second. Carolina wasn't okay during her evaluation in the emergency room. She was confused, slurring her words, forgetting chunks of time, including the entirety of the day leading up to the attack.

The diagnosis is traumatic brain injury.

She's lucky, the doctors say. It could have been much worse. The cut is healing, and the head of plastic surgery says she won't need any further treatment from his team. The hospital stitched it up brilliantly in the first place. Her hair should grow back over the wound eventually, and you won't be able to see anything.

So far as the brain injury goes, they've said it is moderate. She has some patches of memory loss over the month or so leading up to the attack, and the entirety of the twenty-four hours before it. She was sleepy, and at times slipped in and out of consciousness during the hours in the emergency room.

It was the most horrendous few hours of my life. They sent her for X-rays, bloods, scans. And until they had all the results, no one was willing to tell me what was going on.

There were moments I thought I could lose her.

I went to the chapel and prayed. I confessed my sins and begged forgiveness for the lives I'd taken. Maybe they were righteous kills, as I've always believed, but who was I to say? Only God can decide who lives and dies. I prayed there and then for him to make Carolina live.

He did.

She pulled through and started to rouse more easily, and by the time they had all the results she was wide awake, if groggy and a little confused.

Now, she seems almost back to normal.

She's been told to take it easy for the next couple of months, though. No work, no drinking, reduced stress.

I know the perfect place for her to do all these things, but I don't want to push her. If she still wants to check into rehab, fine. I can wait. I'm patient when I really want something. I think Montana will do her more good than a clinic in Surrey, though.

I've come armed with weapons.

Photographs. Stunning photography of the land I own. The horses. The house. All of it designed to make her love it the way I do.

I enter her room, and her mother and father turn to me, from where they are gathered around her bed.

"Oh, Sam." Her mother comes to me and hugs me.

They know we are in a relationship. We told them the day after Carolina was admitted.

"So good to see you. Our girl is coming home today." She beams at me.

The plan is for her to go to her parents' house for the remainder of the week and then transfer to rehab. I want her to transfer to Montana.

Her parents know I'm going to ask her. I've discussed it with them, and have their blessing. Her father says he thinks the London media life is toxic, and this has opened his eyes to how messed up it all is.

I didn't tell him anyone can get a stalker, anywhere, in any walk of life. Why give away the advantage that having him onside is?

Not that either of them will interfere with Carolina's decision, but it feels good to know I have their blessing.

"Good luck, darling," her mother whispers as she ends her hug and walks to the door.

"We will come back to collect you in an hour," Lord Henningborne says, kissing his daughter on the forehead.

I walk toward the bed and smile down at the woman in it. She looks smaller somehow in that bed. Fragile. It makes me want to protect her forever. I don't want to be her bodyguard temporarily; I want to be it for life. I will defend her savagely with every fibre of my being, if she'll let me.

I sit and take out my phone, my weapon in this war to win her over to my suggestion of rehabbing in Montana, with me.

Then I take a deep breath and prepare to make the most important sales pitch of my life.

# Epilogue

#### Carolina

THE AIR here is so clear. It's as if every time I breathe, it clears some of the soot and filth of London out of my lungs.

It's so beautiful everywhere I look it hurts my eyes.

Nothing is more beautiful, though, than the man I love riding his horse toward me across the fields.

I've been here in Montana for three months now. Samuel wanted me to come here straight out of hospital, but I stuck to my guns and my original plan.

I needed time to get my thoughts together. Even more so after the attack.

Some of my memories were blurry. My feelings more so.

My man was disappointed, but he'd done as he promised. He waited. He also visited. He flew in from America three times in the two months I spent in the rehab clinic.

His visits were always light, friendly, supportive and without pressure. His emails were the same, but they always included news about the land he loves here. The animals he owns, the local people, and over time, I longed to be here with him.

I wanted to walk the verdant landscape with him. To ride a horse across the fields. To see the mountains in the distance.

Once my time in the rehab center was up, I had a choice to make. Go back to work. Take a sabbatical and go stay with my parents at their country estate. Or ... come here, to be with Samuel.

It was a no-brainer.

Montana called to me, and so I booked my ticket and flew out the day after I left the clinic.

You might say I've fallen in love twice now. Once with a man, and once with a place.

"You okay?" he says as he pulls the horse to a walk and then a stop, sliding off her in a practiced way that speaks of many hours in the saddle.

"Got some news," I say.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Lexy has been charged with fraud and harassment in France, and she's agreed to a stay in a psychiatric facility. Nine months to be exact, instead of two years prison time."

"How do you feel about that?" he asks.

"I'm glad she's getting help and glad it's over. I feel as if now, I can really focus on the future."

He takes my hand in his as we walk toward the house, the horse clip-clopping behind us.

"Listen, are you going to make up with Marcus?" I ask him.

"We aren't kids, Carolina. He fucked up, and I know he did. Not sure what you mean by make up with him."

"I need you to call him," I say.

He pauses walking and frowns at me. "Why? What's wrong?"

"It's Jade." I sigh. My friend had been having a lot of problems with an ex of hers. But it seemed to die down, and we both believed he'd moved on. I heard he had a new girlfriend and his harassment of Jade stopped. She came to see me a few times during my rehab, and we were both relieved that she was free of his crap.

"What about her?" Sam asks.

"She left for work a week ago, and there were flowers on the bonnet of her car just like before. More the next day. Then some at her work, on her desk. Yesterday, she got home, and she says she is sure her ex has been in her flat. The whole place stank of his aftershave."

"Holy shit," Sam says.

"Yeah. Holy shit, indeed. So ... do you think you can call Marcus? She wants a bodyguard, and I think he'd be the perfect person to look after her."

He shakes his head. "The guy got you in a position to be hurt. I think someone like Legend would be better."

"She wants Marcus." Jade hasn't met him, but when we talked the other day and I described him as a down to earth Yorkshire man, she said she wanted him. Would feel most comfortable with him.

"Things were as safe as they could have been made to be that day I met Lexy, Sam. You need to let it go. No one could have predicted she'd have acted so violently and so suddenly. Not you. Not the police. Who, by the way, also thought I should wear the wire. Not Marcus."

He scowls and says nothing. I get it. If he can't blame Marcus, then he has to blame himself. When the reality is, no one is to blame.

I squeeze his hand. "Will you talk to Konstantin and Andrius in Greece and see if they can spare him, then speak with Marcus. I'm scared for my friend."

We have reached the paddock, and he hands the mare over to one of the stable hands, as we continue to walk toward the house.

He lets go of my hand and puts his heavy arm around my shoulder. "You know I can't deny you anything." He kisses the top of my head.

We reach the house, and he opens the door, toeing his boots off as we step inside the massive entranceway.

I love this place, but I'm glad he said he can't deny me anything because I want to go home. Not forever but for a visit. I need to speak to my bosses at the television company. I've decided to hand my notice in. I don't want that life anymore. What I want is to write. I've had an idea for a novel, and I will use my art knowledge to write a thriller set in the world of art forgery.

I'm missing my parents, though, and now with the news from Jade, I want to see my friend.

Brutus runs up to us, on his tiny legs, barking joyously. Two massive dogs shadow him. We brought the guard dogs back with us. They're now our girls, our pets, and they are so gentle with Brutus it makes my heart melt.

After we greet the dogs, I head to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of wine. Alcohol free. I'm not drinking since the head injury, and now I have a new reason not to. One I need to tell Sam about.

I run my hand over my stomach, imagining it swollen with life. My engagement ring sparkles, and I smile to myself. I lift my head and see my fiancé watching me. His face is a picture. His eyes dart from my hand to my face and back again.

"Are you...."

"Yes," I say. "I am." Nerves crawl all over me. How will he react?

He whoops and lifts me up, swinging me around. The alcohol-free sparkling wine in my glass sprays the kitchen, and I yell at him to put me down.

"I love you so damn much," he tells me.

"I love you too," I say.

Then I smile at him.

"Oh, no. I know that smile What do you want?"

"Fancy a holiday?" I ask.

"Where?"

"London?"

He groans, but his grin is all the answer I need.

\* \* \*

The End

If you want more alpha heroes, then read the free prequel to the Bratva Blood series here: <u>The Soldier</u>