

A man in a dark suit and tie stands next to a dark car. He is looking down at his hands, which are clasped in front of him. He is wearing a watch on his left wrist. The background is a blurred cityscape.

OWNED

by a sinner

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELLE HEARD

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Dedication

To all my readers who are still waiting for Mr. Right.

Liam's for you.

Songlist

Click here - [*Spotify*](#)

Game of Survival – Ruelle

Half Light – BANNERS

Waiting for Superman – Daughtry

Broken – Izak Danielson

Just Say – Nine One One

Dressed in Black – Sia

Broken – Jonah Kagen

Lifeline – Reuben Gray

Better off Without – Armon Jay

Hurricane – Tommee Profitt, Fleurie

There Must Be Something In The Water – Kevin Close

Till The World Stops Turning – Kaleb Jones

I Get To Love You - Ruelle

Synopsis

All I want to do is look after my dad, so when I land the job of a lifetime that will take care of our expenses, I grab at the chance with both hands. Little do I know, the impossible will be expected of me.

Slowly my smile fades, and my laughter dies until all that's left is the broken puppet my personal hell created.

Liam Byrne, the head of the Irish mafia, returns from a business trip, and I expect my hellish nightmare to increase ten-fold.

Brutal, merciless, and dangerous, Liam is feared by all – even the monster intent on killing my soul.

Turns out I was wrong.

The instant Liam notices what's happening, he takes me under his wing, and even though he's all sharp edges and threatening growls, I feel safe with him.

Little by little, my sunshine creeps through the cracks, and my laughter returns.

But can one monster really defeat another, or am I just a girl dreaming about the impossible?

Owned By A Sinner

*Mafia / Organized Crime / Suspense
Romance*

STANDALONE in The Sinners Series

Book 2

Authors Note:

This book contains subject matter that may be sensitive for
some readers.

There is triggering content related to severe physical,
emotional, mental, and sexual abuse.

There's brutal violence between these pages.

18+ only.

Please read responsibly.

Priesthood:

*A gathering of Mafia dons that was in effect
a convocation of the nation's priesthood of
organized crime*

*“Evil people don’t need a reason to justify
the vile things they do. They just are.”*

— Michelle Heard

Family Tree

Liam Byrne



Owen Byrne

Father

Family Business: Irish Mafia

Mother: Patricia Byrne (*Deceased*)

Uncle: Cillian Byrne (Merciless Saints)

Step Mother: Gemma Byrne

Step Brother: Finn Byrne

Kiara Murphy



Jimmy Flanagan

Father

Mother: Tara Murphy

Best Friend: Denise Hudson

Prologue

Jimmy Flanagan

(Kiara's Dad)

25 Years Ago...

Sitting across from Tara, who was just supposed to be another one-night stand, I'm still trying to process the fact that she's pregnant.

With my kid.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Rising to my feet, there isn't much space to move in the studio apartment. I slump back down on the worn sofa.

"Jesus," I manage to mutter.

"You don't have to do anything. I just thought you should know."

Shaking my head, I let my eyes rest on the redhead across from me. The flicker of hope in her soft brown eyes brings a frown to my forehead. "I'm no white knight, lass."

I'm the furthest thing from.

Tara nervously wets her lips, her eyes darting around the small living space.

Jesus, this is a fucking mess. On the spur of the moment, I admit, “I’m a bad man.”

Tara’s gaze flicks to me, then she asks, “What do you mean?”

Deciding to lay all the cards on the table, I say, “I work for the Irish mafia.”

Her eyes widen, and the hope that’s been flickering on and off dies a sudden death.

Letting out a sigh, I shake my head. “I can help out financially, but my life is no place for a kid... or the likes of you.”

Tara nods, and swallowing hard on the bomb I just dropped on her, she anxiously wipes the palm of her hands on her skirt. “I can tell the child you died.”

My gaze narrows on her as her words hit unexpectedly hard. “No.”

I don’t want my kid thinking I’m dead. I might have done a lot of bad shit in my life, but I’ll never turn my back on a kid, especially one that’s my own.

“Like I said, I’ll help out financially. I’ll check in on you and the kid whenever it’s safe. That’s the best I can do.”

Tara thinks for a while, her eyes focused on the wall of the neighboring apartment block outside the window. “I’ve heard horror stories about the Byrne family floating on the street. I don’t want my child anywhere near the mafia.”

“That we can agree on.”

Her gaze turns back to me. “Maybe we can tell the baby you’re a traveling salesman?”

The corner of my mouth lifts. “Sounds like a plan.” Getting up, I pull my wallet out and remove all the cash I have on me. “I’ll bring more.” I set the money down on the coffee table. Locking eyes with Tara, warning laces my tone as I say, “No one can know who I am. For your safety. Once the kid is born, give them your last name, and don’t go near the Byrnes.”

She nods as she stands up. “I won’t tell a living soul.”

I allow my eyes to drift over the woman responsible for one of the best nights of my life. For a split second, I wish things were different. I wish I had the luxury of getting to know her. Maybe things could work out between us.

But there’s no wishing in the life I’ve chosen for myself. My life and loyalty belong to Owen Byrne, the head of the Irish mafia.

I have to keep Tara and our unborn kid a secret.

Chapter 1

Kiara

Liam; 39. Kiara; 24.

Walking up the path, I can't stop smiling. Today was a good day, and I can't wait to share the news with my dad. The moment I open the front door, my smile grows even wider. "Dad?"

"In the kitchen, lass," he calls out.

My feet feel light as I move through the cozy living room with its worn brown couches.

When Dad had a heart attack, I thought my own would stop. I was beside myself with worry and only managed to breathe freely once Dad was able to smile at me again.

The doctor said we were lucky. I've changed Dad's diet and made sure there's no stress whatsoever to get him worked up.

Entering the kitchen, it's to find Dad and Kristine at the four-seater table. Kristine's a temporary nurse I hired, using the money I had saved up from all the temp jobs I've done over the years to pay her salary. It's not much, but it's helping with the bills.

Dad gives me a surly look, then glares at the carrots on his plate. "Look what she's makin' me eat."

Leaning down, I press a kiss to the top of his thinning salt and pepper hair. “You heard what the doctor said. You need the vegetables. You can’t live on pizza and burgers any longer.”

“Aye-aye,” he mutters, grumpy as always. Instead of putting up a fight, he shovels a forkful of carrots into his mouth and makes a show of chewing. Frowning at me, his voice is brisk as he asks, “What are you doing here?”

For some unknown reason, Dad’s against me visiting him at his house. At first, it hurt whenever he’d tell me to hurry and leave, but now I just ignore his grumpiness, telling myself it’s because he’s not feeling well.

My parents never married. I was the result of a one-night stand, but they never made me feel unwanted. Mom raised me, and even though Dad traveled a lot for work, he tried to see me as often as he could. He might not be the world’s best father, but he’s never missed one of my birthdays, and the little time we got to spend together are some of my best memories.

“I wanted to check on you, and I have good news,” I grin while sitting down in one of the empty chairs. I sneak a carrot from Dad’s plate and pop it into my mouth.

“Well?” He lifts an impatient eyebrow at me. “Don’t keep me waitin’.”

“I just got my first permanent job!” The excitement and relief bubble over my lips. “As a receptionist.”

God, I still can’t believe it.

A smile tugs at Dad’s mouth. “Where?”

I nod at his plate of food so he'll eat some more. Reluctantly, he scoops up another bite of carrots.

"Byrne Enterprises. I'll work in the lobby. It's a big company, so there are many opportunities for growth," I ramble, my excitement growing with each word.

The starts are the limit.

God, I needed this job. I only had enough in my savings to pay Kristine until the end of the month. Now I can afford her until Dad's back on his feet, and I'll be able to move out of the shoebox I'm currently living in and into a better apartment.

Dad's features grow dark and tense, his eyebrows drawing together. "Byrne Enterprises." He does not look happy for me, his voice laced with warning.

My gaze flits over his features as I try to gauge his mood. "Yeah. I've applied all over the city, and lucky for me, they're okay with my lack of experience. I really needed something more stable, and the pay is good."

Dad shakes his head, the corner of his mouth drawing down as if I just told him I'd be working in a dumpster and not a multi-billion-dollar company. "Over my dead body, will you work at Byrne Enterprises."

What?

My happy bubble pops, and I slump back in my chair. I really thought Dad would be excited for me. I really don't get why he's against me taking this position. "I don't understand. This job pays well, and I'll be able to make a better life for myself. Why are you against it?"

The expression on Dad's face only grows grimmer, and I start to worry the conversation will make his blood pressure shoot through the roof, and we can't have that. Under normal circumstances, I would stand my ground, but I can't risk Dad suffering another heart attack. The doctor warned the next one could be fatal.

Anger brims in Dad's voice as he says with finality, "You will not work at Byrne Enterprises. If you're strugglin' financially, move back in with your Ma."

Mom lives in a small studio apartment, and besides there being no space for me, I'm twenty-four and need to build a life for myself. Why can't Dad understand that?

My eyes flick to Kristine, and when she shakes her head, silently telling me not to upset Dad any further, I get up from the chair and pour myself a glass of water.

This is not how I pictured the conversation going. Damn, I really thought Dad would be happy for me.

Kristine starts to clear the table, then checks Dad's vitals. With a stern look at him, she says, "You need to calm down. Come," she starts helping him up from the chair, "let's watch that car show you like so much."

Dad's eyes rest on me for a moment, and I don't miss the worry swirling in his green irises. "Finish the water, lass. You need to go." He turns toward the door, then pauses and adds, "Don't come over again. You know I don't like it."

With disappointment filling my heart, I watch Kristine usher Dad into the living room.

I don't understand his reaction to the good news. I thought he'd be happy for me.

With a heavy heart, I follow them into the living room. I wait for Dad to sit down on one of the couches, then bend over him and press a kiss to his forehead. "Bye, Dad."

When I pull back, he looks up at me, affection softening his eyes. "I might be full of shit, but I love you, lass. I only want the best for you, and Byrne Enterprises is not it."

Nodding, I force a smile to my face. "Love you too. Get better, okay?"

He nods, then gestures to the front door with a nod. "Get goin'."

Letting myself out, I shut the front door behind me and make my way down the path to the rickety gate. I glance back, wishing things had gone differently. I don't get why Dad reacted like that.

As I walk down the street toward the bus stop, I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial Mom's number, hoping she'll react differently.

After a couple of rings, she answers, "Hey, sweetie."

"Hi, Mom." The disappointment keeps my lips from curving into a smile. "I got a permanent job."

"You did?" Instantly, excitement bubbles in her voice, which lightens my mood a little. "That's wonderful news, sweetheart. Where? What's the pay like? What will you be doing?"

Slowly the excitement trickles back into my heart. “I got a position as a receptionist. The pay is amazing. I’m starting at three thousand, five hundred.”

“Gosh, I’m so happy for you, Kiara! That’s the best news ever,” Mom exclaims.

Reaching the bus stop, I glance up and down the street. “Dad’s not happy about it at all.”

“Why? What did he say?” I can hear the surprise in her voice.

“He said he doesn’t want me working there.”

“That’s weird.” Mom pauses, then asks, “Where will you be working?”

“Byrne Enterprises. It’s a huge company, so there’s lots of room for growth.”

“Oh...” This time when she pauses, I start to frown because it feels different. “Ah...”

Shaking my head, my frown deepens. “What’s wrong with Byrne Enterprises?”

“Nothing.” She hesitates, then says, “I just heard it’s a tough place to work.”

“I can do tough.”

“I know, sweetie. I just don’t want your first permanent job to scare you off.”

“It won’t. It can’t be worse than Joe’s diner.”

“Yeah... I guess.”

My parents' reactions are downright disheartening, but it only makes me more determined to make a success of the job.

They're just being overprotective. I'll do my best and show them I can stand on my own two feet. Especially for the pay Byrne Enterprises is offering me. I need the money now more than ever.

Changing the subject, I ask, "Is Mr. Rodgers still a pain in the butt?"

"Ugh." I hear Mom moving around her apartment. That's another reason I needed this job, so Mom can come live with me. "I swear the man is trying to drive me insane. Yesterday I placed a potted plant in the hallway, just to pretty up the empty space, and he gave me an earful about it."

"Such a grump," I comment. "Try to ignore him. Hopefully, he'll find someone else to bother."

"From your lips to God's ears."

"I'll pop in on Sunday," I say as my eyes land on the approaching bus.

"Can you bring me a box of the coffee I like?"

"Sure. See you then."

Ending the call, I wait for the bus to come to a stop, and once the doors open, I step onto it. I sit down in the first available seat, and when we start to move, I stare out of the window.

As we pass Dad's house, it's to see Kristine opening the front door for two men. They're all smiling, and it makes me feel better knowing Dad has friends who check in on him.

Damn, I wish my parents were happy for me. I expected them to be proud and to celebrate with me.

My shoulders slump, and while I blindly stare at the passing scenery, I can't understand why they reacted like that.

This is an opportunity of a lifetime, and I'm definitely not letting it pass me by. I'll work my butt off and show them I can be successful.

Chapter 2

Kiara

I set down a steaming mug of coffee in front of Denise before taking my seat at the reception counter.

“You’re a lifesaver,” she grins while picking up the cup. “Next time I tell you I’m going out during the week, stop me. This hangover is trying to kill me.”

I let out a soft chuckle. “I told you it was a bad idea.” My gaze drifts over her pretty face. “Don’t worry, there’s no sign of the hangover. You look beautiful as always.”

I swear Denise and Beyoncé could be identical twins.

“It’s the mad makeup skills,” she chuckles.

“You have to teach me some of that magic.”

After the morning rush, the lobby’s quiet. I’ve been working at Byrne Enterprises for two weeks and learned so much. Denise is patient with me and a good teacher. We quickly became friends.

Just as I take a sip of my coffee, the phone rings. Denise takes the call giving me time to swallow.

“Byrne Enterprises, Denise speaking. How can I help?” She listens then replies, “One moment, please.” I watch as she presses the extension for the executive floor.

Once she picks up her cup again, I say, “I’m nervous about meeting the CEO and director.” I’ve been memorizing the hierarchy structure. Byrne Enterprises is owned by Liam Byrne. His younger brother, Finn, is a director.

Denise gives me an encouraging smile. “Don’t worry. They don’t talk to us, lowly employees.” After finishing her coffee, she adds, “Just remember Liam’s the CEO. He should be back in a week or two. Finn is the younger brother. He—.” Suddenly she stops and moves her cup out of sight.

I do the same while following her line of sight.

“That’s Finn Byrne. Just smile and let me do the talking if he stops at reception.”

“Okay,” I murmur as I watch a man in his early thirties get out of a red Ferrari. He checks something on his phone as he steps into the lobby, then he casually glances in our direction. For a moment, he turns his attention to his device, but then his head snaps back toward us, and his eyes lock on me.

My insides tighten with nerves when he changes direction and heads toward the reception counter.

I take in the pristine Armani three-piece suit he’s wearing, his ruffled ginger hair, and once he’s close enough, his brown eyes. Finn is taller than average with a slim build, and even though he’s attractive, I can already feel the arrogance coming from him in waves.

Just smile and don’t put your foot in your mouth.

Stopping on the other side of the counter, he tucks his phone into the inner breast pocket of his jacket while glancing from Denise to me. “Where’s Julia?”

“She resigned around the same time you went on vacation,” Denise answers before introducing me. “Kiara joined us two weeks ago.”

Standing up, I hold out my hand. “Kiara Murphy. It’s a pleasure meeting you, sir. Thank you for the opportunity. I’ll do my best.”

Finn wraps his fingers around mine, the hold not too tight. “Welcome, Kiara.”

Just before things start feeling awkward, he lets go of my hand. There’s a sharpness in his gaze as he stares at me for a moment longer, then he walks toward the elevators.

Sitting down, I release the breath I was holding. “That wasn’t nerve-wracking at all.”

“Yeah, but at least it’s done and over with.” Denise frowns at Finn’s back, then turns her attention to me. “I’ve heard he’s not the most pleasant person to work with. At least we’re safe down here.”

Curious, I ask, “By not the most pleasant, you mean?”

She shrugs, but before she can answer the phone rings. I quickly take the call. “Byrne Enterprises. Kiara speaking. How can I help?”

“Put me through to Mr. Byrne,” a man snaps in my ear.

“Which one, sir?”

“Liam!”

“He’s currently out of the country. Can I transfer—.”

“Fuck, I forgot. Is Finn back from vacation?”

“Yes, sir. Please hold.” I press the extension for the executive floor to transfer the call before giving Denise my attention.

She’s busy digging a chapstick out of her bag. After putting some on, she says, “I don’t like spreading rumors, but I’ve heard Finn’s short-tempered.” She scrunches her nose. “Then again, apparently Liam’s worse. He barks at anything that moves. He once had Julia in tears because she accidentally transferred a call through to his office while he was in a meeting.”

Okay. No accidental calls.

After making a mental note, I ask, “Why did Julia resign? Did she get a better job?”

Denise shrugs. “I have no idea why she left. It was sudden, and she didn’t even give any notice, so I can only guess it was for personal reasons.”

“Shoot, I hope she’s okay.” Picking up the two mugs, I get up from my chair. “I’ll be right back.”

Walking across the tiled lobby floor, I spare Mark, one of the security guards, a smile where he’s standing by the entrance. Just as I reach the small kitchen, the door opens, and Kevin grins at me while he holds the door open so I can dart inside.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Kevin and Mark have also been very welcoming. It’s been easy making friends with the staff working in the lobby, but then again, it’s just the four of us down here. The other

personnel on the upper floors, not so much. Everyone's too busy, scurrying around like ants.

After rinsing the cups and placing them on the drying rack, I quickly stop by the restroom to relieve myself. While washing my hands, I inspect my appearance, making sure none of the wild strands of my auburn hair are out of place.

I don't have a huge selection of clothes and have pretty much been switching things up with the two suit pants and one skirt I have. Nobody seems to notice the lack of variety in my wardrobe, but as soon as I get my first paycheck, I'll buy a couple of items so I'll look more professional.

When I get back to the reception desk, Denise gives me an encouraging look. "You've been summoned to the executive floor. Good luck."

Crap.

"Did I do anything wrong?"

She quickly shakes her head. "No, Finn probably just wants to get to know you. He does it randomly."

"If I'm not back in thirty minutes, come save me," I joke before walking toward the elevators.

On my way up, my nerves tighten my stomach into a hard knot.

Gosh, it feels like I'm going for the interview all over again.

When the elevator doors open, I force a smile to my lips, hoping it looks natural.

Devon, the executive floor secretary, gives me a professional smile. The man seems to have it down to an art form. I can definitely learn a thing or two from him.

“Mr. Byrne is waiting.” Devon gestures at the hallway to the right of us. Wearing a dark gray suit, he fits perfectly in with his luxurious surroundings. “The office at the end of the hallway. Just go in.”

“Thank you.” I wipe my palms nervously on my sides as I glance at all the cream, black, and gold décor. The art on the walls and sleek modern offices behind glass walls look expensive. The lavishness is a bit overwhelming and intimidating.

Reaching the end of the hallway, I can’t see past the frosted glass on the sides of the door. I suck in a fortifying breath of air, then knock.

“Come in.”

My hands still feel sweaty as I take hold of the knob, and opening the door, I make sure my smile is in place.

The first thing I notice as I step inside is a leather couch to my right. Finn stands up from behind an impressive desk that’s all steel and glass. He gestures at one of the leather chairs in front of his desk. “Have a seat.”

His eyes track my every step, and only once I’m sitting down does he take a seat again. For an unnerving moment, he just stares at me, the slight smile on his face doing nothing to set me at ease.

“I’ve read your file.”

Not knowing what else to do, I just nod.

“You didn’t study further after finishing high school.”

God, please don’t let him fire me because of my lack of experience.

“I’m a hard worker.”

“I’m sure you are,” he chuckles. “Gina seems to be happy with you.”

If the head of HR is happy with my work, it’s a good thing, right?

“Tell me about yourself,” he says as he casually leans back in his high-back chair, his eyes narrowing on me.

I always dread that question because I never know how to answer it. “Ah... I’m twenty-four.” *Gosh, I suck at this.* “Born and raised in Chicago.”

Lifting an eyebrow, he says, “I’ve already read that in your file.”

The ball of nerves that used to be my stomach tightens even more.

“What is your weakness?”

“Donuts,” I answer honestly, then let out an awkward chuckle. “I can eat a dozen if someone doesn’t stop me.”

I could eat a dozen right now.

Finn’s lips curve up into a pleased smile. “And your greatest strength?”

“Endurance. I’m not scared to work hard.”

This is better. This I can do.

“Why did you want to work here?”

The stiffness leaves my smile, and my nerves ease a little. “There’s lots of space for growth. I feel I can achieve and contribute a lot at Byrne Enterprises.”

Finn nods, and tilting his head, his smile widens, “Now tell me about yourself.”

Feeling much better than when I walked into his office, the answer comes naturally, “I love helping others. During the holidays, I volunteer wherever I’m needed, whether it’s at a soup kitchen or animal shelter. I love being outdoors. I can sit in the park for hours just feeding the pigeons.”

Finn stares at me for the longest moment, then asks, “Would you mind working after hours?”

I quickly shake my head. “No. Like I said, I’m a hard worker. Whatever the company needs.”

Slowly, he nods. “That’s good to hear.” He gestures to the door. “You can get back to work.”

Rising to my feet, I take a second to say, “Thank you for the opportunity. I really appreciate it.”

When I turn around and leave the office, I feel his eyes burning on my back.

You did good.

I think.

Chapter 3

Liam

The past month has been so fucking busy, I'm exhausted. Stepping off my private jet, a tired smile tugs at the corner of my mouth as I walk toward my uncle.

Cillian might be my father's younger brother, but they're nothing alike. There have been many times when I've wished Cillian was my father. My own is only interested in profits, and lately, traveling the world.

Cillian gives me a lopsided grin. "You look like shit."

Letting out a chuckle, I give him a very quick hug. I hate being touched. There's no reason for it. I've just always despised any form of physical contact.

"I feel like shit," I admit. That's another thing about Cillian, I can just be myself around him.

I glance around the island, which belongs to Damien and Winter Vetrov. They deal in blood diamonds, and Cillian's been the head of their guards for as long as I can remember.

Because he doesn't get along with my father, he chose a different path for himself instead of joining the Irish mafia.

"Are Damien and Winter still away for work?" I ask to make sure. I never visit when they're home.

“Yeah, they’ll be back in two weeks. You can relax,” my uncle reassures me. Tipping his head toward the house, we start to walk away from the private jet. “Things busy at work?”

“You have no idea.” I sigh, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension in them. “We took care of the Sicilians.” Christ, they’ve been a pain in my ass for way too long. When I finally drove them out of Chicago, they migrated to Vancouver only to give Nikolas Stathoulis hell. He’s part of the Priesthood I belong to.

We consist of the five heads of the most prominent crime families who rule the world. There’s me, the head of the Irish mafia, and Gabriel Demir, head of the Turkish mafia. Nikolas runs the Greek organized crime syndicate, and Luca Cotroni is the Don of the Italian mafia. Luca is really close with Viktor Vetrov, who’s in charge of the *bratva*.

To avoid a war, the Priesthood was created, and honestly, joining them was the best thing I ever did. With the united power we hold it’s made us all unbeatable.

“It’s about time,” Cillian chuckles. “Took you long enough.”

I give my uncle a playful scowl, but it quickly falls away as I say, “Now to take care of Finn.”

Cillian’s eyebrows pop up. “Is he still giving you trouble?”

“More than ever.” When my father married Finn’s mother, the fucker somehow became my problem. It’s been fifteen years, and I still don’t understand why my father legally

adopted Finn. I mean fuck, Finn was practically a grown-ass man at seventeen.

You know why.

It was to create competition between us, and it gave Finn a false sense of confidence that he could rule the Irish mafia in my stead.

Which will never happen.

I'll kill him long before he can get his greedy fucking hands on my city and men.

"What's the little shit up to now?"

"Insubordination." Meeting my uncle's eyes, I admit, "I think he's acquired a taste for sex slavery."

Cillian's eyes widen, then he shakes his head. "What are you going to do?"

"Catch him in the act so when I kill the fucker my father can't say shit." If there's one thing The Priesthood disapproves of, it's peddling flesh. Everything else is fair game.

Before the conversation can continue, Dana steps out onto the porch, and I brace myself for the hug that's bound to come my way.

"Liam, it's been too long. How have you been?" The moment I step onto the porch, she leans in for the dreaded hug.

Dana and Cillian got married late in life, and they're the perfect couple. Even though I'm fond of her, my body tenses when her arms wrap around me. Instantly, revulsion crawls over my skin, and I grit my teeth against the overwhelming

sensation. My chest constricts, and I focus on counting to three before pulling back.

“I’ve been good. How are you?” I ask politely.

“Cillian keeps me busy,” she answers with a teasing tone to her voice while her eyes rest lovingly on her husband.

We all head inside, and before I know what’s hit me, Dana has me sitting at the kitchen table and stacking a plate with food. “You must be hungry after the long flight. After you’ve eaten, Cillian will show you to your room so you can rest.”

“Still in the habit of feeding people?” I joke with her as a plate loaded with meat and vegetables is set down in front of me.

“The stomach’s the way to the heart. That’s why everyone loves me,” she chuckles.

“Clever.”

Cillian sits down across from me, and after he’s taken a bite of his food, he locks eyes with me. “How’s Owen?”

“Father’s traveling the world with Gemma. I haven’t spoken to him in months. Honestly, I talk more with you than him.”

Not that I mind. I’ve never been close with my father.

Cillian shakes his head, clearly displeased by my answer. “It’s always been about money for him.”

“I have you, so it really doesn’t matter.” Cillian’s more than just my uncle. Besides Will, my second in charge, Cillian’s the only other friend I have.

Being at the top of the food chain would be lonely as fuck without the two men in my life.

They're also the only people I don't have to pretend around. Being the head of the mafia, I have to be dominant and threatening at all times, but when I'm alone with one of them, I can actually let my guard down.

It also doesn't help that people, in general, annoy the fuck out of me. Needless to say, I'm not an extrovert by nature, and people find me grumpy and cold. Not that I care, seeing as it makes my job easier if my employees are too terrified to mess up.

My phone vibrates, and pulling it out of my pocket, it's to see a text message from Will.

Finn's back at the office after his so-called well-deserved month-long vacation.

I quickly type out a reply.

Keep a close eye on the fucker.

Tucking the device back into my pocket, I focus on eating some of the food Dana made, even though I hate consuming anything I haven't prepared myself.

After the meal, I follow Cillian to the room I usually stay in whenever I visit. With the island heavily guarded, it's the only place besides St. Monarch's where I can sleep with both eyes shut.

"Try to get more than four hours' sleep," Cillian mutters jokingly.

“I plan to do just that.” Feeling a rare affectionate moment, I place my hand on my uncle’s shoulder only to pull it back. My eyes drift over his graying hair before locking on the blue eyes I inherited from him. “You’re getting old.”

“Yeah, every one of these gray hairs is thanks to you and Winter,” he chuckles.

Winter might be like a daughter to Cillian, but we’ve never been close. She’s good to Cillian, though, and it’s all that matters at the end of the day.

When I shut the door behind me, I walk to the luggage one of the guards brought in. I take a couple of minutes to shower before changing into a pair of gray sweatpants. Slumping down on the king-size bed, I stare up at the ceiling.

My thoughts instantly turn to the only real problem I have right now. *Finn*.

To keep him away from interfering with the mafia, I’ve placed him at Byrne Enterprises. He should be working in the mailroom instead of occupying the director’s seat.

He doesn’t even do half a day’s work for the exorbitant amount he gets paid, and he’s damn good at delegating his workload to the other staff.

Also, I might be a fucking bastard to work for, but I let my employees work in peace where Finn likes to interfere with them to the point where I’ve had to pay off sexual harassment claims.

That’s why I have Devon working reception for the executive floor.

Honestly, Finn's just a fucking annoying thorn in my side, and I'm quickly running out of patience with him.

One of these days, I'm going to lose my shit with the fucker, and whether it starts a family war or not, I'm going to put a bullet right between his eyes.

Chapter 4

Kiara

After I'm done updating the week's appointment schedule, so we know who to expect for a meeting with one of the employees, I place an order for access cards, seeing that we're running a little low.

"You're really getting the hang of things," Denise praises me.

A warm smile stretches over my face. "It's because you're such a good teacher. Once I get paid, I'll take you out for dinner." We can never take lunch at the same time so it will have to be after work.

"I'm totally going to hold you to that," she chuckles.

When the phone rings, and we see it's an internal call from the executive floor, Denise mutters, "It's your turn. I got the last one."

Scrunching my nose at her, I answer, "Kiara speaking."

"Come up to my office," Finn says brusquely.

I haven't spoken to Finn since he returned from vacation and wonder why he wants to see me again.

"I'll be right up, sir."

Taking off my earpiece, I set it down on the counter. “I’ve been summoned to the executive floor.”

“Good luck.”

Walking to the elevators, I can’t think of a reason Finn wants to see me. Hopefully, I didn’t do anything wrong. When I step into the elevator, I press the button for the top floor, then quickly check my appearance in the mirror covering the walls. I tuck a stray curl behind my ear, thinking I should’ve clipped my hair up instead of braiding it today.

When the doors slide open, I smile at Devon, who’s wearing a light blue suit today. The man always looks like he stepped out of a fashion magazine.

“Mr. Byrne wants to see me.”

Devon lets out a heavy breath. “Rather you than me. Prepare yourself for a mountain of work.”

Work I can do. Relief slithers into my chest now that I know I’m not in any trouble.

After knocking, I push the door open and step into the office.

Finn looks up from where he’s sitting on the leather sofa, reading something on the tablet in his hands. A smile spreads over his face, and he sets the device down. “There’s the breath of fresh air this company needed.”

The sudden compliment catches me off guard, and I stand awkwardly with a mouth full of teeth.

He gestures to the desk. “How are you with capturing data?”

“Ah... pretty good.” I follow him to the desk, and when he indicates for me to take a seat on his chair, I almost frown but stop myself in time.

Once I’m seated, Finn says, “Transfer all these reports onto the system.”

Before I can reach for the first report, Finn places his hand on the back of the chair and leans partially over me, pointing at the first page. “You’ll see it’s basic and should catch on quickly.”

I nod, and glancing up, I notice how close he is to me. The spicy scent of his aftershave weaves into the air I breathe, and for a moment, everything feels inappropriate. Another wave of awkwardness sets in, making me shift uneasily in the chair.

Then Finn points to the laptop’s screen. “Type in the first row, so I can make sure you know what to do.”

“Yes, sir.” I double-check all the figures as I enter the information, and once I’m done, I glance at Finn.

He places his hand on my shoulder, and giving me a light squeeze, murmurs, “Good girl.”

Instantly my muscles lock up, and an unsettling feeling trickles into my gut.

Definitely inappropriate.

When Finn walks back to the leather couch, I take a deep breath before focusing on the work at hand. I keep double-checking everything I transfer from the report to the laptop, not wanting to make a single error.

The silence in the office keeps growing, and by the time I place the fourth report onto the completed pile, I notice it's already ten minutes past six. My eyes dart to the couch, only to find Finn staring at me.

The uneasy feeling returns full force, making my stomach bunch up with nerves.

Slowly he tilts his head, the corner of his mouth lifting into a smile that seems more predatory than friendly. "You said you don't mind working late, right?"

Shoot.

I quickly nod. "Do you need all the reports done tonight?" There are easily ten or more still to do. I try to calculate how much time it will take.

"Good. I'll even be nice and order dinner for you. Any preferences?"

I don't want to eat but just get the work done so I can stop by Dad's place on the way home. Since I started working, I haven't been able to visit him as often as I'd like.

"It's okay. I had a big lunch," I decline the offer before getting back to work.

Long after it's grown dark outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, do I lift my head again. I check how many reports are left and feel some relief when I count four.

Suddenly I feel pressure on the back of the chair then Finn leans over me to look at the laptop's screen. His scent fills my immediate space, and I sit dead still while waiting for him to check over the spreadsheet.

Again he places his hand on my shoulder, but this time the touch lingers well into inappropriate territory. I have to suppress the urge to pull away.

Still standing close to me, he turns his head and smiles at me. “Almost done.” His thumb brushes over the exposed skin by my blouse’s collar, then he finally pulls away.

He doesn’t walk back to the couch but instead leans against the desk by the completed stack of reports.

Try as I might, I struggle to focus on the numbers, and I end up having to triple-check the work. The atmosphere in the office keeps growing tenser, and by the time I enter the last set of digits, my shoulders and neck are aching from all the stress.

I’ve placed the last four reports on a new pile, avoiding Finn’s personal space. Pushing the chair back, I step around the other side of the desk while asking, “Will that be all, Mr. Byrne?”

He lets out a chuckle. “You did it much quicker than I’d be able to. Thank you.”

Lifting my eyes to his face, I force a smile to my lips. “Just doing my job, but you’re welcome. Is it okay if I head home?”

“If you must.” There’s a teasing tone to his voice, and now that the work is done, I start to worry Finn’s crossing the line.

“Have a good night, sir,” I say, the uneasiness I’m feeling spilling into my voice.

He just touched your shoulder, Kiara. Don’t go making this something it’s not.

“You too,” Finn smiles at me, his eyes tracking my every step until I’m out of his office.

The rest of the offices are quiet as I go down to the reception, and after collecting my purse, I smile at the night guard on my way out of the building.

Needing to save some time, I hail a cab and give the driver Dad’s address. I’ll just pop in for a couple of minutes.

During the drive from the city to the suburbs, exhaustion from the day’s work settles into my bones.

God, I’m going to sleep like the dead tonight.

My thoughts return to Finn and the uneasy feeling he gave me tonight. It’s not the typical kind when you’re intimidated by a boss, but more like dealing with a man that’s interested in you when you don’t reciprocate his feelings.

There’s nothing physically wrong with Finn. He’s attractive and obviously wealthy, and I’m sure there are many women who’d like to date him, but not me. He’s not my type.

Actually, I don’t know what my type is.

There’s just something about Finn that makes the hackles on the back of my neck rise.

Maybe it’s because this job is so important to me, and I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize it.

Yeah, that’s probably it.

When the cab comes to a stop, I quickly settle the fee and get out. Taking a deep breath of the evening air, I let myself into the house and find Dad in front of the TV.

Instantly a frown settles on his forehead while he takes in my work attire, then he shakes his head. “You’re testin’ me, lass. I told you to stop workin’ at that place.”

The last thing I want to do is fight, and after pressing a kiss to Dad’s cheek, I ask, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine!” he snaps, anger darkening his eyes. “When are you goin’ to listen to me and stop workin’ at Byrne Enterprises?”

Adamant not to get into a fight with Dad, I give him a pleading look while saying, “Can we not get into it tonight? I just wanted to check in on you.”

His eyes sharpen with worry. “Did somethin’ happen?”

I quickly shake my head. “No.” Dad’s already against me working at Byrne Enterprises, so I’ll never tell him anything negative. It will only make matters worse. “I’m actually doing well at work.”

Dad lets out a sigh. “You’ve always been stubborn.”

A smile tugs at my mouth. “Just like you.”

My comment earns me a rare smile from Dad, then he nods in the direction of the front door. “It’s late, lass. Get goin’.”

I take a moment to inspect Dad’s coloring. He does look better, his skin not so pale anymore. “Bye, Dad.”

“Text me when you get home, so I know you’re safe,” Dad calls after me.

“I will.”

Pulling the door shut behind me, I take my phone from my bag so I can order a cab.

When I get home, I plan on showering and going straight to bed. Today's been really tiring.

Chapter 5

Kiara

Five days. Just five days, and I'll get my first paycheck.

God, I can't wait.

Every time I think about it, excitement fills my chest. Sure, it's not my actual first paycheck, but this one feels different. It's not part-time but permanent, and that makes all the difference.

I'll save up for three months, then I'll be able to get a bigger apartment. After that's done, I plan on padding my savings account again.

"What's that smile for?" Denise asks when she takes a seat behind the reception counter.

"Dreaming about my first paycheck," I grin at her.

Putting in her earpiece, her smile matches mine. "I still remember mine. I spent it all on clothes and makeup."

"That must've been so much fun."

Will Gillen, who I think is some kind of assistant to Liam Byrne, places his hands on the counter, and leaning forward, he asks, "What was fun?"

He's the only executive who's actually down to earth, and his smile is always warm.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Denise teases him, her dark eyes sparkling brighter than usual.

Hmm...

“Teasin’ me again?” Will murmurs as he leans closer to her. “One of these days...” With a wink at Denise, he walks away from the counter.

I can’t keep the huge smile off my face as I widen my eyes at her. “What’s that about?”

Denise shrugs, but her face is shining with happiness. “Maybe something, maybe nothing,” she answers vaguely.

“Oh, that’s a whole lot of something,” I tease her. The internal line rings, and I quickly answer, “Kiara speaking.”

“My office. Now,” Finn orders.

The smile drops from my face. “Yes, Sir.”

Ending the call, I remove my earpiece, and it has Denise asking, “You’ve been summoned again?” When I nod, she frowns darkly. “He’s really starting to make a habit of it. I hope he’s paying you for the extra work he’s making you do.”

“I’ve been logging the hours,” I say to set her at ease, then quickly make my way up to the executive floor.

When the elevators open, it’s to see Will talking with Devon. Devon instantly frowns, then asks, “Again?”

I nod as I step into the lavish reception area.

“Again, what?” Will asks.

“Finn has Kiara doing his work,” Devon mutters, cautiously glancing in the direction of Finn’s office.

Will crosses his arms over his chest, then locks eyes with me. “Is that so?”

“I don’t mind,” I quickly reply. “I’m learning a lot.”

Slowly, Will nods, and removing his phone, he walks down the other hallway toward the CEO’s office while making a call.

I dart to the right, and after knocking on the door, let myself in.

Finn gestures at a black garment bag hanging next to the door. “Change into the dress. We’re going to be late.”

Huh?

I blink a couple of times, then ask, “Late for what?”

He looks up from his desk, impatience flashing in his eyes. “We’ve completed construction on the Pearson building. There’s a celebration we need to attend.”

But I’m just a receptionist, and it’s almost time to go home.

When I hesitate, Finn’s features tighten, and his eyes sharpen. “Do you have a problem attending a work function with a director?”

God, when he puts it that way, it makes me feel stupid. “No, of course not.”

“Good, because you won’t get a chance like this again,” he warns me.

Taking hold of the garment bag, I move to open the door again when he says, “You can change in there.” He points at the en-suite bathroom.

Even though I feel uncomfortable, I listen and walk to the bathroom. Shutting the door behind me, I don't even take in the luxury around me. While I unzip the bag, I try to convince myself it's just a work function, and I have nothing to worry about.

I'm probably overreacting. If I want to make a success of my career at Byrne Enterprises, I'll have to show how competent I am in every field. This is an opportunity of a lifetime.

My eyes glide over the silky dark ruby gown.

Wow, I've never worn anything so beautiful.

Stripping out of my suit pants and blouse, I'm careful with the dress as I slip it on. While straightening out the fabric, I move to stand in front of the full-length mirror next to the sink.

Holy crap.

My eyes flit over my reflection, drinking in how stunning the dress looks on me. Finn sure has good taste.

I remove the heels from the bag, and only when I step into them do I realize Finn got my size spot on.

Okay, that's super weird.

"Are you ready?" Finn calls out, impatience lacing his words.

Damn, such a pretty dress, and I can't even do my hair or freshen my makeup.

Hurrying, I fold my clothes, and not wanting to leave them behind, I hold the items to my chest and exit the bathroom.

Finn's eyes lock on me, and he gestures with his hand for me to twirl in a circle. "Set that down so I can get a good look," he orders.

I place my work clothes on the couch, then turn in a full circle, my skin prickling with unease from having Finn staring at me.

"Just like I thought. Exquisite," he compliments me.

My cheeks flush while I pick up my clothes before following Finn out of his office. When we near reception, Devon's eyes flit over me, then a frown forms on his forehead.

"I'm leaving for the day," Finn tells him with unnecessary authority tightening his voice.

The second Finn's back is to us, Devon gives me a worried look.

I shrug and walk faster to catch up when the elevator doors open. Noticing Finn pressed the button for the basement, I push the one for reception, saying, "I just need to get my bag and tell Denise I'm leaving."

When the doors open, Finn doesn't step out but instead just blocks the doors from closing again. Knowing he's holding the elevator, I hurry to the reception counter.

Denise's eyes widen when she notices the dress I'm wearing. "Damn, girl. You look stunning, but what's going on?"

"I have to accompany Mr. Byrne to a work function," I explain while taking my bag from the drawer I keep it in. I tuck my clothes inside, then give Denise an apologetic smile. "Sorry that you have to sit here alone. I'll make it up to you."

When I start to walk away, Denise says, “Be careful.”

Her warning makes the apprehension already growing in my chest tighten its hold around my heart.

“We’re going to be late,” Finn calls out, and unable to reply to Denise, I rush back into the elevator.

As we step out into the basement, doubt trickles through me. Working overtime is one thing, but leaving the office with a director doesn’t feel right. Nervously, I glance at Finn as we approach the red Ferrari he always drives. “What’s expected from me at this function?”

Finn opens the passenger door, then smiles at me. “Just look pretty by my side.”

What?

When I hesitate, he adds, “You’ll meet many influential people who can make or break your career. Just impress them the way you’ve impressed me.”

I really hope he means that professionally.

Climbing into the car, I set my bag down by my feet and tug on the seat belt.

What are you doing, Kiara? If it doesn’t feel right, it’s because it’s wrong. There’s still time to go back to the reception counter where you belong.

Finn slides in behind the steering wheel, then smiles at me. There’s nothing professional about the way he’s looking at me, and for the first time, my skin crawls with apprehension.

The drive to the venue is filled with an uncomfortable silence, and I only manage to take a deep breath when I get to

climb out of the car.

While Finn hands his keys to the valet, I glance up at the impressive building that's all steel and glass.

"A work of art, right?" Finn says as he comes to take my arm.

"Yes." Wishing he wouldn't touch me, I follow him into the lobby.

We spend the next hour greeting various people, and I struggle to memorize all the names. Surrounded by couples dressed in expensive clothes and champagne flowing like water, I feel totally out of place.

Finn keeps either placing his hand on my lower back or wrapping an arm around me, and every touch makes my body feel tenser. There's nothing professional about the way he's interacting with me, and I'm dead sure his interest in me is personal.

"You make such a lovely couple," Mrs. Pearson suddenly says. I've been standing quietly next to Finn, listening to him talk about a contract with Mr. Pearson, who's the owner of the building.

"Oh," I smile awkwardly, but before I can correct her, Finn interrupts, "Thank you, Mrs. Pearson." He looks at me, and this time there's actual desire darkening his eyes. Before I can process the expression on his face, he wraps an arm around me again and holds me tightly to his side, chuckling, "I got lucky."

What the hell? No, you didn't.

Totally inexperienced when it comes to situations like this and not wanting to make a scene in front of important clients of the company, I stand rooted next to Finn, feeling like an idiot.

As soon as the function is over, I'll tell him this is inappropriate and not to let it happen again.

Unfortunately, the night drags on and on, my muscles aching from all the tensing whenever Finn touches me.

This is ridiculous. I shouldn't have come.

Needing some fresh air and to get away from Finn, I excuse myself and walk out of the building. I move to the side so I'm not in the way, and suck in deep breaths while staring at the road that's busy because it's a Friday night.

At least I can sleep in tomorrow.

"Come back inside," Finn says, his tone relaxed from all the champagne and whiskey he's had to drink.

Remember to take a cab home. You're not getting into a car with him again.

"I just need a minute."

He comes to stand in front of me, and tilting his head, he says, "Everyone loves you."

I can't even manage a smile, the uneasy feeling I have is too overwhelming. "What time can I leave?"

That's all I want to do. Just go home and think about how I'm going to fix this mistake.

Finn lifts a hand and brushes some of my hair back that's come loose from the clip. Too late, I pull away, not that he

even notices. The man seems to be oblivious to my uncomfortable feelings.

“You want to impress me, right?” he asks.

I get the feeling if I say no, my career will come to a sudden end.

My mind searches for the right thing to reply with, but before I can think of the best response, Finn leans down, his hand slips behind my neck, and I’m yanked against his body. His mouth hits mine, my teeth feeling the impact.

Even though Finn made it pretty clear he’s interested in me on a personal level, the kiss still catches me totally off guard. I’m too stunned to respond, and even when his tongue thrusts into my mouth, I remain frozen.

His other arm wraps around my back, and I’m held hard against his chest, the kiss turning hungry.

Only then does disgust pour through my veins. My mind screams no, and with more power than I thought I had, I yank back, freeing my mouth from his. As if I’ve run a hundred miles, the breaths explode from my lips, my eyes wide with shock.

“No,” I whisper. Thinking fast, I take a couple of steps back to put some space between us. “This is inappropriate.”

Finn tilts his head, a smug smirk curving his lips. “Really? You didn’t seem to mind hanging onto my side the entire evening.”

Seriously?

“If you’re clever, you’ll climb the corporate ladder fast. Think about the doors I can open for you. Besides, you wouldn’t have put on that dress for me if you weren’t interested.”

Staring at Finn, my pride makes me lift my chin. “I have no intention of sleeping my way to the top, Mr. Byrne.” Even though I’m terrified of what this will mean for my future at the company, I refuse to sacrifice my pride. “I’m not interested in you and want to keep my personal life separate from work.” Not wasting another second, I walk to the valet and ask him to bring the car around because I need my bag.

Turning back to Finn, I say, “Unless it’s work-related, I think it would be best if we don’t interact with each other again.”

“You’re making a mistake,” he warns me, darkness lacing his words.

I made a mistake when I ignored my gut instinct the first night I worked late with him, and I definitely shouldn’t have come tonight.

Crap, this is a mess.

Just wanting to end the uncomfortable conversation, I say, “I hope you enjoy the function, Mr. Byrne. Have a good evening.”

The second the Ferrari pulls up, I open the passenger door and take my bag from it. My spine is stiff from Finn’s eyes burning on me as I walk toward the road so I can hail a cab.

God, I hope this doesn’t become a problem.

Just keep calm. You're not the first woman to deal with something like this at the workplace. Just do your job, and they won't have a reason to fire you.

It's hard to process what just happened.

Did I do something wrong? Did I do something to make Finn think I'm interested in him?

Just as I reach the pavement, Finn grabs hold of my arm, yanking me to a stop. Leaning threateningly into my personal space, he growls, "Careful, Kiara. You leave and you'll regret it."

I pull my arm free. "I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. That wasn't my intention. I'm going home now, and I hope we can forget this happened."

My heart is hammering wildly in my chest as I rush toward a cab that's pulling up to the curb, and not looking back at Finn, I get into the vehicle.

Only when we're driving away does my mind catch up to what happened. Confusion, frustration, and fear explode into a chaotic mess in my chest.

Shit, I can't believe that happened.

And now Finn's upset because I rejected him.

Dammit! Why did this have to happen?

Is it going to affect my work?

Probably.

Shit.

My heart's still beating a mile a minute when the cab pulls up to my apartment building. I rush inside, and when I finally get to lock my front door behind me, I slump down on the couch.

God, what am I going to do?

Hopefully, nothing will come of this, and Finn will just let it go and ignore me.

Chapter 6

Kiara

My stomach is burning with tension. I hardly slept from all the worry, and this morning it really sunk in. I spent the entire weekend trying to come up with a solution, but I have nothing.

Only the damn worry eating at my insides while I get ready for work.

I have no idea what Finn's going to do, and I'm at a total loss on how to handle this situation.

Do I just ignore it?

Would it work if I avoided Finn?

Should I report it?

I've researched sexual harassment in the workplace, but the fact that I don't have any proof and it's my word against his leaves me hesitant to go to HR with the problem. After all, I've only been with the company a month where Finn's the owner's brother.

God.

With no other option but to go to work and hope for the best, I leave my apartment.

Finn had a lot to drink on Friday night. Maybe he won't even remember what happened.

Ha, you should be that lucky.

By the time I walk into the lobby, I can't keep my hands from trembling, and my stomach feels raw.

"Morning," Denise greets with her usual warm smile. "How was the event?"

"Morning." I place my bag in the bottom drawer, then answer, "It was okay. I can't remember half the names of the people I met." It's on the tip of my tongue to confide in Denise, but deciding against it, I say, "I'll make us coffee."

Feeling anxious, I keep glancing around me as if Finn will appear out of thin air. After preparing the coffee, I take my seat behind the counter and focus on checking the schedules.

"You're quiet today," Denise mentions. "How was your weekend?"

"Good. I just stayed home and got some rest," I answer, forcing a smile to my face. "How was yours?"

"Boring," she chuckles. "I can't wait for payday."

"Just two more days."

Denise's eyes widen, then she whispers, "Just smile. The CEO is here."

My head snaps up, and even though Denise told me to smile, it drops right off my face at the sight of the CEO. I have to blink a couple of times because the man looks exactly like *Charlie Hunnam*.

Holy shit.

His steps are filled with confidence, the three-piece suit fitting his muscled frame like a second skin. I always thought I

preferred dark-haired men, but taking in Liam's dark blonde hair, I have to admit, he's the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on.

My sensitive stomach starts to spin with nerves and something unknown as he walks in our direction.

Smile.

Smile, dammit!

My lips curve up in a trembling smile, my entire body now humming with nerves and an emotion I've never felt before.

Liam stops on the other side of the counter, and he nods at Denise. "Everything okay down here?" he asks her, his voice sounding like rough velvet.

Sweet Jesus.

My heart flutters, and I swallow hard.

"Yes, sir," Denise answers. "Welcome back."

She gestures at me, and it has me shooting to my feet. Liam's crystal-clear blue eyes lock with mine, and it feels like I take a physical punch to my gut.

Totally off balance, I hold out a trembling hand and ramble, "Kiara Murphy. It's a pleasure meeting you, sir. Thank you for the opportunity to work here. I'll do my best."

Instead of shaking my hand, Liam's eyes flick down to my hand, then back to my face. His features look like they've been carved from stone, his stare icy.

Shit.

Does he know?

“Welcome to Byrne Enterprises,” he says, his tone unnervingly grim.

Oh, God.

Leaving my hand hanging in mid-air, Liam turns and walks toward the elevators.

I slump back into my chair, a hard tremble wracking my body.

Did Finn tell him a different story, and now he’s judged me before giving me a chance to explain?

“Hey,” Denise says, laying a comforting hand on my forearm. “It’s okay. Liam’s always like that, and I should’ve warned you he hates being touched. That’s why he didn’t shake your hand.”

My head snaps up, a slither of hope unfurling in my chest. “Really?”

Her smile is soft and reassuring. “Yes, don’t worry.”

If only she knew what happened between Finn and me, she might think differently.

God, today’s going to be torturously long.

The internal line rings, the sound making me jump.

“Denise speaking.” My eyes are glued to her face. “Yes, Ma’am, we received them on Friday. Kiara will hand them out today.” She ends the call, then says, “We need to program the access cards and hand them out.”

I let out the breath I was holding, and glad to have something to keep me busy, I get to work.

By the time the day is winding down to an end, and I haven't seen or heard from Finn, I don't know what to make of it. It doesn't make me feel any better. Every time the phone rings, I expect to be called up to the executive floor.

After handing out the last of the access cards and getting the staff members to sign for them, I press the button for the elevator. When the doors open, my stomach drops at the sight of Finn and Liam. Both men look like they're about to kill someone.

Noticing they're going up, I say, "I'll get the next one for the lobby."

Finn's eyes rest hard on me while Liam doesn't even bother glancing at me. The look Finn gives me makes it clear he didn't forget what happened, and he's angry as hell.

The doors slide shut, and I let out a breath of air, my heart racing in my chest.

At this rate, I'm going to have a heart attack.

I wait until I'm sure it's safe before calling an elevator, and when I finally get to sit down in my chair again, my body's wound tight.

Somehow, I manage to smile at Denise, who's busy on a call, while my heart beats violently in my chest and a light sweat beads on my forehead.

What am I going to do?

Taking a tissue out of my drawer, I pat the sweat from my forehead while focusing on calming my racing heart.

It's going to be okay. Just do your work and avoid Finn.

Luckily the lobby isn't busy, and I manage to regain my composure. Not wanting to think about the problem, I keep myself busy with work, checking everything three times to ensure I don't make any errors.

The knot in my stomach is burning something fierce.

Denise's gaze flits over my face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I force my lips to curve up.

The internal line rings, and like a coward, I let Denise take the call. She answers, then scrunches her nose. After ending the call, she mutters, "Finn wants to see you."

Oh, God.

When I hesitate, she adds, "You better head up. He sounded like he's in one of his moods."

Reluctantly, I rise to my feet. I wipe my sweaty palms on my sides, dreading what will happen.

Maybe he wants to put the unpleasantness behind us?

That's wishful thinking, Kiara.

My legs are heavy as I walk to the elevators. The ride up has my heart beating, faster and faster, until it feels like it might burst from my chest.

I feel like a complete mess by the time the doors slide open, and then as if the universe has it out for me, I walk right into a wall of muscle.

Gasping, I bounce back into the path of the closing doors. Liam grabs hold of my shoulders, and I'm yanked forward, slamming into his chest again. This time a woodsy and manly scent hits my nose.

The trembling grows into full-blown tremors rocking through me, my nerves unable to handle much more.

I'm hit with a shitload of intensity, and without a word, Liam pushes me to the side. He slams the button to call the elevator back.

I'm so rattled I don't stick around to be scolded and forget to apologize. Darting down the hallway like a fearful deer, I don't have time to steel myself before knocking and letting myself into Finn's office.

Just get it over with.

I keep repeating the words to myself as I focus my sight on Finn. He's leaning casually back against his desk, his arms crossed over his chest. There's a triumphant sneer on his face, making me think he's going to fire me.

Crap. There goes my new apartment.

The fear multiplying by the second robs me of the ability to think of a way to start the conversation.

Nodding at his laptop, he says, "Come take a seat."

What?

Does he want me to capture data again?

Cautiously, I keep my eyes on him as I walk to the chair and sit down. The second Finn moves around the desk and comes to stand behind me, every muscle in my body locks up. My mouth grows dry, and panic flares to life in my chest.

Shit. Not again. I should've stayed by the door.

Finn leans over me and presses a button on the laptop. The screen lights up, and instead of it showing a spreadsheet, a

video starts to play.

It takes a solid ten seconds before fear bleeds through my veins. My heart stutters to a stop. My breaths falter over my lips.

Oh. My. God.

I watch the footage of Mom fast asleep in her bed, her lips slightly parted as soft snores slip over them. Someone's standing over her, then I see a gloved hand holding a gun.

Oh, God. No!

My eyes grow wide as pins and needles painfully rush over my skin.

Finn leans down until I feel his breath on my ear. "Your mother sleeps like the dead. I could've killed her easily."

No.

The shock starts to shudder through me like earthquakes, ripping gaping holes right through my entire life.

God, no.

The footage stops, then Finn asks, "Do you need to watch it again?"

In a stunned daze, I shake my head.

The chair is turned, so I'm facing Finn. Lifting a hand, he brushes his fingers over my cheek, making my skin crawl, then he takes hold of my chin. "This is how things are going to be from here on out."

With horror-filled eyes, I meet his triumphant gaze.

“You’re going to be at my beck and call. You’ll do everything I tell you to, and you’ll fucking love it, or I kill your mother.”

His words hit hard, like nails being slammed into the coffin he’s about to bury me in.

“Nod to show you understand,” he demands.

Somehow my head bobs up and down.

“If you go to the police, I’ll know. Your every move will be watched, so don’t try to get help. Just do as you’re told, and your mother will continue to live her shitty life.”

God.

My mind finally catches up to the enormous shock it’s been dealt, and I manage to ask, “Why are you doing this?”

The corner of Finn’s mouth lifts with arrogance. “Because no one says no to me. I warned you, you were making a mistake, and now you’ve forced me to take extreme steps.”

He makes it sound like it’s my fault. He’s... insane.

The realization sends a fresh wave of panic burning through my veins.

God only knows how I manage to ask, “What do you expect from me?”

His lips curve more as he leans closer. “Everything, Kiara.”

The words sound sinister, filling me with dread.

His thumb brushes over my bottom lip, then his eyes lower to my mouth. “I’ll do whatever I want, and you will fucking

love every second of it. It's as simple as that."

Simple?

It's a freaking nightmare!

I start to shake my head, but it only earns me a dark chuckle. Finn shrugs, "Or disobey, and your mother dies." He lets out another chuckle. "The choice is yours."

What choice? Either I let him do what he wants with me, or my mother dies.

This is insane. Absolute madness.

Finn slowly closes the distance between our faces, his eyes remaining locked with mine. I sit like a frozen pillar, and the instant his mouth presses against mine, unbearable revulsion fills every inch of my being.

Disgusted, I press my lips together, but it only makes Finn chuckle again. "Do you want to be responsible for your mother's death?" The words stick to my skin.

This time when he kisses me, I don't stop him. His tongue breaches my lips, making bile churn in my stomach. He tastes awful, every brush of his tongue against mine, revolting. It feels like an eternity filled with dread and revulsion passes before he lifts his head. Giving me a pleased smile, he murmurs, "Good girl."

God, help me.

Straightening up, he warns me again, "Tell anyone, and your mother will die. I trust you won't be that stupid." He nods to the door, showing I can go.

My legs are weak, but I force them to take my weight as I get up. Still in a horrified trance, my body is on automatic pilot as I walk to the door.

“Kiara.”

My body convulses, but I stop and numbly turn around to look at the man who’s become the monster in this nightmare I’ve been thrown into.

“Smile,” he demands.

My lips curve up while my heart feels shriveled in my chest.

While darkness closes in around me.

While my dreams of making a success of my career vanish.

While the nightmare becomes a living, breathing force sucking the very air from my lungs.

“That’s better,” he praises me, a pleased smile forming around his mouth.

Stepping out of the office, I shut the door behind me, then stare at the gleaming tiles beneath my feet.

I’m going to be sick.

Covering my mouth with a hand, I rush to the executive restroom, not caring what anyone will think about me using it.

I make it just in time, and rushing into a stall, I drop to my knees and empty my raw stomach of the bile.

I hear the restroom door open, then Devon calls out, “Kiara, are you okay?” The sounds of my vomiting must reach

him because he curses, “Shit.”

I can hear Devon coming in, and once I’ve emptied my stomach, I grab some toilet paper to wipe my mouth and flush the toilet before glancing in Devon’s direction.

He crouches next to me, a look of concern tightening his features. “What happened?”

“I must’ve had something bad for lunch.” The lie comes too easily, making me feel worse.

Devon takes hold of my arm and helps me to my feet. I walk to the basin and rinse my mouth before washing my hands. When I’m done, I give Devon a pleading look. “Do you think I can go home? I really don’t feel well.”

I need to check on Mom.

“Girl, I heard you puking your guts out. I’ll let HR know. Get some medicine on the way home. Okay?”

My chin wobbles as a wave of emotion hits. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell Devon what happened in Finn’s office, but the image of my sleeping mother flashes through my mind.

“Thank you,” I reply, my voice hoarse from the chaos I’ve been dumped into. Needing to flee this hell, I rush out of the restroom.

I give Denise the same excuse I gave Devon, and grabbing my bag, I leave Byrne Enterprises in a traumatized trance.

The instant I’m a safe distance away from the building, I pull out my phone and dial Mom’s number.

“Hi, sweetheart. Won’t you get in trouble calling during work hours?”

Just hearing her voice acts as a soothing balm to the trauma I just suffered.

Clearing my throat, I say, “I ate something bad for lunch. They’re letting me go home early. Is everything okay there by you?”

“Oh, dear. Make sure you drink a lot of fluids, so you don’t dehydrate,” Mom tells me.

“I will. Is everything okay by you?” I ask again.

“Everything’s fine. Oh, on Saturday, the window in the living room wouldn’t close. You won’t believe what happened!”

My heart all but stops in my chest.

“Mr. Rodgers came to fix it for me. Can you believe that? I thought hell was freezing over.”

“Nothing else happened?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

“Besides the total three-sixty in Mr. Rodgers’ attitude, nothing else happened. Kiara, the man even smiled at me. It was weird... but pleasant. Kind of.”

Usually, I’d joke with Mom. I’d tell her Mr. Rodgers has a crush on her.

But not today.

Relief soaks into the cracks all the worry and fear have ripped through me. Closing my eyes, I suck in a deep breath of air.

“I’m just glad you’re okay. Always make sure you lock your windows and door.”

“You don’t sound well, sweetie. Are you almost home?”
Mom asks, concern tightening her voice.

“Yeah, I’m just going to sleep. Don’t worry about me.”

“Let me know if you get any worse.”

“I will.” My tongue darts out to wet my lips, tears threatening to push up my throat. “I love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

Ending the call, I tuck the phone back in my bag, then continue to walk toward the bus stop.

Should I have told her?

Should I go to the police?

I don’t have any proof. It’s my word against his.

God, I can’t believe this is happening to me.

Chapter 7

Liam

What a fucking day.

Walking down the hallway, it's to see Devon taking a seat by his desk and the elevator doors closing behind the new receptionist, Kiara.

Instantly my thoughts turn to when she walked into me and then bounced back into the closing doors. I just reacted and pulled her way.

Only when I was alone in the elevator did I realize touching her didn't fill me with disgust. Weird, but I'm contributing it to a natural reaction. I just didn't want her to get hurt. There's nothing else to it.

"Oh, Liam," Devon says as I'm about to pass his desk. "Kiara had something bad for lunch. I let her go home. I hope it's okay with you?"

"Of course," I mutter as I head toward Finn's office. "Let HR know."

Not bothering to knock, I shove Finn's door open and stalk inside. The fucker is sitting behind his desk with a huge smile on his face.

"Unproductive as always," I mutter. Coming to a stop on the other side of the desk, I cross my arms over my chest and

stare my so-called stepbrother down. “I hear you’re giving all your work to Kiara.”

Finn lets out a bark of laughter, and standing up, he adjusts his jacket. “You should be happy, *brother*. I’m training the woman. That way, when you fire me, you’ll have someone who can do the job.” The taunting tone in his voice grates against my temper, making it flare to life.

“A fucking toddler can do your job!” Reigning in the burst of anger by taking a deep breath, my voice is calmer when I continue, “Kiara is a receptionist for the lobby. Do your fucking job and leave the woman alone.” Taking a step closer, my eyes bore into his. “And don’t think I’m not aware of the sex ring you started. Shut that shit down.”

“Or what?” he arrogantly taunts me. “You’ll tell Father? He doesn’t give a shit about what I do.” Finn moves around the desk, closing the space between us. The fucker knows I hate being touched, and the second he reaches for my shoulder, I grab hold of his wrist and shove him backward. “Keep your fucking hands off of me.” Every ounce of power I have brims in my voice when I say, “Shut the sex ring down and start doing your own fucking work.” This time, I’m the one to take a threatening step closer to him. “Don’t, and I’ll end you. You’re a fucking annoyance I can’t wait to get rid of.”

Finn lets out a burst of incredulous laughter as if I’m being unreasonable. “Yes, sir,” he bites the words out, zero respect in his tone.

I hold his gaze for a moment longer, thinking I should just get rid of the fucker now.

Finn must see the seriousness of my threat because the arrogance falls from his face. “Fine. Stop worrying. I’ll shut the sex ring down. You can’t blame me for trying to make extra money on the side. You practically pay me peanuts to work here.”

“I fucking pay you more than you deserve.” With everything said, I turn around and leave the office, not bothering to shut the door behind me.

The only reason Finn is still breathing is because I can’t fucking kill him for annoying me.

But it’s only a matter of time.

When I reach Devon’s desk, I stop. Finn’s the reason I employed Devon, and honestly, I haven’t regretted the decision once. He’s the best secretary I’ve ever had.

“Notify me whenever Finn calls a staff member to his office,” I instruct.

“Yes, sir.” Devon nods in the direction of my office. “Will’s waiting for you.”

Hearing Will’s here, a rare smile tugs at my lips. I head to my office, and opening the door, it’s to find my best friend sitting with his feet up on my desk.

“You’re looking for shit,” I warn him playfully.

“You love me too much,” Will jokes. He waits for me to take my seat, then finally lowers his feet from my desk. “Did you talk to Finn?”

“Yes.” I shake my head, my eyes meeting my friend’s. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“I’ll gladly put a bullet between his eyes.” A serious expression falls over Will’s face. “The shipment of weapons should be here tomorrow morning.”

“Good.” I can always trust Luca to deliver on time. The man never disappoints.

Continuing with the updates, Will says, “There’s no sign of the Sicilians. Everything’s quiet here and in Vancouver.”

“We wiped out the majority,” I mutter. It was a good day when I got to help Nikolas and the rest of the Priesthood eliminate those fuckers.

“Jimmy had a heart attack.”

My head snaps up, and shock shudders through me. “When? Is he okay?” I rise from my chair.

“A month ago.” Will gives me a sheepish look as his words hit. “You needed the rest, Liam. I would’ve told you sooner if things went sideways, but Jimmy’s at home recovering. He even got a nurse to help out.”

“You should’ve told me,” I bark. Jimmy Flanagan is one of my best men. “Now it looks like I don’t give a shit if one of my men dies!”

“You were close to burning out, and I’ve been checking in on him.” Will gets up, and tilting his head, he gives me a look that clearly states he’ll fight me on this.

“Next time, you let me know immediately,” I order.

Will nods, then his mouth curves up. “Come on, calm down. You know I did what’s best for you.” When I start to walk around the desk, he asks, “Where are you going?”

“To check on Jimmy,” I mutter, still pissed off.

He rushes to catch up with me. “We’re leaving for the day,” Will tells Devon as we pass his desk.

I slam the button for the elevator while giving Will a scowl.

“You still love me,” the fucker mutters under his breath.

“You’re fucking lucky I do,” I grumble as we step into the elevator.

On the ride down, Will continues updating me on everything regarding the mafia.

All of the management staff know I’m the head of the Irish mafia, but not the lower-level employees. Byrne Enterprises is a construction company I use to launder funds for the mafia. For the past couple of years, it’s been producing one hell of a profit. I’m slowly moving the money laundering operations to a new venture, so this company can be legitimate.

On the drive over to Jimmy’s house, I mutter, “That’s the last time I take a vacation.”

“Now you’re overreacting,” Will chuckles.

“One of my best men had a heart attack. I lost three employees at Byrne Enterprises, and two got killed while transporting a shipment. It’s a clusterfuck.”

“It would’ve happened whether you were here or on vacation,” my friend points out.

I don’t bother agreeing or disagreeing with him.

Stopping the SUV in front of Jimmy’s place, I glare at the state of the house. “The place looks like shit. Get the men to

give it a fresh coat of paint and to clear out the gutters.”

“Okay.”

Walking up the path, I gesture at the worn state of the small garden. “Have them clear out this shit as well.”

“Got it,” Will replies before knocking on the door.

A woman in her late forties opens for us. The moment she sees Will, a smile spreads over her face. “Wow, now you’re visiting twice a week?”

“Aren’t you lucky,” he shamelessly flirts with her. Will just has a way about him that makes people love him. Unlike me.

Not having time for this shit, I push past them and walk into the living room. Surprise flutters over Jimmy’s face, and he immediately begins to get up.

Waving a hand at him, I say, “Sit down, old man.” I glare at him, shaking my head as I take in how much weight he’s lost. “I leave you alone for six weeks, and you try to die on me. What the fuck, Jimmy?”

He shrugs as if it’s nothing. “I hit a little speed bump. It’s nothin’.”

Sitting down on the single-seater, I stare at Jimmy for a moment longer. “You look like shit.”

The nurse comes in, followed by Will. Locking eyes with the nurse, I ask, “Isn’t he eating? What did the doctor say?”

Her gaze rests cautiously on me. “Jimmy needs to rest and not get upset then he should get better in no time. He eats but complains about the vegetables.”

I turn my gaze back to Jimmy and give him a not-negotiable look. “Eat your fucking vegetables.”

He grumbles something beneath his breath, then nods at me.

Letting out a breath of relief, now that I’ve seen him with my own eyes, I say, “Don’t make me worry. Get better, you hear?”

“Aye-aye.”

“Can I make everyone some tea?” the nurse asks politely.

“No, thanks,” Will answers. “We can’t stay long.”

“If you have work to do, you can leave,” I tell Will. “Swing by in an hour to pick me up.”

“Sure?” Will asks.

When I nod, he heads toward the front door. I turn my attention back to Jimmy, who says, “Go make us tea, Kristine.”

Once the nurse leaves the living room, Jimmy gives me an apologetic look.

“Don’t you fucking dare apologize for having a heart attack,” I warn him.

“I feel useless sittin’ around on my arse all day.”

We stare at each other for a moment, then I ask, “Do you need anything?” I gesture to the kitchen. “Let me know how much she costs and what your medical expenses are. I’ll take care of it.”

Emotion washes over his face, and being his usual grumpy self, he starts to argue, “I can’t expect that of you.”

“Shut up and let me take care of you. It’s the least I can do after you’ve been loyal to the family for years.”

Jimmy glances down at his hands which are starting to show signs of arthritis. The man looks downright uncomfortable, but then he mutters, “Thanks, boss.” Lifting his eyes to mine, it seems like he wants to say something else, but then Kristine comes in carrying two cups of tea.

After taking the cup from her, I set it down on the coffee table, having no intention of drinking it. I have a problem with consuming anything I didn’t prepare myself. It goes hand in hand with the no-touching thing.

Thankfully, Kristine doesn’t stick around but leaves us alone to talk privately.

“What did you want to say before she brought the tea?” I ask.

Jimmy quickly shakes his head. “Nothin’.”

“Do you need anything?” I try to pry it out of the stubborn fucker.

“No.” He gives me half a smile, looking tired as hell.

“Are you getting enough rest?” I ask.

He nods.

“So there’s nothing you want to tell me?” I give him another chance. Jimmy’s one of the few people I have patience for. He came over from Ireland with his father and has been loyal to the mafia since day one. He’s one of the few good

ones left. “We’re family, Jimmy. You can talk to me about anything.”

His smile grows a little. “I know.”

When it’s clear he’s not going to talk, I let out a sigh. “Stubborn fucker.”

This time he chuckles. “I’ll be back at work—.”

I instantly shake my head. “You’ll come back to work when I decide you’re ready.”

Jimmy glances at the time, and for a moment, he looks anxious, but then he says, “Kristine’s goin’ to throw a fit if I don’t take a nap.”

Rising to my feet, I lock eyes with him. “Take care of yourself, Jimmy. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, boss.”

Walking out of the house, I pull my phone out of my pocket to call Will. I glance up and down the street, thinking Jimmy could’ve lived in a much better neighborhood if he didn’t drink and gamble his money away.

“I’m around the corner,” Will answers.

“Good.” I end the call and watch as a bus stops up the road. A couple of people get off then Will pulls up next to me.

Getting into the car, I say, “The warehouse.”

Chapter 8

Kiara

There's a permanent burning sensation in my stomach as I stand across the road from Byrne Enterprises.

Lifting my eyes, I look at the impressive building where I thought my dreams would come true. My gaze locks on the top floor, and I try to make out any movement behind the windows, but it's too high.

What am I going to do?

I can't remember how many times I almost called the police since yesterday afternoon.

I can't risk Mom's life. God only knows what Finn is capable of.

The realization that there's no one I can go to for help hit around midnight. It was staggering.

I'm alone in this nightmare.

Lowering my eyes, I try to force a smile to my face, but it threatens to dissolve into tears. I swallow hard on the hopelessness and fear swirling in my chest.

I've never felt so tired before, as if all the life has been drained from me. Finn can do anything to me, and there's

nothing I can do to stop him. And I have to pretend I freaking like it.

God.

I shake my head, unable to fathom that man touching me and just allowing it to happen. Yesterday it was a kiss. What will today bring?

Closing my eyes, I suck in a fortifying breath of air before crossing the street. The threat of Finn killing my mother tightens its restraints around my heart with every step I take closer to the entrance.

How am I going to get out of this mess?

Will resigning be enough to get rid of Finn?

Probably not.

I don't have enough money to run with Mom, and I can't leave Dad behind.

Shit.

My breaths speed up as I reach the entrance. My eyes dart around, feeling like I'm being hunted.

Breathe, Kiara.

Entering the building, I don't have a single ounce of strength to smile. Before I can reach the reception counter, Denise's eyebrows furrow with worry. "Hey, still not feeling better?"

I nod, swallowing hard on the lump in my throat. "But I'll be okay." *I hope.*

"You should've taken the day off. I can manage alone."

I contemplated calling in sick but don't know how Finn will react. I don't want him coming to my apartment.

"Don't worry. Want some coffee?" I ask to change the subject.

"You sit down. I'll make us some."

"Thank you." Taking my seat, I place my bag in the lower drawer. As Denise heads across the lobby floor, Liam and Will come in. She pauses, a bright smile curving her lips. "Morning, Mr. Byrne." Then she turns her smile to Will. "Mr. Gillen."

"If Liam wouldn't fire me, I'd tell you how pretty you look today," Will compliments her.

Watching their banter does nothing to lift the dark cloud hovering over me.

As I glance away from Denise, it's to lock eyes with Liam. Frowning, he walks closer but stops a safe distance from the counter.

It's only then I remember Denise telling me he doesn't like being touched.

And yesterday, I ran face-first into him without apologizing.

"Sorry for plowing into you yesterday," I quickly get the apology out of the way.

"Do you feel better?" he asks, his eyes inspecting me way too closely.

I force a numb smile to my lips. "Yes. Thank you for asking."

Liam stares at me for a moment longer, then asks, “How was your first month here?”

Amazing until Friday.

Do you know what your brother is doing?

“Good,” I murmur with zero excitement in my tone. “I’ve learned a lot.”

He nods, his eyes narrowing on me. “You don’t look well. I’d rather have you go home if you’re sick.”

Sitting up straighter, I shake my head. “I’m much better. It was just something I ate.”

Liam glances at Will and Denise, and when the internal line rings, I startle, and Liam’s head snaps back to me. With his eyes on me, it feels like the ground’s going to give way beneath my feet as I press the answer button with a trembling finger.

“Kiara speaking.”

“My office. Now.”

Oh, God.

“Yes, sir,” I breathe, fear trembling through me.

The second I end the call, Liam asks, “Who was that?”

“Your brother.”

His left eyebrow lifts. “What did he want?”

“He wants me to go to his office.”

Liam locks eyes with me, and it feels as if he’s trying to pry all my secrets from me. “Stay and do your work.”

But...

Cautiously, I nod, then watch as Liam walks to the elevators.

Shit. Who do I listen to?

Should I call Finn and tell him I can't come to his office?

By the time Denise comes back with two steaming mugs of coffee, I can't even bring myself to drink the beverage.

A cold sweat breaks out over my skin, and I feel weak from all the worry.

"Aren't you going to ask?" Denise's voice pulls me from the fear-induced trance I keep slipping into.

"Ask what?" Did she say something I didn't hear?

"About Will and me," she chuckles, the sound light and free.

"Oh. Of course." I wipe my hand over my forehead. "Has he asked you out yet?"

Denise begins to nod, excitement shining from her. "We're going to dinner on Saturday night, which means I have to buy a new dress." She reaches for an envelope, and opening it, her face lights up again. "Oh, happy first payday."

Right. I didn't even check my bank account.

"Thanks." I do my best to smile. "Congrats on your date."

Denise beams again, then she starts to ramble about Will and every detail she likes about him. I only listen with half an ear, trying to get some work done while worrying my butt off about Finn.

Chapter 9

Liam

Shoving Finn's door open, I walk into his office. "Not the person you expected?" I mutter.

Lifting his eyebrows, he asks, "To what do I owe the honor so early in the morning?"

"Kiara is employed as a receptionist for the lobby. Stop calling her up to your office and do your own fucking work. Last warning."

Finn stares at me for a moment, then snidely answers, "Yes, sir." Just as I'm about to turn around, he asks, "When will you let me into the mafia?"

A chuckle bursts over my lips. "Never." The mafia will fucking chew him up and spit him out.

"Do you expect me to be happy with the scraps you throw my way forever?"

The corner of my mouth lifts. "Yes." I gesture around the office. "This is all you'll ever get from me."

Finn darts up but catches himself in time from losing his temper. "I deserve more."

Taking a step closer, I lock eyes with him. "You deserve nothing. Just because your mother married my father doesn't

mean shit to me. You might have the last name, but you're not a Byrne."

It looks like Finn's about to choke on his tongue, then he threatens, "I'll tell our parents."

I shake my head at the level of this man's stupidity. "Finn, when will you realize they have no power over me? This company belongs to me. The mafia belongs to me. I fucking own everything."

Frustration tightens his features. "This isn't fair."

Narrowing my eyes, my temper starts to spike. "I don't have time for your tantrums. If you want a better income, there's the door."

Done with this conversation, I stalk out of the office and head to my own. The second I shut my door behind me, Will grins at me from where he's perched on the corner of my desk. "Denise said yes."

I shake my head, and letting the tension roll off my shoulders, I joke with my friend, "Only because you kept groveling."

"You're okay with me taking her out on a date?" he checks with me again.

"She's an adult and can make her own decisions," I mutter while taking a seat behind my desk. Glancing at Will, I ask, "Are you going to tell her what you really do for a living?"

"I don't think she'd be impressed hearing how I kiss your ass," he jokes but then shakes his head. "Not until things are serious between us."

“Make sure you can trust her,” I mention. Opening my laptop, I check my schedule for the day. “Only two meetings.” Just then, the page updates, and I glare at the screen. “Make that six meetings.”

“The life of a CEO. Rather you than me.”

“Get off your ass and go check the warehouse. It’s less than two hours until the shipment arrives.”

“Yes, boss.” The fucker salutes me before he leaves the office.

Relaxing back in the chair, I rest my elbow on the armrest, my thumb brushing over my jaw. Kiara’s pale face suddenly flashes through my mind, making me frown.

The woman didn’t look well enough to be at work.

But she said she’s fine.

Shifting in my chair, I bring up the proposals I’m working on. When I have to reread a sentence for the third time, the frown darkens on my forehead.

There’s something about Kiara Murphy that bothers me, and I can’t place my finger on it.

She’s beautiful, her auburn hair thick and silky, her amber eyes, with the dark ring around the lighter irises, absolutely striking.

But that’s not why she grabbed my attention.

She seems skittish.

Come on, Liam. Most people are shit scared of you.

If it bothers you so much, send the woman home.

I don't like the interest Finn has in the woman.

Tapping my fingers on the desk, my eyes narrow. Honestly, I don't like any interest Finn has in a woman. Not after finding out he started an illegal sex ring.

Kiara is young and stunning. She'd be a perfect target for flesh peddlers.

That fucker better not look at any of my employees.

Pressing the button for Devon's extension, I wait until he answers, "Yes, sir?"

"Come to my office."

Seconds later, my door opens, and Devon gives me a questioning look.

"Come in." He shuts the door behind him, then I ask, "Has Finn shown an interest in any of the female staff members?"

Devon thinks for a moment, then answers, "He called Julia up quite often."

"Julia?"

"She was the lobby's receptionist before Kiara joined us. She resigned just after you went on vacation."

"Do you know why she resigned?"

Devon shakes his head. "I didn't speak to her often."

"Have HR send up her file to me."

"Yes, sir." Then he adds, "He's also calling Kiara up often and had her escort him to a function last week."

What? I don't like that one bit.

“Let me know if he calls her up again.”

“Yes, sir.”

I watch Devon leave my office then force my attention to the proposals so I can get them done before the meetings.

When the email pops up from HR, I click on it and skip through the basic information. Getting to the reason for resignation, I note Julia left because she got a better offer in Miami.

Nothing weird about that. I close the email and return to the proposals until it's a couple of minutes before my first meeting. Knowing Mrs. Crowe loves attention, I head downstairs to meet her in the lobby.

Stepping out of the elevator, Kiara's alone at reception. She rubs over her forehead, then her head snaps in my direction, and she practically jumps in her chair.

I'm used to people fearing me, especially on the mafia side of things, but I find Kiara's reaction a bit extreme. Stopping near the counter, I ask, “Everything okay down here?”

She nods quickly, her head bobbing up and down, her face still too pale. “Yes, sir. Denise just went up to the accounts department to hand out an access card.”

My eyes drift over Kiara's face. “Are you still feeling okay? I can get someone else to cover for you.”

A smile wavers around her lips, and I wonder if she's always so nervous.

“I really feel better, sir.”

“Liam,” Mrs. Crowe croons as she walks into the lobby. “Don’t tell me you’re waiting for me.”

Taking a deep breath, I force a smile onto my face. “Of course. How are you?”

“Just fabulous.” Her eyes dart to the side, then she makes a beeline for the reception. “Oh my, you have to tell me who colored your hair. I’d kill for that shade of auburn.”

Kiara blinks at Mrs. Crowe, who can be overwhelming at first, but the woman is really harmless.

“Ah... it’s my natural color,” Kiara answers.

“Would you mind if I took a photo? Just so I can show my hairdresser.”

“Oh, sure.”

Kiara stands up, then Mrs. Crowe asks, “Do you mind taking the clip out, dear?”

Kiara shoots a nervous glance my way, then does as Mrs. Crowe asks.

My client turns her attention to me as she digs her phone out of the huge-ass bag she has under her arm. “Be a sweetheart and help me take the photo.”

Careful not to accidentally touch Mrs. Crowe, I take the device from her, and after opening her camera, I look at Kiara just as she runs her fingers through the long strands of silk she calls hair.

I pause for a moment, and when Kiara glances back over her shoulder at me, my heart squeezes at the sight of her.

Fuck, beautiful. The woman is otherworldly.

The second our eyes lock, she quickly turns her head away. Not wanting to waste more time, I zoom the camera in on Kiara and take the photo.

Handing the device back to a beaming Mrs. Crowe, I notice how Kiara quickly clips her hair back up. Without thinking, I say, “You should let your hair down more.”

“Huh?” Kiara freezes as if I just threatened her.

“He’s right, dear. Your hair should be down,” Mrs. Crowe adds her two cents.

Gesturing toward the elevators for Mrs. Crowe to start walking, I catch myself stealing another glance at Kiara before returning my attention to my client.

Chapter 10

Kiara

When I get home, I drop down on my couch and let out a relieved breath.

After the call this morning, Finn made no effort to interact with me, and now that I have the day behind me, the tension is actually starting to ease.

Maybe I'll get lucky, and Finn will be too busy to mess with me.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I quickly log into my banking app, and when I see the amount paid into my account, a smile curves my lips.

I soak in the good moment, my soul needing it desperately.

Now I can get a couple of outfits for work.

My muscles relax more, and even my lost appetite returns. Getting up, I walk to the small kitchen and start preparing mac and cheese for dinner.

When I take the first bite, my stomach growls in protest that I let it go hungry the entire day.

Unable to resist, I log into my bank account again and stare at the balance while eating.

The device vibrates in my hand, and closing the banking app, I click on my messages. Not recognizing the number, I open the text.

I missed you today.

Instantly, the food sours in my mouth. Then another message comes through.

Don't think you can hide from me.

I own you now.

Come in at seven tomorrow.

And don't fucking breathe a word of this to anyone, or your mother dies.

I drop the phone on the counter and stare at it, as if it's a snake, until the screen goes black. My heart beats wildly in my chest, the little bit of happiness I was able to gain back from receiving my paycheck drowned out by the reminder of the nightmare I'm stuck in.

Minutes pass before I'm able to move a muscle. I place the leftover mac and cheese in the fridge, and walking to my bathroom, I turn on the faucets to run a bath, needing to scrub myself clean.

Feeling exhausted, I strip out of my clothes, and stepping into the tub, I sink down in the water. Lying back, I submerge my head, and holding my breath, I wish I could wash Finn from my life.

What am I going to do?

With no choice in the matter, I'm at work at seven like Finn requested.

The building feels empty as I take the elevator up to the executive floor.

No one will hear if I scream.

Do I even dare scream?

My hands fist at my sides, my teeth mercilessly worrying my bottom lip.

God, this is insane.

If I go to the police with the text messages, will they be able to protect my mother? Is it enough evidence?

Feeling like a prisoner walking to the execution chamber, my eyes are locked on Finn's office door. My breaths grow shallow, knowing without a doubt, nothing good will happen once I go in there.

Stopping in the middle of the hallway, the hopelessness and fear increase in my chest, gripping my heart in a strangling hold.

Suddenly the door opens, then a predatory smile spreads over Finn's face. "And here I thought you were going to make me wait." Gesturing for me to come inside, he waits.

Staring at the man that's making my life a living hell, I wonder how I ever thought he was attractive.

He's despicable.

"Today, Kiara."

A hopeless breath flutters over my lips then I move forward, walking into hell. Stopping in the middle of the office, I hear him shut the door.

I feel him move, the sensation that I'm being hunted tightening my throat.

When his fingers brush over my shoulder and down my arm, my body instinctively jerks. "Please don't do this," the plea falls over my lips.

My arm is gripped tightly, and I'm tugged back against his chest. His breath wafts over my ear. "That's not how this works. If you're going to beg and cry..." A gun appears in my line of sight, scaring the living shit out of me. I cringe back, my heart lurching into a violent beat.

Finn brings the barrel to my neck and drags the cold steel across my throat. I'm so terrified I can't even breathe.

"You don't want anything to happen to your mother, right?"

I quickly nod.

"And I'd hate to hurt you," he adds sinisterly. He moves the barrel down my front and stops between my breasts. "Are you going to beg and cry?"

I shake my head.

"You're going to enjoy everything I do to you, right?"

Closing my eyes, I swallow hard on the terror filling every inch of me, then I nod.

"Good girl," he breathes.

The gun disappears from my line of sight, then Finn resumes brushing his fingers up my arm. “Turn around.”

As I turn to face him, my breathing grows shallow and fast, the quick breaths making me feel dizzy. Slowly I look up until our eyes meet.

How can you do this to me?

I see the depravity and lust in his eyes, and it answers my question. Finn’s evil.

“Show me how thankful you are that I’m sparing your mother’s life,” he says, a cruel sneer forming on his face. “Kiss me.”

I struggle to keep the disgust from showing on my face. A lump forms in my throat. “C-can you lean down?”

God. Help me.

Finn’s smile stretches as he leans down.

Think of Mom. Think of anything but what you’re doing and just get it over with.

Lifting my chin, I squeeze my eyes shut and press my mouth to his.

Don’t puke.

Don’t puke.

Finn growls against my lips, “You can do better than that.”

A sob threatens to push up from my chest, and I swallow hard to keep it down. Parting my lips, intense revulsion shudders through me as I let my tongue enter his mouth.

Finn's arms wrap around me, and I'm squashed to his chest. He tilts his head and kisses me hungrily, even groaning with satisfaction.

Don't puke.

His one hand slips down to my butt, and he grips me tightly.

Up until now, there's just been a general fear of what Finn will do to my mother. I knew he'd take advantage of me, but I didn't allow myself to think about what that entails.

He's going to rape me, and I can't stop him.

This man is going to strip me bare and break me.

Yanking back, I cover my mouth with a trembling hand, violent breaths rushing from me.

Finn lifts a hand, and swiping the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip, warning fills his gaze. "Really?"

"I..." My mind races to find an excuse. "I thought I heard something."

He turns his head, listening. For once, the universe is on my side, and a phone starts to ring out in the hallway. Finn points to the ensuite bathroom. "Go. Hide!" he hisses at me.

I rush into the restroom and shut the door behind me. Pressing my forehead to the wood, I say a prayer of thanks as my breaths burst over my lips.

"Why are you here so early?" I hear Liam's voice, his tone downright brutal and nothing like it's been whenever he talks to me.

“I thought I’d get some work done before the day starts,” Finn answers casually.

Liam lets out a chuckle that doesn’t sound amused at all. “Has hell frozen over? You’ve never lifted a finger to work.” I hear footsteps, and for a moment, I wonder what would happen if Liam found me here.

Would he think I’m here out of my own free will?

Would he believe Finn or me?

“Show me what you’re working on,” Liam demands.

“Fuck off, Liam,” Finn growls, but a moment later, I hear him grunt, then Liam says with a voice that sounds like it’s filled with death, “Do you want to die today?”

What?

My eyes widen, and I keep my breaths as quiet as possible.

“I’m sorry,” Finn quickly apologizes, his tone suddenly void of all the arrogance. “I’m sorry, okay?”

There’s a moment’s silence, then Liam growls, “I’m out of patience with you, Finn. Either you start working, or you get your lazy ass out of my company.”

“I’ll work,” he quickly replies, fear for Liam clearly trembling in his tone.

Lifting my head, hope creeps into my heart.

Finn’s scared of Liam, and it really doesn’t sound like they get along.

Maybe Liam will believe me if I tell him what Finn’s doing to me.

Still, that won't stop Finn from killing Mom.

I hear something fall, then Liam says, "Fucking parasite." More movement sounds up then the office grows silent.

I take a step away from the door, straining to listen for any sound.

"Fucking bastard," Finn spits out, then the door's yanked open. With rage burning on his face, he grabs hold of my arm, and I stumble forward as he tugs me into the office. "Get the fuck out and make sure Liam doesn't see you!"

I don't waste any time and rush to the door. Slipping into the hallway, my heart's pounding against my ribs as I run toward the emergency stairs, avoiding the elevator.

I flee down the stairs, and only when I reach the lobby's floor do I sink down on the bottom step. Covering my face, I suck in desperate breaths of air.

This is insane! What the hell?

I have to do something.

Chapter 11

Liam

Swamped with proposals, contracts, and getting everything ready for the quarterly meeting with the management staff, I walk to Devon's desk.

Just as I reach him, Devon rises from his chair, worry etched on his face.

Coming to a stop in front of him, I ask, "What's wrong?"

"My sister just broke off her engagement. Apparently, it got really bad. She's in LA." Devon gives me an apologetic look. "Would you mind if I take a couple of days off to bring her to Chicago?"

"Of course not." I glance at his desk. "I'll get someone to cover for you."

Relief relaxes his features. "Thank you." I watch him gather his keys and phone, then he says, "I'll probably only need three days."

I nod. "Take the rest of the week."

"I really appreciate it."

I watch as Devon leaves, then, picking up his phone, I dial the extension for HR.

"Gina speaking."

“Devon had to take a couple of personal days. Send someone up to cover for him for the rest of the week.”

“Yes, sir.”

I place the phone down, and walking back to my office, I figure I better get to work if I want to get everything done before Friday morning’s meeting.

Minutes later, there’s a knock at my door. Scanning over the final page of a contract, I mutter, “Come in.”

The door opens, and only once I’m done, do I glance up. Surprised to see Kiara staring at me, I lift an eyebrow. “Do you need something?”

“Gina sent me up to cover for Devon,” she explains, looking anxious as hell.

“Right.” Rising to my feet, I say, “There’s a meeting scheduled for Friday morning with all the management staff. Can you put together data packets for the quarterly projections?”

Kiara stays rooted by the door, and I don’t miss the fear trembling in her eyes. “I haven’t done it before, but if there’s an example, I can learn quickly.”

I gesture in the direction of Devon’s desk. “Devon will have the last meeting’s presentation on his computer.”

Kiara moves out into the hallway so I can exit my office, then follows a couple of steps behind me.

Taking a seat at Devon’s desk, I search his saved documents for the right one, then bring it up. “Here we go.” Opening his emails, I click on the one I sent to him, opening

the document with the information she'll need. Rising from the chair, I motion for her to sit down. I make sure to keep a professional distance as I ask, "What do you think? Can you do it?"

She looks at the two documents, then nods. "I'm sure I can."

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. "I'm in my office if you need help."

Kiara nods, then gets right to work. I watch as she copies the last meeting's document, creating a new one to work on, then her fingers fly over the keyboard.

Usually, I get annoyed watching other people work, just wanting to get shit done myself, but my eyes are glued to Kiara, the way her hands move is almost soothing.

Mesmerizing.

"It's about time you replaced Devon," Finn suddenly comments.

Kiara startles so bad, she pales while my eyes snap to Finn. My tone is unyielding when I say, "Kiara's covering for Devon, and she has work to do, so you can move along."

Finn presses the button for the elevator, then gives Kiara an inappropriate grin. "Just saying, I like the view."

I should've pulled the trigger this morning.

The arrogant fuck steps into the elevator, the doors closing on his smirk.

Turning my attention back to Kiara, it's to find her frozen in the chair, her eyes wide on the shut doors.

“I apologize for that,” I say, then think to add, “if he makes any inappropriate comments, let me know so I can deal with it.”

Kiara glances up at me, her tongue darts out to wet her lips, then she nods.

I point at the computer. “Let’s get back to work.” I watch her type for a couple of seconds, then turn around and head back to my office.

Now I can focus on getting the contracts done. I get lost in my work until my phone rings. Pulling the device out of my pocket, I answer, “Liam.”

“A warehouse got hit,” Will mutters, his tone pissed off. “The one holding weapons and counterfeit machines.”

“Fuck.” Rising to my feet, I turn to look out of the window, not taking in the city stretching out around me. “Did anyone get hurt?”

“Collin took a bullet to the shoulder. We’re getting him fixed up.” Will lets out a sigh. “You’re not going to like this.”

“What?”

“The men say it was Sicilians.”

What the fuck?

“You sure?”

“I’ll look into it. Could be the leftover soldiers that are trying to rebuild the Sicilian mafia. Should we clear out the warehouse?”

“Yes.” Glancing at my wristwatch, I notice it’s already past six pm. “I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Okay.”

Ending the call, I shut down my laptop, and grabbing my jacket from where it’s hanging, I shrug it on as I leave my office.

I’m in for another surprise when I find Kiara still working hard. “You’re still here?”

Her head snaps up. “Yes, didn’t you need it done today?”

“Christ, no.” I glance at the time again, then say, “Switch everything off. Can I give you a ride home?”

“Ah... no, but thanks for offering.”

I wait for her to gather her bag, then press the button for the elevator. When the doors slide open, we step inside.

Kiara moves to the side, putting space between us, and when she sees I noticed, she smiles awkwardly. “Just making sure I don’t bump into you...” a cute expression flutters over her face, “again.”

Right. “You heard I don’t like being touched?”

She almost looks sad when she replies, “I can understand why. People are too handsy nowadays.”

“Sounds like you’ve experienced someone who doesn’t know how to keep their hands to themselves?” I don’t expect her to answer, but I hope she will.

I actually feel comfortable in the small space with her.

That’s new.

“Yeah.” She shrugs as the doors open, the action almost hopeless.

A weird emotion hits me square in the chest, and stepping into the lobby, I ask, “Is the person still a problem?”

Kiara hesitates but then shakes her head.

I open the exit door and wait for her to pass, a faint floral scent drifting from her.

She even smells beautiful.

Totally out of character, I say, “If the person gives you trouble again, I’m here if you need help.”

Her eyes meet mine, and again, it catches me off guard how striking their color is.

Nodding, she says, “Have a good night.”

“You too.”

I watch her walk toward the corner, and even though I have to get to the warehouse and stop by Jimmy’s place to check in on him, I stand and watch until she gets safely on a bus.

My thoughts are consumed with Kiara and what I learned about her. There’s obviously a fucker in her past who gave her a hard time, and it doesn’t escape my attention that it pisses me off.

It also doesn’t escape my attention that Kiara affects me like no one has before.

An eyebrow lifts as I head to the basement where my car is parked.

You’re interested in the woman.

The realization catches me totally off guard, never having felt anything for a woman before. Coming to a dead stop in the middle of the basement, I search deeper but can't figure out what it is about her that has me feeling attracted to her.

Christ, this is weird.

Chapter 12

Kiara

After work, I first went to buy a couple of outfits before taking the bus to Dad's neighborhood. Even though it's almost nine o'clock, I need to check in on Dad before heading home.

When I walk into the house, it's to find Dad in front of the TV. "Hey, Dad," I say as I go to press a kiss on his forehead. "Did Kristine go home?"

"Yeah, but what are you doin' out so late? You should be home," he chastises me.

I set the bags down next to the couch and take a seat. "I just wanted to stop by and check in on you. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, lass." Dad's eyes scan over my face. "You look worn. Still workin' at that damned place?"

My shoulders sag a little. "I've applied at other companies. As soon as I find something else, I'll resign."

Relief flickers in Dad's eyes. "That's good."

A knock at the door has Dad's head snapping toward it, then he gets up, his features turning grim. "Go hide, lass," he whispers. "Hurry!"

"What?" I stand up, confused by Dad's reaction.

He quickly gestures toward the kitchen. “Go hide! Go. Go. Go.”

I hurry to the kitchen, then shake my head, not understanding why I have to hide.

Then I hear Dad open the front door. “Liam? Somethin’ wrong?”

“No. I just wanted to check in on you.” Hearing Liam’s voice, surprise shudders through me, followed by the burst of warmth in my chest I’ve been doing my best to ignore since our conversation in the elevator.

How do Liam and my dad know each other?

“It’s late,” Dad mentions, his voice tight.

“You telling me to leave, old man?” There’s a familiarity to his tone you only have with close friends.

Frowning, I press against the wall next to the doorway, listening closely.

“Of course not.”

I hear them move into the living room, then Liam asks, “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Doc just needs to clear me for work.”

“Did you get the money?”

“Aye, but it’s too much.”

Liam lets out a chuckle. “Shut up and take it. And don’t fucking drink and gamble it away.”

“Aye.”

Money?

What's going on here?

Liam clears his throat, then says, "The warehouse was hit by Sicilians."

"What?" Dad gasps. "I thought we took care of them in Vancouver."

"Not all of them. The remainder of them are trying to rebuild the Sicilian mafia."

Mafia?

"Jesus H. Christ," Dad grumbles.

"You still have that contact?" Liam asks.

"Tony? Yeah. You want me to check with him?"

"Yes. See what he can find out about the Sicilians. I need to take care of the problem before it gets out of hand."

"Aye, boss."

Boss?

"Thanks." I hear movement then Liam asks, "You're shopping for women's clothes?"

"Oh... shit." I hear the bags I left in the living room rustling. "Kristine must've forgotten them."

Only then does it hit – Dad's hiding me from Liam.

"I'm going to head out. You get some rest and get better. I need you back at work."

"Aye-aye," Dad mumbles.

I listen as Dad lets Liam out, and when the door shuts, I step out of my hiding place. Dad's on the other side of the

living room, his eyes closed and shaking his head.

Uncertainty fills my voice as I whisper, “Dad?”

He opens his eyes, but it takes a moment before he looks at me. He seems exhausted, as if all life has been drained from him. “This is why I didn’t want you comin’ by. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

Taking a couple of steps forward, I ask, “You know Liam? Why are you hiding me from him? What were you talking about? Mafia?”

Dad slumps down in the nearest chair, and it has me walking closer and taking a seat on the couch. My worried and confused gaze rests on him.

Dad shakes his head again before lifting his eyes to meet mine. “Ahh, lass, you were never supposed to find out.”

The frown on my forehead deepens. “Find out what?”

Dad’s shoulders sag, and he lifts his hand to rub over his forehead. Finally, he explains, “I work for Liam Byrne.”

“Is that why you didn’t want me at Byrne Enterprises? Because we’d both be working there?”

Shaking his head, he says, “No.” He lets out a heavy breath. “I work for the Irish mafia.”

I blink a couple of times, the words not fully getting through to me. “You what?”

Then it starts to sink in, and my eyes widen with shock. “You work for the Irish mafia? Liam?” Another wave of shock shudders through me. “Oh my God.”

Is the mafia even still a thing?

“Your old man’s a criminal,” Dad admits outright. He lifts his chin, pride darkening his gaze. “But I won’t apologize for it. The mafia’s in my blood.”

I take a moment to process what Dad’s telling me, then ask, “Why did you hide it from me?”

He lets out another heavy breath. “I didn’t want the mafia knowin’ about you. I wanted to keep you safe and away from that part of my life.”

Nodding, I absorb the answer, then look at my dad with fresh eyes. All the traveling. Not seeing him for months at a time. Him not wanting me to come over to his house. His anger when he found out I got a job at Byrne Enterprises.

I think to ask, “Is Byrne Enterprises run by the mafia? Do Liam and Finn also work for them?”

Dad shakes his head, but then he says, “Liam’s the head of the mafia. I work for him.”

Oh. My. God.

The shock rockets through me, making me gasp, “I work for the mafia?”

“No, lass. Byrne Enterprises is a real company. I just didn’t want you anywhere near Liam and the mafia.”

Lifting my hands, I cover my mouth, a million thoughts racing through my mind.

“Just resign and don’t let Liam find out who you are,” Dad mutters.

“Why?” My eyes lock with Dad’s. “Do you think he’d hurt me?”

I can't wrap my head around the fact that the man who's been gentle and patient with me, even offering to help me, is a bad man.

God, it would kill Dad if he found out what Finn's been doing to me.

Dad shakes his head, his mouth pulling down at the corners. "Liam would never hurt you." He takes a deep breath, shifting in the chair. "But if he found out I have a daughter, he'd... Lass, you're beautiful, and I'm one of his best men. He might get it in his head to claim you."

"Claim me?" I parrot like an idiot.

"Liam owns everythin'. Chicago. Every man workin' for him. Our families." Worry darkens Dad's eyes even more. "You'll belong to the mafia. If he decides to take you, there's nothin' I can do. No one dares go against Liam Byrne. Aye, lass, you need to get away from Byrne Enterprises now. Don't go back tomorrow. Ye hear me?"

Liam would take me?

No one dares go against him.

Staring at my father, the thoughts run through my mind. "What about Finn?"

Dad's face tenses with disgust. "He's nothin' but a worm. Never been a part of the mafia. Lord only knows why Owen married that connivin' woman. Finn's not worthy of the name Byrne."

My eyebrows dart up. "They're stepbrothers?"

“More like sworn enemies,” Dad grumbles, his hate for Finn evident in his voice. He gives me a look of warning. “You stay away from Finn. He’s no good.”

Hope begins to unfurl in my chest. “But Liam’s good?”

Dad sucks in a deep breath of air. “I trust Liam with my life. He’s only been good to me.” He waves a hand in the air. “Even paid for Kristine and the medical bills.” Dad pins me with a look. “I’ll pay some of the money into your account, so stop worryin’ about Kristine.”

Maybe Liam can help me? Maybe he can stop Finn?

Could he be the answer to my prayers?

Dad rises from the chair, waving a tired hand at the front door. “Time to go, lass. Before someone sees you here.”

Climbing to my feet, I ask, “Does Mom know about the mafia?”

Dad nods. “Aye.”

I step closer, pressing a kiss to Dad’s cheek. Pulling back, I lock eyes with him, so many questions still mulling in my head.

“Don’t hate me, lass. I did the best I could.”

A loving smile curves my lips up. “Oh, Dad, I could never hate you. I understand why you hid it from me.” Now that I know the real reason for Dad’s behavior, I realize how much he loves me. How much he protected me. “Thank you for wanting to keep me safe.”

Emotion flutters over his face. “Always, lass.”

Picking up my bags, I say, “Stop worrying and get some rest.”

“You’re goin’ to stop workin’ there, right?”

“Yeah. I just need to wrap some things up.”

When I walk to the front door and open it, Dad reminds me, “Don’t tell anyone who you are.”

“Okay.” I smile at Dad before stepping out of the house and shutting the door.

Taking a deep breath, my world’s still spinning from everything I learned tonight.

Liam’s the head of the Irish mafia.

That means he’s stronger than Finn... right?

Chapter 13

Liam

Stepping out of the elevator, I have to admit, I really like the sight of Kiara sitting at Devon's desk.

She glances up, then a stunning smile spreads over her face. I take in the soft curls falling over her shoulders.

She let her hair down.

My heart constricts, and there's a weird sensation in my gut.

Jesus, I have a crush on the woman. Like a fucking teenager.

My worry about the damn Sicilians takes a back seat, and I almost chuckle at the thought, then say, "Morning, already hard at work?"

She nods, none of the awkwardness I was starting to get used to on her face. "I should be done by lunch. How many do you need me to print?"

"Eight." Stepping closer, my eyes drink in her beautiful features, then lowers to the silk top she's wearing. Looking for a reason to keep talking to her, I ask, "Are you still happy you started working here?"

"I really enjoy the work."

That's good.

“Are you born and raised in Chicago?”

Personal questions, Liam?

Kiara's smile grows, drawing my attention to her glossy lips that look biteable. “Yes. I live in Palos Hills.”

What?

When I frown, Kiara hurries to say, “But I'm saving up to move into a better apartment.”

“Good.” I'm hit with a protective wave for the woman, and it has me asking, “And your parents?”

She stares at me for a moment, making me feel the question was too personal, but then she answers, “My mom's a cleaner at a nursing home, and my dad... ah, he's in sales.”

“Do you still live with them?”

Liam, why not just ask her to write down everything personal? You're crossing the line.

Kiara shakes her head. “My parents never married. My mom has a studio apartment near me, though.”

I can't stop myself from saying, “If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Sir.

Get to fucking work, Liam.

When I start to walk down the hallway, Kiara asks, “Can I bring you coffee?”

I pause to actually consider it and then find myself nodding. “One sugar, no cream.”

“Yes, sir.”

Christ.

Walking into my office, I shrug out of my suit jacket and hang it up before taking a seat at my desk. The second I switch on my laptop, I find myself sending an email to HR requesting Kiara’s personnel file.

With a ton of work waiting for me, I lean back in my chair, unable to tear my thoughts away from the woman who has me in knots.

This has never happened.

At thirty-nine, I resigned myself to life as a bachelor.

The second the email comes through, I dart forward and open the attached file.

Kiara Murphy. Twenty-four.

Fuck.

There’s one hell of an age gap between us.

A knock at my door has me closing the document. “Come in.”

My eyes lock onto Kiara the instant she steps into my office. She sets the coffee down, then gives me an expectant look.

Oh, she’s waiting to hear what I think.

My gaze lowers to the beverage, and I wait for the usual feeling of disgust to come. But it doesn’t.

Picking up the cup, I stare at the black fluid a moment longer, then take a cautious sip. When it tastes exactly the way I like it, the corner of my mouth lifts.

I set the coffee down, and meeting Kiara's eyes, say, "Another job well done. Careful, though. I'll expect coffee every morning."

A happy smile explodes on her face, robbing me of my ability to breathe.

Jesus.

"I don't mind. I'm glad you like it." Too soon, she turns around, leaving my office.

Turning my attention back to the beverage, I take another sip. My lips curve wider, then I shake my head at myself.

Get to work, asshole.

Forcing myself to focus, I bring a contract up. Time starts to slip away until my office phone rings.

Seeing it's Kiara's line, I answer, "Yes?"

"I have a Mr. Gordon on the line for you."

"I'm in the middle of something. Take a message for me."

"Yes, sir."

Sir.

The image of Kiara in my bed, moaning that word, flashes through my mind.

I have to close my eyes when a burst of desire hits, making me harden at the speed of light.

Fuck, at this rate, I'm not going to get much work done.

Chapter 14

Kiara

Working with Liam, I've noticed it keeps Finn at a distance.

Just one more reason why I like Liam.

I know Dad said I must stay away from him, but... why? I get Liam's the head of the mafia, and after searching on Google, I think I understand what that entails. But the mafia set aside, Liam treats me like a human being. He's the total opposite of Finn.

I'm not going to lie, where Finn disgusts me, Liam intrigues me. There's no comparing the two men.

Also, Dad said he trusts Liam, so why can't I?

"You can take notes, right?" Finn suddenly asks, making me jump in the chair.

Bastard.

I don't bother hiding the scowl as I meet his eyes, my chin raised. "Yes."

The corner of his mouth lifts in a sneer. "Careful. Just because Liam's giving you the time of day doesn't mean shit. Seems your mother's living on borrowed time."

The reminder of the threat has it feeling like acid's pouring into my stomach.

He gestures to the office where the meeting is being held.
“We have a meeting in the boardroom. Come.”

Grabbing a notepad and pencil, I reluctantly follow Finn, and stepping inside the boardroom, the managers from each department are already seated around the rectangular table.

Unfortunately, I have to sit next to Finn because Liam comes in, taking the only other available seat on the other side of the table.

It's fine. You're surrounded by people. Finn won't do anything.

“Morning, everyone,” Liam starts the meeting. I open the notepad and get ready to write any important points down. “Thank you for being here on time.” I watch as Liam sets a timer on his phone.

I find myself staring at his hands, my insides fluttering.

“Everyone’s here apart from Devon, who had to take a couple of personal days. Kiara is filling in for him.” He gives me a warm smile, making my own lips curve up.

“Everyone should have a copy of the quarterly proposals?”

As all the managers take a look at the packets I placed on the table earlier, a hand settles heavily on my thigh. My head snaps to Finn, and quickly reaching beneath the table, I shove him off.

My cheeks flame up, and I swallow hard as the hopelessness and fear return with a force. I glance around the table, hoping no one noticed.

“Let’s start with item one,” Liam says, drawing my gaze to him.

I stare at his handsome features, the strength in his eyes.

Can you make Finn stop?

Liam’s gaze meets mine, and I quickly lower my own to the notepad. I press the pencil to the paper but draw a startled line across the page when Finn grabs hold of my thigh again. Then he moves his hand up, and I almost choke when he grips me hard between the legs.

Shock shudders through me, and before I can even think of what to do, I dart up from the chair to get away from Finn.

Liam’s eyes narrow on me. “Kiara, are you okay?”

Wrapping an arm around my waist, horrible emotions well up in me. “Cramps,” I whisper, and not excusing myself, I hurry out of the office.

I run to the restroom and shut myself in one of the stalls. Placing a flat hand against the door, I start to gasp for air, the shock of what happened hitting again.

Humiliation floods me, pushing tears to my eyes.

I can’t believe Finn touched me like that. And in an office filled with people.

Crouching down, I wrap my arms around my waist, unable to compose myself.

I’ve never been violated like that. I don’t know how to handle it. My chin begins to tremble, and it feels like my stomach is on fire with the bile churning in it.

This is sick.

It feels as if my whole body is being submerged in ice.

I try to shut down my mind, but I can't ignore the disturbing feel of Finn's hand between my legs.

I gasp for air, my lungs burning and my throat aching. Bile rushes up, and somehow in my traumatized state, I turn to the toilet before emptying my stomach.

When there's nothing left to vomit, I sink back on my butt, and leaning against the wall, I try to breathe through the trauma of what Finn did to me.

Surrounded by people, he violated me, which means if he gets me alone, he'll rape me.

It's only a matter of time.

Unless.

Liam.

Knowing I can't hide in the stall forever, my fingers feel numb as I open the door. I walk to the basin, and unable to look at my reflection in the mirror, I wash my hands and splash some water over my face.

I'm hesitant to leave, not that I'll be safe here.

Calm down. You can't make a scene at work.

Just calm down so you can think.

It takes more strength than I have to leave the restroom. Sitting down at my desk, I glance back to the boardroom. I can hear the soft murmur of voices as the meeting continues.

When I turn my gaze to the desk, I notice a note with two painkillers.

Take them. If you don't feel better by the time the meeting ends, you can go home.

Liam.

My hands fly up to cover my face as my emotions spiral out of control. I can't keep the sob from escaping my lips, my entire body trembling.

The phone starts ringing, startling the hell out of my frazzled mind. I swallow the tears down, taking a quick deep breath, then answer the call. "Kiara speaking."

"Girl, you sound sick," Denise's voice comes over the line.

"PMS," I lie. "The cramps are killing me."

"Do you need painkillers?"

I look at the note Liam left and almost start crying again. "No. I have some. Do you need something?"

"Oh, right. I have a call for Liam. It's Mrs. Crowe."

"Okay." Denise puts the call through. "Morning, Mrs. Crowe. It's Kiara speaking, Liam's temporary assistant. How can I help?"

"Where's Devon?" she asks.

"He's on vacation."

"Oh. Can I speak with Liam?"

"He's in a meeting. I can get him to call you back." My body's still a trembling mess. I don't know how I'm even having this conversation right now.

"Please, dear. He has my number."

"Okay. Enjoy the rest of your day."

I end the call, and lowering my head, I try to regain control over the chaotic emotions swirling in my chest.

I can't believe Finn grabbed me between the legs.

An intense wave of disgust rolls over me, making my skin break out in sickening goosebumps.

The only thing counting in my favor today is the meeting that should last a couple of hours.

Slowly, I lift my head, my eyes finding the note again.

I can't let this continue. I need help.

Dad said no one dares go against Liam. Does that include Finn?

The elevator doors open, and Will steps out.

I quickly sit up, and moving the chair forward, I force a smile to my face.

Will takes one look at me, then frowns. "You okay?"

I nod, then say, "Mr. Byrne's in a meeting."

"I just need to tell him something." My eyes follow Will as he walks to the office, and after knocking, opens the door. "Liam." He gestures with a nod for Liam to step out into the hallway.

I can't tear my eyes away from the door, and the moment Liam comes out of the office, emotion wells in my chest again, making my eyes burn.

I can't hear what they say, but when they're done talking, Liam glances my way. A frown forms on his forehead, then he walks toward me. "Did you take the painkillers?"

“Ah...” I glance at the two pills. “Not yet.”

Turning around, he walks to his office and seconds later comes back with a bottle of water. “Take them,” he orders as he sets the water down in front of me.

While I pop the pills into my mouth, washing them down, Liam turns his attention to Will. “Get going.”

“Yes, boss,” Will chuckles.

Again, goosebumps spread over my skin.

Does Will also work for the mafia? Does Denise know?

Liam looks at me again, then his eyes narrow. “Just cramps?”

No. It's so much worse.

It's on the tip of my tongue to blurt out everything, but instead, I nod.

His blue eyes soften. “Let me know if it gets worse. Okay?”

I point at the note. “Thank you.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “You're welcome.”

I watch him go back into the office for the meeting, then my shoulders slump.

You need to tell someone, Kiara.

Chapter 15

Liam

The meeting ran longer than expected, and I spent the rest of the afternoon returning calls.

Glancing up, I frown. There's been a strange tension hanging in the air, and I can't figure out what's responsible for it.

My personal phone starts to ring, and picking the device up, I answer, "Liam."

"It's Luca. Just checking if you got the payment."

I've been laundering money for years for the head of the Italian mafia, and in return, he supplies me with the weapons I need.

"Yes, I'm heading down now to make sure everything goes smoothly."

"Good." I hear him inhale. "How are things in Chicago?"

"Some Sicilians popped up here again, but I'm dealing with the problem."

"Didn't the stupid fuckers learn their lesson?"

"Apparently not," I mutter. "Can you ask Viktor to check for any information he can find? Maybe there's underground chatter."

“I’ll tell him to take a look.”

“Thanks.”

Ending the call, I dial the number for Jimmy.

“Aye, boss, I was just about to call you.”

“Did you find out anything from Tony?”

“Aye. He says it’s a small group. No more than twenty to thirty men. I asked him to find out who the new leader is, seein’ as Manno’s six feet under.”

“Twenty’s nothing. We can deal with them. Thanks, Jimmy.”

“Sure thin’, boss.”

After the call, I notice it’s already past five. I tuck the phone into my pocket as I get up and head out of my office.

Reaching Devon’s desk, Kiara’s staring at the computer screen, completely lost in thought.

“Time to go home,” I say.

She jumps, letting out a startled sound. “Oh. Right.” I watch as she switches everything off and wait until she stands up before I walk to the elevator, pressing the button.

Glancing back at her, I ask, “Feeling better?”

Her head bobs up and down as she comes to stand next to me. “Thanks for asking.”

Always polite.

My gaze scans over her face, and with her standing closer, I notice the dark circles forming beneath her eyes.

Something's wrong.

“Get some rest this weekend,” I say. The elevator doors open, and I wait for her to enter before stepping inside.

After I press the button for the lobby floor and I step back, our arms accidentally brush. I don't feel the need to instantly put distance between us, but Kiara quickly steps to the side.

“Sorry,” she apologizes, even though it's not her fault.

“It's okay,” I murmur. Looking at her, it's to see she has her arms wrapped tightly around her waist, her shoulders hunched as if she's trying to make herself smaller.

The protectiveness surges in my chest, and for the first time in my life, I feel the need to hug another person.

I shove my hands into my pockets to keep myself from reaching for her.

When the doors open, Kiara practically scurries out, careful to step around me. Walking to the exit, I open the door for her, and follow her outside.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, my eyes searching her face.

Her gaze lifts to mine, but it's only for a moment before she glances in the direction of the bus stop. “Yes. Have a good weekend, sir,” she says, an emotion I can't quite place, tensing her voice.

“You too.” I watch as she walks to the bus stop and joins the gathering group already waiting.

Shaking my head, I walk back into the building and go up to the third floor, where the money laundering takes place.

When I enter the office, Will's already here, checking that things are running smoothly. "Update me."

He moves in behind Charles and gestures at the computer's screen. "We're processing a quarter of the funds as payment for services, and the rest is for a sale of a property."

"When will the funds be back in Luca's account?"

"The usual forty days, so it doesn't appear in the same calendar month."

"Good."

Pulling my phone out, I send Luca a text updating him on what's happening.

"I spoke with Jimmy," I tell Will.

"Oh yeah, what did he say?"

"His informant, Tony, says the Sicilians are a group of twenty to thirty men."

Will lets out a bark of laughter, crossing his arms over his chest. "What the fuck do they think they'll accomplish with twenty to thirty men?"

"Right?" I chuckle while shaking my head. "Fucking stupid."

"Can Jimmy find out who's the fucker in charge?"

I nod. "He's on it."

"Good."

Stepping closer to Charles' desk, I say, "Keep the amounts below twenty-five thousand."

"Yes, boss."

I spend another thirty minutes checking that all the other payments are being processed correctly before turning my attention back to Will. “I’m just going to grab my jacket, then we can head to the main warehouse.”

“I’ll wait in the car.”

My thoughts turn to the Sicilian problem as I head back to the executive floor. I just need to find out who’s the new leader and where they’re hiding, then wipe the bastards off the face of the planet once and for all.

Chapter 16

Kiara

Just as the bus approaches, my phone starts to ring. Pulling the device out of my bag, I answer, “Hello.”

“Where the fuck are you?” Finn’s voice comes over the line.

Instantly my muscles tighten, and my heart sets off a wild pace. “I’m on my way home.”

Why are you even answering him?

“I swear I will fucking end your mother in the next hour if you don’t get your ass back to the office. You have ten minutes.”

The call ends while his words are still shuddering through me. Turning around, I begin to run, my breaths already exploding over my lips. I rush into the building and repeatedly push the button for the elevator. On the way up, I place a hand on my stomach, only then thinking about what will happen when I set foot in Finn’s office.

Everyone left for the day, and there’s no way the security will hear me down in the lobby.

Closing my eyes, intense dread fills every inch of me.

Kill him if you have to, Kiara. It will be self-defense, and even if it's not, going to jail is better than being raped and living like this forever.

Stepping out of the elevator, I quickly dart around Devon's desk, and setting my bag down, I dig a letter opener out of the drawer. I push it into the back of my pants, then slowly walk down the hallway.

Stand up for yourself. Fight if you have to.

With a trembling hand, I open the door. I'm unable to think straight, my breaths exploding over my lips, and my heart is nothing more than a whisper.

I'm terrified to face Finn, who's grinning triumphantly where he's leaning against his desk. "Come in and shut the door."

My legs feel like lead as I step inside and shut the door behind me. My tongue darts out to wet my dry lips. "This has to stop." My voice sounds weak, my fear trembling in every word.

Finn lets out a sadistic sounding chuckle as he pushes away from the desk, slowly coming toward me.

My fingers flex, the urge to grab hold of the letter opener surging through me.

"This has to stop," he taunts me, then shaking his head, he says, "It will stop when I say so." Lifting an arm, he gestures at me. "Time to see what you're hiding beneath those clothes. Strip."

"No." Slowly, I move my hand behind my back and take hold of the handle of the letter opener. I pull the weapon out,

then keep still. “You’re done torturing me.”

Finn raises his eyebrows, his smirk growing, then he darts forward. Even though I expected it, a shriek still escapes me when he grabs hold of me. I’m thrown to the side, falling against the couch while the letter opener slips from my hand and skids across the floor.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Finn laughs.

Move, Kiara!

I quickly crawl after it, but a kick to my side sends me tumbling over. My breath explodes from my lungs, a searing pain engulfing my stomach and chest.

Oh, God.

Breathe.

Move!

Not giving up, I stretch to reach my weapon, but Finn’s weight comes down on me. Turning onto my back, I wildly hit him with every ounce of strength I have.

A punch to the left side of my face has my head snapping to the side. Spots dance in my vision, fire spreading through my jaw, my eyes instantly tearing up. A ringing in my ears makes it impossible for me to hear anything else.

Finn grips my hands, and when he starts to wrap his belt around my wrists, my hips buck up to throw him off me. “No!” I scream, the single word sounding horrified.

“You’re only making me harder by fighting back,” Finn laughs as if this is funny.

As if the most horrible moment of my life is entertaining to him.

All my struggling makes him give up on tying my wrists together, and instead, he grabs hold of my blouse, tearing it down the front.

An enraged and terrified sob escapes me, then he grabs at my breasts. When he leans closer, I shove and hit his shoulders, neck, and face.

The only warning I get is a growl, then intense pain stuns my mind from his punch to my face. The world turns black, and my strength instantly vanishes. In and out of consciousness, I feel Finn rip at my clothes. The muggy air licks at my skin, then it's replaced with the feel of his lips and teeth.

I hear myself cry, the sound haunting.

Shut down.

Leave this place, Kiara.

“I’m going to enjoy fucking you.” His touch is brutal, his hands marking my skin as he squeezes my breasts, then his teeth clamp around my right nipple.

I can feel myself go into shock, my body shivering, my breaths shallow.

Fight!

I force strength into my arms, and my hands splay over his face as I push him away from my breast. He grabs hold of my right arm, pinning it to the floor.

Some more strength returns, and I struggle to free my body from beneath his. At some point, I feel his erection slapping against my thigh, and it fills me with so much revulsion I manage to push him off me.

Scrambling toward the door, I struggle to my feet, only to be taken down with one hell of a force as Finn plows into me.

I cry out in frustration and rage and instantly start to hit and kick at him again. It feels like I'm turning into a wild animal, the only thing keeping me going is my survival instinct.

My nails scratch long grooves over his cheek and neck, the sight of his blood making me feel feral.

Bringing my knee up, I slam it into his stomach, and hearing the breath whoosh from him, empowers me to keep fighting.

When Finn pulls his right arm back, I know the next blow might knock me out completely. It's only seconds, but I struggle with everything I have and let out a scream right before his fist slams into my ear.

Instantly the world spins, nausea whirls in my stomach, but somehow I cling to consciousness, my arms numbly slapping at his chest.

He kicks my legs open.

Closing my eyes, I beg the darkness skirting around my mind to take me.

Fight.

I have to fight.

The palm of his hand smacks me between my legs. “That’s ... like it. Spread open ... me.”

I keep slipping in and out of hell, my head rolling to the side, my ear still ringing and aching... everything’s aching.

Chapter 17

Liam

Stepping out of the elevator, I glance at Devon's desk, only to frown at the sight of Kiara's handbag.

I can swear I remember her taking it.

Moving closer, I pick the black handbag up, glancing over it while I bring up the memory of her clearly walking out of here with it.

Lifting my head, I glance up and down the hallways.

Did she forget something?

A terrified woman's cry has my head snapping to the right, and dropping the bag, I break out into a run. I shove Finn's door open, and the sight greeting me sends shockwaves pulsing through my body.

Finn on top of Kiara.

The blood.

Her naked.

It's only a second, and as Finn's head snaps up toward me, I lunge forward, kicking him so fucking hard he flies off of her.

Rage fills my vision with a hazy red as I step over Kiara while pulling my gun from behind my back where the vest was

covering it.

Finn shakes his head, climbs to his feet, and as I train the barrel on him, he dives for me. The shot vibrates in the air, his shoulder hits my chest, his hand grabbing hold of my right wrist.

I keep my footing, the fucker not able to take me down because I'm bigger than him.

Straining against his hold, I turn the barrel on him again. Pulling the trigger, the bullet clips the fucker's leg, earning me a painful groan.

Finn lets go, and darting around me, the bastard almost trips over Kiara before running out the door. My arms fly up, and I take the shot, this time hitting his right shoulder before he flees down the emergency stairs.

I'm just about to go after the fucker when a broken sound from Kiara has my eyes snapping down to where she's lying on the floor.

Right by my feet.

Jesus Christ.

Crouching down by her, I tuck the weapon away and pull my phone from my pocket to dial Will's number.

"You coming or what?"

"Finn fucking attacked Kiara. Get the doctor. Bring him to my office."

"Jesus. On my way."

I end the call, and after shoving the device back in my pocket, I carefully push my arms beneath Kiara's body and lift

her to my chest.

She groans, her head slumping against my shoulder, then her eyes flutter open. “Liam?” Her voice sounds fragile, and it grates against my heart.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur softly. Carrying Kiara to my office, I lay her down on the couch, then quickly grab my jacket to cover her. Leaning over her, my eyes lock with hers. “Do I need to take you to the hospital?”

She shakes her head, a tear rolling down her temple. “No. D-Dad can’t k-know.”

She starts to sit up. “Don’t move,” I say, not even thinking when I press my hand to her shoulder. “I have a doctor coming.” When she relaxes back on the couch, I straighten up. “I’m just going to get a first aid kit.”

Rushing out of the office, I jog to Devon’s desk and pull the first aid kit from beneath it. When I get back to my office, Kiara’s sitting up, busy pushing her arm through the jacket’s sleeve.

Noticing the bite marks the fucker left on her delivers another gut punch before she covers herself.

When I set the first aid kit down on the floor by her feet, Kiara covers her face, her shoulders shuddering beneath the trauma she just suffered at the hands of that fucker.

I should’ve killed him before this happened.

Fuck.

I should’ve killed him.

Suddenly Kiara's head snaps up, and she looks at me with so much fucking fear it hits me square in the chest. "My mom!" She begins to get up, but my hand darts out to her shoulder, stopping her. "He's going to kill my mother," she cries.

Years of living on the edge of a knife keep me calm as I say, "Give me her address." I pull my phone out and dial Will's number again.

"We're five minutes away," he answers.

"Address," I repeat to Kiara, and once she's stammered through it, I ask Will, "Did you get that?"

"Yes."

"Have men guard that apartment. It's Kiara's mother's place."

"Done."

I end the call, and moving my hand up to the side of her neck, I lock eyes with her. "Nothing will happen to your mother. Are you okay with me cleaning you up?"

Kiara stares at me for a moment, then her face crumbles. An overwhelming emotion of protectiveness surges through me. Without thinking, I move to sit on the couch and pull her to my chest.

Her hand comes up between us, and she grabs a fistful of my vest, smothering her cries against me.

My arms lock around her, and it feels like it will be an impossible task to pry them away from her.

Lowering my head, I press a kiss to her hair. “I’ve got you. Okay?”

She nods, her sobs breaking my fucking heart.

“I won’t let you get hurt again,” I promise.

Kiara wraps her free arm around my lower back, pressing closer to me. Knowing she’s looking for safety in my arms makes possessiveness pour through my veins.

“I’m so fucking sorry I didn’t see what was happening.”

“I-I... w-was so s-scared,” she stammers through her tears.

My heart.

Will comes rushing into the office with Dr. O’Sullivan right on his heels.

Lowering my mouth close to her ear, I ask, “Are you okay with my doctor looking at you?”

Kiara nods but doesn’t pull away from me. Glancing at Dr. Sullivan, I say, “You’re going to have to check her in my arms.”

I’m not letting go of her unless it’s what she wants.

“Ah...” Dr. Sullivan sets his bag down next to the couch. “Can you move so I can actually see her?”

This time Kiara pulls slightly back. She keeps her head down, reluctantly letting go of my shirt but keeping her other arm wrapped around my lower back.

I quickly make sure the jacket is still covering her, then look at Will. “Find a blanket.”

“Yes, boss.”

Dr. Sullivan reaches for Kiara's chin, and when she flinches, I almost grind my molars to dust from clenching my teeth.

He starts asking her questions, and listening to her stammer her way through the answers is pure torture.

When he's done checking her, he says, "She'll definitely have a concussion. Someone has to keep an eye on her for a couple of days." The corner of his mouth lifts. "She's tough, though. No broken bones." He runs through the list of her bruises which he says will fade within two to three weeks.

Taking an injection out of his bag, he explains, "This will help with the shock."

I glare at the needle as it pricks her skin. Will comes in with a blanket, and I take it from him. When Dr. O'Sullivan is done treating Kiara, I wrap the blanket around her.

A silent tear trails over her swelling cheek. I rise to my feet and nod to the door. "Thanks, Doc. Will will take care of the payment."

When the two men leave the office, I don't waste time bending down and lifting Kiara back into my arms. She wraps her arms around my neck, hiding her face against my shoulder as I carry her out of the office.

On the elevator ride down, we remain silent, stopping on the lobby floor, where Will joins us before we head down to the basement.

"Heading home?" he asks.

I nod. "Get every available man to hunt Finn. I want that fucker found." My eyes lock with Will. "Alive. He's mine."

“On it.”

The elevator opens to the basement, and as we step out, I add, “He took a bullet to the shoulder, and another grazed his leg, so start looking at hospitals.”

Will opens the passenger door to my SUV, and I carefully place Kiara on the seat. Leaning over her, I pull the seat belt on and clip it in. When I straighten up, I say to Will, “Check on Kiara’s mother. I want an update every hour.”

“I’ll drive by her mother’s place,” my friend assures me.

I walk around the back of the SUV and slide in behind the steering wheel. When I start the engine, Kiara gives me an address which I assume is for her own apartment.

Reversing out of the parking space, I tip my chin at Will, then glance at Kiara. “You’re not going home.”

Her eyes shimmer in the light coming into the car from the basement. “I d-don’t want to go to t-the hospital.”

“You’re not.” I steer the vehicle out onto the road. “I’m taking you to my place.”

Chapter 18

Kiara

The air I breathe smells tainted.

The lights are too bright.

Staring out of the window, it feels as if someone dug my insides out. I feel hollow.

I can't comprehend the attack. It doesn't feel like it happened to me. As if I'm not in this body.

Wrapping the blanket tighter around me, I cover my mouth with some of it.

Finn stripped me of everything I am. Everything I was.

Mom.

I peek at Liam. "Will my mom be safe?"

His eyes leave the road to find mine. "Yes. I have men guarding her."

My throat closes up, but I squeeze the words out in a strained voice, "Thank you."

My eyes keep darting between the window and Liam. I'm scared if I look away for too long, he might disappear. It's stupid, but I can't help it. Right now, I need someone stronger than me by my side.

Just until I'm better and I can fight for myself again.

Flashes of the ordeal bombard my mind, and I quickly smother a sob that escapes before I can stop it.

"Almost there," Liam murmurs as he turns the SUV up a street.

I nod and bury my face deeper in the blanket.

I've never been hurt like this before.

My face aches as if a second heart is pulsing in my cheek.

I can still feel Finn's hands on me. Groping. His teeth on my breasts.

Oh, God.

I shake my head to rid myself of the traumatic flashback.

"We're here." Liam brings the car to a stop, then he tugs at the blanket. I lower it from my face and lift my eyes to his. "You'll be safe with me. I promise."

I nod, not doubting him for a single second.

When I move to open the door, he says, "Sit still. I'll come around and get you."

My eyes follow Liam as he climbs out of the SUV and walks around the back to come open my door. "I can walk," I say, my voice hoarse.

"I know." Still, he slips his arms beneath me and lifts me to his chest, bridal style.

Two men step forward where they're standing by an elevator in the basement, and it has Liam saying, "Stay at your posts. Everything's fine."

Assuming they are guards, I hide my face against Liam's shoulder until I hear the elevator door close. Lifting my head, I whisper, "Really, I can walk."

When Liam looks down, it puts his face closer to mine. "Are you uncomfortable?"

"No, but you have to be." All the touching must be getting to him.

"I'm fine."

The doors open, and I'm carried into a sea of luxury. The first thing I see is a raindrop crystal chandelier, followed by cream leather couches that form a half-circle facing floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city.

It's breathtaking.

Liam sets me down on one of the couches, and I notice the kitchen to my left, the white marble countertops sparkling from the overhead lights.

"I'm just going to get a first aid kit," he says, and I watch as he walks up a spiral staircase.

Glancing around his home, it hits that Liam brought me to his penthouse. He hugged me and carried me. He saved me.

He shot Finn.

Finn.

The trauma washes over me, threatening to drown every ounce of life from me.

Pulling the blanket and jacket away, I peek down at my bare breasts. The sight of the red blotches and bitemarks has my chin trembling, and I quickly cover up again.

Hearing Liam coming down the stairs, I quickly wipe away the tears forming beneath my eyes.

He sits down next to me, and opening a bag, he takes antiseptic wipes out. When he lifts his hand to my face, I quickly say, “I can clean myself. I really don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Liam pauses, then locks eyes with me. “I’m not uncomfortable, Kiara. I want to do this.”

He does?

When he dabs over my jaw and cheek, I lower my eyes to his chest. Seeing the bloodstains on his shirt, I mutter, “I’m sorry for ruining your shirt. I don’t think the stains will come out.”

Liam glances down, then shakes his head. “It’s nothing. Tell me if I hurt you.”

Even though it burns, I sit still and keep quiet.

Liam leans closer as he wipes over my ear, then he murmurs, “The skin split, but it’s stopped bleeding.” He dabs some balm onto the broken skin.

Having him so close to me, my emotions begin to spiral, and I can’t keep the tears from flowing.

I’ve always been like that, the second someone shows me kindness, I can’t hold the tears in anymore.

Liam’s arms wrap around me, and I’m gently pulled to his chest. I press my lips together to keep the sobs in. Fighting to regain control of the mess left behind by the assault, it takes minutes before I calm down.

Pulling back, I whisper, “Sorry.”

“It’s understandable. You’ve been through hell,” Liam says, his tone brisk, as if he’s angry.

He takes hold of my chin, lifting my face, then wipes the tear tracks away with his fingers.

My eyes dart to his, and we both freeze. After a couple of seconds, I ask, “Are you really okay with all the touching?”

The corner of his mouth lifts, softening his features. “Yes. You don’t have the same effect on me as other people.”

Meaning?

His gaze lowers to the blanket. “My clothes won’t fit, but we’ll have to make do.”

“Your clothes?”

Liam gets up, then holds his hand out to me. “I’ll show you to the bathroom so you can shower.”

Climbing to my feet, I place my hand in his. His fingers wrap warmly around my cold ones, then he leads me up the stairs. I’m taken to a bedroom that’s half the size of the living room. The décor is white leather with gold finishings, a glass wall separating the bedroom from a walk-in closet.

Holy crap.

“You have a beautiful home,” I murmur, feeling a little awestruck.

“Thanks.” Liam pulls me into a bathroom that’s half the size of my apartment. An oval-shaped tub stands in front of the windows, and I can see the city from here.

Letting go of my hand, he says, “I’m just going to get you something to wear.”

I stand still, glancing at the marble counters and huge shower. A minute later, Liam comes back with a black t-shirt and gray sweatpants.

He sets the clothing down on the counter, then looks at me. “Take your time. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.” The second the word ‘sir’ leaves my mouth, I feel awkward as hell.

I’m standing in my boss’ bathroom.

“Just Liam,” he corrects me before walking out and shutting the door behind him.

Letting the blanket drop to the floor, I take hold of the jacket and slowly open it. The second I see my naked body, I have to glance away, shame hitting me hard.

Finn saw me naked. He touched me.

God. Liam saw me naked too.

Crouching down, I bury my face in my arms.

Chapter 19

Liam

Hearing Kiara cry in the bathroom takes all my strength to not go back in there to comfort her.

Instead, I pull out my phone and dial Will's number.

"The mother is safe, and there's no sign of Finn... yet," he answers.

"Keep looking for the fucker." I sit down at the foot of my bed and stare at the shut bathroom door. "Can you stop by the office and bring Kiara's handbag. It's at Devon's desk."

"Will do. I'll bring it by your place tomorrow," he replies.

"Also, go to Finn's office and gather Kiara's clothes. I don't want any of the other staff finding them." Rubbing a tired hand over my forehead, I add, "Thanks for tonight."

"That's what I'm here for. How's Kiara holding up?"

I shake my head, not sure. "As best as she can."

"I feel for the woman." He lets out a sigh. "I'll see you tomorrow. Let me know if you need me to bring anything else."

"Thanks, Will."

Ending the call, I pull the tie loose from around my neck and undo the top two buttons.

I hear the shower running, and my thoughts turn to the scene I walked in on. I close my eyes against the image of Finn on top of Kiara.

I've done a lot of bad shit in my life, but hurting a woman? It's something I'll never be able to stomach.

It's only then the realization hits that I don't know whether the fucker raped her, and I can't remember if the doctor asked her.

My eyes snap open, and I shoot to my feet, unable to sit still. Pacing up and down in front of the bathroom door, my skin crawls with disgust for what Kiara went through.

The second the door opens, I stop pacing and stare at her. She's washed her hair and her body's drowning in my clothes. Her chin trembles as she asks, "Do you have a nail clipper? I can't get all the blood out from under my nails."

Jesus.

Darting forward, I can't stop myself from wrapping my arms around her. I press my hand to the back of her head and try to curve my body around hers. She instantly breaks down, and I hate asking the question, but I need to know.

"Did he rape you?"

"N-no," she stammers through her tears. "I m-managed to fight h-him off until you c-came."

Thank. God.

When Kiara calms down, she pulls back, whispering, "Thank you." I'm just about to tell her to stop thanking me when she adds, "For stopping him."

Not knowing what to reply, I take hold of her hand and pull her back into the bathroom. Digging a nailbrush out of the cabinet, I turn on the faucet. I pull her hand beneath the water and begin to scrub her nails, getting the blood out from beneath them.

“Finn’s blood?” I ask as I manage to clean one nail after the other.

“Yes. I scratched him a couple of times.”

“Good for you. Should’ve taken his fucking eyes out.” A fresh wave of anger pours through my veins.

“Yeah, I should’ve.”

Glancing at Kiara, it’s to see the corner of her mouth lifting slightly. “Why do people say you’re grumpy?” she asks, catching me by surprise with her question.

“‘Cause I am,” I answer honestly. “I’m not a people person.”

I can feel her eyes on me as I focus on her left hand. “You’ve only been nice to me.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re different.”

“By different, you mean?”

My eyes flick to hers. “You don’t annoy the fuck out of me by breathing.”

The corner of her mouth lifts again, and it has me asking, “Feeling a little better?”

Kiara takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I’m trying not to think about it.”

When I'm done cleaning her nails, I turn off the water and grab a towel from the warming rack. I dry her hands, then lock eyes with her. "We need to talk about it. Just a couple of questions, then I'll drop the subject."

She lifts her chin, steeling herself.

"When did it start?"

She thinks for a moment, a tear escaping her eye and spiraling down her cheek. I reach up and wipe it away with the pad of my thumb.

"About three weeks after I began working at the company." When I keep looking at her, she adds, "He made me go to an event with him and kissed me. The Monday after that, he threatened to kill my mother if I didn't do what he wanted. He had a video of her sleeping and him standing over her with a gun."

Fucking bastard.

"Later that week, he made me kiss him again, but you came into the office, and I hid in the bathroom."

I have to take a deep breath to remain calm.

Kiara lowers her head, then whispers, "And this morning during the meeting, he touched me beneath the table."

Christ.

"So it wasn't cramps?"

She shakes her head, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

The fucker was molesting her in the same room as me. I glance at the windows and the city lights sparkling outside, my jaw clenching with the rage building in my chest.

I should've fucking killed him years ago. Biggest mistake of my life.

Lifting an arm, I place my hand behind Kiara's head and pull her to my chest. Lowering my mouth to her ear, I say, "Next time anyone fucks with you, you tell me immediately."

She nods, doing her best not to break down.

"I'll also have guards protecting you twenty-four-seven." I almost add only until we find Finn, but then I would be lying.

Kiara wraps her arms around my waist, burrowing closer to me. It has me engulfing her with my body, holding her as tight as possible without hurting her.

After today... after holding her in my arms, there's no fucking denying it – I'm falling for Kiara. For the first time in my life, I'm allowing a woman into my heart.

Not allowing, idiot. You didn't have a fucking choice. She walked right in and made herself at home, and there's no getting her out.

Not thinking, I press a kiss to her damp hair. "Now, we can talk about anything that will take your mind off tonight."

She pulls back, giving me a wavering smile. "I'm a stress eater. Do you have any food?"

"A fridge full." I hold my hand out to her, and she doesn't hesitate placing hers in mine. "And if I don't have what you want, we can order in."

She doesn't hesitate to say, "Donuts. I need donuts."

Pulling my phone out, I call Paul, one of the guards downstairs.

“Yes, boss?”

“We need donuts.” I look at Kiara. “How many?”

“A dozen.”

My mouth curves into a smile. “Get us a dozen.”

She widens her eyes to get my attention. “A mixture of flavors. Please.”

“Get one of each.”

“Okay, boss.”

Ending the call, I tuck the device back into my pocket as we head down the stairs.

When she sits down on a couch, Kiara glances around the living space. “Do you live alone?”

“Yes.” Wanting to see her face, I take a seat across from her. Unbuttoning my cuffs, I start to roll up my sleeves. Kiara’s eyes lock on my hands, and she seems to slip into a trance as she watches me.

When I’m done, I lean forward, and resting my forearms on my thighs, I link my hands. I take in the darkening bruises on her face, then get up to grab a steak from the freezer. Wrapping a kitchen towel around the frozen meat, I walk back to Kiara and stopping in front of her, I make sure to be gentle as I press it to her jaw and cheek. “Keep it there for a couple of minutes.”

Her fingers brush against mine as she takes hold of the makeshift icepack.

When I sit down again, I ask, “What’s your topic of choice?”

She thinks for a moment, then asks, “Do you always carry a gun?”

I nod, wondering what her reaction would be if she found out I’m the head of the Irish mafia.

She’d probably run for the hills.

There’s a glimmer of fear in my chest at the thought that I might not stand a chance with Kiara. We’re from different worlds.

Chapter 20

Kiara

One of the guards I saw in the basement walks into the penthouse, and immediately my muscles lock up.

When Liam stands up, I shoot to my feet, moving around the glass coffee table so he's between the guard and me.

"Thanks, Paul," Liam says, taking the box of donuts from him.

While Paul steps back into the elevator, Liam nods at the couch. "You're safe here. Sit down."

After I've taken a seat again, Liam holds the box out to me. "All yours."

Somehow a smile curves around my lips as I take the donuts from him. "Don't you like donuts?"

"I don't consume anything I haven't prepared myself."

My eyebrows dart up. "Scared someone will poison you?"

He shakes his head. "No, it goes hand in hand with the no-touching thing. It just disgusts me."

Before I can stop myself, I ask, "Why?"

Liam shrugs. "No reason. I've just always been that way."

Opening the box, I take out the powdered sugar one and bite into it. Sugary goodness explodes over my tongue, removing the bitter taste from the attack. I didn't lie when I said I'm a stress eater. I ate an entire pizza and a dozen donuts after breaking up with my last boyfriend. Food comforts me.

After swallowing, I ask, "Then what happened to all the coffees I made for you?"

Liam sits down on the same couch as me, and turning his body toward mine, he rests his arm on the back, his hand settling inches from my head. "I drank them all."

With the donut halfway to my mouth, I pause to ask, "Because you didn't want to offend me?"

"No. Because I liked it."

He's never grumpy with me.

He doesn't mind touching me.

He drinks the coffee I make.

He brought me to his home and has gone out of his way to take care of me.

Slowly the realization starts to sink in.

I think Liam likes me.

His eyes go to the donut in my hand, then back to my face, and it has me asking, "Will you try a bite? I promise it's good."

He lets out a chuckle, then lifting his hand, he takes hold of my wrist and brings the donut to his mouth. He bites into the spot I just bit into, then lets go of me.

My cheeks flush, and my stomach does cartwheels.

Wiping his thumb over his lips, he says, “A bit too sweet.”

Uh-huh.

Getting up, he asks, “Want some coffee?”

“Please.” Sinking my teeth into the donut, my eyes follow Liam to the kitchen. I watch as he prepares two coffees, and by the time he carries the cups to the living room, I’m on my second donut.

Liam looks a little green when he says, “Christ, that one looks like it will give you diabetes.”

My mouth curves up a little. “I can live with death by donuts.” Taking the cup from him, I wash the bite down, then say, “Thank you.”

“Stop thanking me.” He sits down in the same position as before he got up, then his eyes rest on me, his irises as blue as the ocean on a summer’s day.

Not wanting to intrude or cry on his shoulder more than I already have, I say, “Would you mind taking me home after the coffee?”

Liam stares at me for a moment, then replies, “On one condition.”

My brows furrow. “What?”

“I’ll stay there with you.” When I begin to frown, he gestures to my head. “Concussion. The doctor said not to leave you alone for a couple of days. You’re stuck with me for the weekend.”

Holy...

I blink at him.

Out of obligation because I work for you or because you care?

“We can stay here. If you don’t mind,” I mumble before taking a massive bite of the chocolate glazed donut.

“Will’s bringing your bag tomorrow,” Liam mentions.

I wash the bite down with another sip of the coffee. “Tha—” A pointed look from Liam has the words dying on my lips. Instead, I just nod.

I glance out the windows at the ocean of lights stretching into the night. Without warning, a debilitating sense of shame and trauma hits. Pressing the back of my hand to my mouth, I close my eyes to breathe through it.

I wasn’t raped.

The bruises will heal.

Mom’s safe.

I’m safe.

It’s over.

I repeat the words until Liam takes the donut and coffee from my hands. He moves the box to the coffee table, along with the cup, then shifts closer and wraps his arms around me.

“Is there anything I can do to help you through this?” he asks, his tone gentle.

Carefully resting my cheek against his chest, I whisper, “You’re already doing so much.” I close my eyes, focusing on

how safe he makes me feel, and I realize I don't care if he's the head of some mafia. I don't care if he's a bad man.

I just care that I'm safe with him.

Liam relaxes against the couch, positioning me to lean against him, not removing his arms from around me. "What do you want to talk about."

"Tell me about yourself," I say without having to think.

"Like you, I'm born and bred in Chicago. Will's my best friend. I'm thirty-nine, and I don't like donuts."

My lips curve up, and I pull back to give him an incredulous look. "You don't look like you're pushing forty."

A smile spreads over his face, making him look even younger. "Is that a compliment?"

"Yep." Leaning my shoulder against the back of the couch, I say, "You look like Charlie Hunnam."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Definitely good."

When he chuckles, the sound is rich and music to my ears. Our eyes lock for a moment before I lower mine to his chest only to look at bloodstains.

Liam glances down, then gets up. "I'm going to shower and change clothes. Want me to put on the TV?"

I shake my head. "I'm going to admire the view." When he lifts an eyebrow at me, I quickly point at the windows and add, "Of the city."

"The remote's by the TV if you change your mind."

I watch as he walks away, and once he disappears up the stairs, I lower my eyes to my hands, my thoughts instantly bombarded with everything that happened today.

You're fine.

The bruises will heal.

You're safe.

Shh... it's okay.

Standing up, I walk to the windows. My stomach dips from how high up we are, giving me something else to focus on for a moment. I wrap my arms around my waist, my side tender from where Finn kicked me. I can also feel a headache coming on.

The past couple of weeks flash through my mind. The fear, the worry, the shame.

It was hell, but today...

I suck in a deep breath, trying my best to keep the tears back.

I can't believe it happened. I know I should've expected it, and in a way, I did, but still...

Finn hurt me. He could've raped me. Or worse. He could've killed me.

I tuck my chin low, my bottom lip trembling.

If it weren't for Liam.

I'm only alone for ten minutes at the most, but it feels like an eternity before Liam comes back, wearing a black shirt and gray sweatpants.

We match.

I've only ever seen him in a suit, and I have to admit, the sweatpants beat a three-piece suit hands down.

"Just say when you want to go to sleep," He says as he comes to stand next to me. Then he suddenly admits, "I don't like heights."

"Then why do you live in the penthouse?"

Liam shrugs, the corner of his mouth lifting into a grin, "Good question."

I turn around and glance at the living area. "Do you have a guest room, or should I just grab the couch?"

"I have a guest room," he says, then tilting his head, he continues, "But I have to monitor your concussion, which means I'll wake you every couple of hours." He gestures at the couch. "How about we each take a couch? Would you be okay with that?"

Looking up at Liam, it strikes me how considerate he is. I've never met anyone like him. "I'm okay with it."

Chapter 21

Liam

Surprisingly, Kiara fell asleep not long after curling up on the couch.

Must've been the injection Dr. O' Sullivan gave her.

Getting up, I walk closer and stare down at her, tilting my head.

Even with the swelling and bruising, she's still the most beautiful woman I've laid eyes on. Now that I've held her in my arms, I have a constant urge to touch her.

No touch has ever affected me like hers.

Crouching down, I lift a hand and gently push a wild curl behind her ear. Her auburn hair forms a halo around her face, her pale skin in stark contrast with the bruises on her jaw and cheek.

I always thought there was something wrong with me, that I was broken, unable to feel love.

Leaning forward, I press my mouth to her forehead, then hold still and breathe her into my lungs. I marvel at how she makes me feel. There's no disgust. No urge to pull away.

Instead, I'm filled with a need for more. For everything, she has to offer.

My jaw clenches from the effort it takes to pull back, then the corner of my mouth curves up.

Chicago's all that mattered up until Kiara. This city is mine. Always have been, always will be. So is Kiara Murphy. She just doesn't know it yet. I'll give her time to heal, to get used to me, but after that, I'll make her mine.

My eyes drift over her feminine features, memorizing every inch of her.

So fucking beautiful.

Remembering how she clung to me at the office, warmth and possessiveness burst in my chest.

Cling all you want, baby. I don't want you to let go.

My phone starts to ring, and it has me quickly standing up and walking to the study that's behind the stairs.

"Liam," I answer.

"It's Viktor," the head of the bratva says. "Luca told me what happened. You okay?"

"Yeah."

"The girl?"

"Sleeping on my couch. Did you find out anything?" I ask as I softly shut the door behind me.

The Russian lets out an amused chuckle. "It's hilarious."

"What?"

"You'll never guess who's behind the Sicilians."

A muscle starts to jump in my jaw as hatred pours into my veins. "Finn."

“You expected it?”

“With the shit he’s been giving me, I’m not surprised. The fucker has always wanted me out of the way so he can take over the mafia.”

I should’ve killed him sooner.

“Can you find out where he’s hiding?” I ask.

“Probably. Give me some time.”

Viktor might be the youngest in the Priesthood, but the man is like a fucking bloodhound. If he’s looking for you, there’s nowhere on this godforsaken planet you can hide.

“Thanks.”

“Remember the meeting next week.”

Fuck. I almost forgot. “Yeah, I’ll see you then.”

Ending the call, my fingers wrap in a crushing hold around the device.

You can run, Finn. You can fucking hide, but come hell or high water, I’ll find you.

“Liam!” Kiara suddenly screams, panic and fear making the sound hoarse.

My body reacts before it even registers in my mind, and I’m out the door. My eyes search for the threat but only find Kiara asleep on the couch.

Am I fucking losing my mind?

Suddenly her body jerks. She makes a terrifying sound, almost like a wounded animal, then whimpers, “Liam.”

Nightmare.

Crouching beside her, I frame her face with my hands. “Kiara, wake up.” My thumb gently brushes over her bruised cheek. “Wake up, baby.”

Her eyes snap open, and it takes a couple of seconds before she focuses on me. Her lips part, and she starts to suck in desperate breaths, then she shoots forward, wrapping her arms tightly around my neck.

Feeling her breaths exploding over my skin and how she’s trembling, the most intense emotion I’ve ever experienced floods my entire being.

Love?

No, this is more than a simple emotion.

It’s obsession.

Moving her up, I lie down beside her, my body pinning hers to the couch. With my arms locked around her, I’m half leaning over her, making the trembling in her subside.

She pulls her arms away from my neck, only to wrap them around my lower back. I feel her fingers twisting in the fabric of my shirt as she grips fistfuls.

“Feeling nauseous?” I whisper, deciding to check her concussion while she’s awake.

“No.” The word sounds small and beaten down.

Not thinking it through, I turn my head until my cheek presses against hers. “Headache?”

She nods, her skin brushing against mine. “But not bad.”

My hand moves to the back of her head, and I softly start to massage her scalp, her hair feeling like silk.

Still clinging to me, she asks, “Can we remove the blanket? It’s getting hot.”

“I can move,” I say, even though I’m already pulling the blanket from between us and tossing it over the back of the couch.

Kiara tightens her hold on me, shaking her head, her breaths fanning over my jaw from the movement. “No. Please stay.”

I press a kiss to her cheek, then get comfortable. “Sleep. I’ll watch over you.”

We lie in silence, but it feels as if she’s screaming for me to never let go. Every couple of minutes, she starts to tremble, and once I whisper I’m here and not going anywhere, it subsides again.

She needs me.

My own emotions rocket between rage, knowing I won’t find a moment’s rest until I’ve killed Finn, and being totally absorbed by Kiara. The way her body fits against mine, it’s as if she’s a piece of me that was missing. She’s the emotion I was unable to feel. She’s the touch I missed my entire life.

In the early morning hours, I realize that I’ll raise heaven and hell for this woman. Within a matter of hours, I’ve gone from being attracted to her to being absolutely devoted.

With Kiara sleeping in my arms, I make peace with the fact that she owns me.

Give her time, Liam. She’s been through hell. The last thing you want to do is scare her off.

Patience.

Chapter 22

Kiara

I wake up to Liam growling under his breath, “Wipe that smirk off your face.”

“Looks cozy,” Will whispers, amusement in his voice. “Here’s her bag.”

Even though they’re murmuring, so they won’t wake me, Liam’s voice is void of the gentle tone he uses whenever he talks to me. “How are things at the warehouse?”

“Under control. Collin’s back at work. I also checked on Jimmy. His contact found out who’s behind the Sicilians returning to Chicago.”

“I already know it’s Finn.” My tone is brutal and enraged. “Viktor is tracking the fucker.”

“Never thought the idiot would have enough balls to come after us.”

“Idiot being the keyword.” Liam’s fingers brush over my hair. It feels like he’s doing it absentmindedly, and knowing I can’t pretend to be asleep without him noticing, I stir against him. His hand moves down my back in a comforting caress, and it makes me wish I could just lie here forever.

“Hey,” he murmurs, his tone gentle again. “You awake?”

I nod, but instead of getting off of him, I burrow closer.

“Need anything?” Will asks.

“Not at the moment.”

I listen as Will walks away. When we’re alone, Liam doesn’t move to get up. He just keeps brushing a hand up and down my back.

It’s only then all the memories from yesterday flood back. The dull headache sharpens for a moment before it becomes bearable again.

I breathe in Liam’s natural scent, all man.

“How do you feel?”

How do I feel?

Safe. Besides the headache and tender cheek, I’m comfortable.

Tentatively my thoughts turn to yesterday. It fills me with intense repulsion whenever I think of Finn and what he did to me.

So much has happened.

I press closer to Liam, and his arms tighten around me. I feel him press a kiss to my hair, the safety he’s offering me forming a cocoon around me.

There’s no more fearing for Mom’s life. There’s no more dreading what Finn will do to me.

I’m safe.

“Better,” I finally whisper. Knowing I can’t lie on top of him forever, I slowly push myself up. Careful not to elbow or

knee him, I move to the side of the couch and pull my fingers through my hair.

God, I must look like a wreck.

I feel like one.

My eyes dart to Liam as he stands up, then I make a disgruntled face because he looks hot as hell with his mused hair.

So unfair.

He glances at me, then his eyes flick to my hair that probably looks like something made a nest in it. The corner of his mouth lifts. “I still like your hair down.”

Instantly, emotion wells in my chest, my heart expanding to keep it all in.

“Come on.” Taking my hand, he pulls me toward the stairs and straight to the bathroom. I watch as he takes a brush out of the cupboard, then he gestures for me to turn around.

When he starts brushing my hair, my throat closes up.

From facing off with a vile man, who made my life hell for weeks, to having a freaking white knight dote on me. The change is extreme.

How’s Liam still single? Are the women out there freaking blind?

“Why aren’t you married yet?” the question slips out before I can sensor my damn mouth.

“Honestly?” His fingers pull through the strands. “I never wanted to. Just didn’t cross my mind.”

Fair enough.

He takes a new toothbrush from the cupboard, holding it out to me. I watch him walk out of the bathroom, then I quickly rid my mouth of the stale taste. When I'm done, I glance at my reflection in the mirror.

Holy shit.

Ugh, I look like shit.

Purple and red bruises color the left side of my jaw and cheek. It's so swollen it looks worse than when I had my wisdom teeth removed.

"It will look better in a couple of days," Liam suddenly says. My eyes snap to him, and seeing he's dressed in cargo pants and a black shirt, my eyebrows pop up.

He just got dressed. I could've left the bathroom and walked in on him butt naked.

Nope, don't let your mind go there. The man is your boss.

When he gets ready to shave, I scurry out of the bathroom, giving him some space.

Glancing around his bedroom, I take in all the décor I couldn't fully appreciate last night. The room is incredibly neat, not a single thing lying out of place. Curious, I glance at the walk-in closet that looks like something off of Pinterest.

Black tinted glass separates the walk-in closet from the bedroom, but I can see all his suits hanging perfectly.

I get a sense of who Liam is. Someone who needs to be in control and hates any ripples in their life.

I'm a ripple.

Scratch that. A freaking tsunami.

Still, not once has he made me feel unwelcome or that I'm annoying him. He's been... perfect.

Hearing movement, I slowly turn my head to the left, my eyes locking with Liam's. I take in the attractive man who seems to have stepped right out of my dreams and into my life.

"This might be the concussion speaking, but..." I suck in a breath, "you're incredible." I turn to face him, his eyes never leaving mine. "I feel lucky having met you."

The man my father hid me from.

The realization hits. Liam still doesn't know who I really am, who my father is.

What will his reaction be when he finds out I know exactly who he is?

With confident strides, he closes the distance between us. He lifts his hand, his fingers brushing softly over the bruised side of my face. Leaning in, he presses a kiss to my forehead, and not replying to what I said, he murmurs, "Let's go to your place so you can pack a bag."

Staying over last night was one thing, but staying the weekend will totally disrupt his life.

"I'm much better today," I say, overly aware of him standing close to me. His aftershave wraps around me, filling my stomach with nervous energy, which is soothing after the raw burn the past weeks. It feels like a kaleidoscope of butterflies has taken up residence inside me instead of the acid and burning coals.

Liam places a finger beneath my chin, the touch sending tingles rushing over my skin. Nudging me to look up at him, he says, “Doesn’t change the fact you might have a concussion.”

“I don’t want to intrude,” I whisper, something electric and captivating tensing the air around us.

His eyes lower to my mouth. “You’re not.”

It looks like he’s a second away from kissing me, but the bubble pops as he takes hold of my hand. He pulls me out of the bedroom and stops in the living room to grab my bag.

When we step into the elevator, Liam doesn’t let go of my hand and also doesn’t give me my bag.

I’m itching to glance up at him but keep my eyes on the doors until they slide open. Instead of walking to the SUV, we head in the direction of a *Bugatti*.

Liam glances around the basement before opening the passenger door while holding the handbag out to me. Taking it, I climb inside the vehicle, and after setting the bag down by my feet, I tug on the seat belt.

When Liam slides behind the steering wheel, the stark contrast between him and Finn strikes me again.

Going to the event with Finn was uncomfortable, and everything after that was pure hell.

Sitting next to Liam, I know I have nothing to fear.

Whether it’s been coming since the first time I laid eyes on him or if it’s happening at this moment, I can’t tell. My heart constricts, then it bursts with an overwhelming emotion. The

electricity I felt in the room rushes back, making me feel nervous and captivated by his every movement.

I've been infatuated before. I've even been in love once.

But this? I've never felt such a strong reaction to a man before.

Maybe it's because he saved me. He's protecting Mom and me. And he's so gentle with me.

Liam presses a button, the sportscar roaring to life, then he glances at me. "You okay?"

"Yes." The strength I lost yesterday is slowly returning.

The corner of his mouth lifts before he turns his eyes to the front and drives us out of the basement. "My address—"

"I remember. You told me last night," he replies while expertly steering us through the city traffic.

Chapter 23

Liam

When I park outside Kiara's apartment building, I already know I'm not going to like what I see once we're inside.

The area's rundown and definitely not safe for a woman living alone.

Getting out of the car, I walk around the front. Kiara opens the door, and I wait for her to climb out, then shut it and place my hand on her lower back. I let her show the way up two flights of stairs. She digs in her bag for her keys, and when she unlocks the door, I push it open and step inside. "Wait here."

"Oh-kay."

It takes me less than a minute to search the apartment. If you can even call it that.

The furniture looks like it's been through a war, the paint on the wall is peeling off in places, water staining the ceiling.

Jesus.

There's no way I'll ever fucking shut an eye again, knowing she calls this dump home.

Before I can sensor my tone, I order, "Pack for a week."

"Why?"

Because I'm never letting you come back here.

“Just in case you need more clothes.”

“Right, rather safe than sorry,” she chuckles nervously before darting into the bedroom, that’s so fucking small the single bed takes up most of the space.

My fucking couch is bigger than that bed.

I glance around, then ask, “Also, take anything of value to you.”

“It should be safe.”

“I doubt it,” I mutter, my skin feeling like something’s crawling over it.

Kiara comes out with a bag, the kind you use for the gym, and I quickly move to take it from her. “Do you have everything?”

“Oh, wait.” She darts to the kitchen, and opening the cupboard, she takes a mug from it. It’s pink, with words printed on it.

Daddy’s lass.

“It’s my favorite,” she explains as she comes to tuck it in the bag.

Lass.

“You’re Irish?”

Kiara’s eyes snap up to mine, then a nervous expression flutters over her face. “Ah... my dad is.” She chuckles. “I’m a mixed breed.”

Interesting.

“Talking about parents. I really need to check in on my mom.”

“We can stop by her place on the way home.”

One night and I’m associating home with her. Jesus.

Walking to the front door, I wait for Kiara to step out into the hallway, then lock up behind us. Pocketing the keys, I place my hand on her lower back again so I can yank her out of the way should danger suddenly cross our path.

I place her bag in the trunk, and once we’ve climbed into the car, I glare at the apartment building, wondering how Kiara’s survived until now.

I need to look at what I’m paying her, in case she’s not interested in me, so she can at least get a better place where she’s safe.

The thought leaves a sour taste in my mouth, the possessive feeling rearing in my chest.

Now I understand why some men kidnap a woman.

Driving to her mother’s place doesn’t take long, and the area’s even worse.

Ian and Rowan are standing by their SUV. “Hey, boss. Everythin’s clear,” Rowan informs me.

“Caleb and Hudson at the back?”

“Aye.”

I walk Kiara into the building, and when she starts giving me nervous glances, I say, “Just making sure you get to the door in one piece, then I’ll leave you to visit with your mom.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to introduce you. I...”

“No need to explain.” It takes effort to stop and watch her walk to the door. She knocks, glancing at me while she fidgets with the oversized shirt.

The door opens, then I hear, “Sweet Jesus, Kiara! What happened?”

When she steps inside the apartment, and the door shuts behind her, I head back down to talk to my men.

Stepping out of the building, I glance up and down the street.

This place is a murder waiting to happen.

“We gonna move the woman soon?” Rowan asks. “Too many things can go wrong here.”

“Can you hold the fort for three days?” I’m fucking asking the impossible.

Rowan narrows his eyes as he glances around us. “Aye.”

Locking eyes with my soldier, I nod. “I’ll have Will set up a place for her.”

Rowan nods.

Pulling out my phone, I dial Will’s number.

“Still snuggling on the couch?” the fucker taunts me.

“Don’t start.” I glance up at the building. “We need to arrange a safer place for Kiara’s mother.”

“I’ll get on it.”

Walking toward the entrance because I need to be closer to Kiara, I say, “I need a team of four men to guard Kiara.

Definitely Declan and Waylon.”

“Got it. I’ll pull Ezra and Ryan from the club.”

“Good.” If I’m not with her, Finn won’t get past them. “Send them to the penthouse Monday morning.” Stopping in the hallway, I say, “Thanks for all the help.”

Ending the call, I tuck the device into my pocket then suppress the urge to stalk up and down. My eyes lock on the front door, wondering how things are going in there.

Chapter 24

Kiara

Mom stares at me with horrified eyes, a hand covering her mouth. “My God.”

I’ve come clean, telling her everything that happened with Finn and what Liam’s done for me.

“You should’ve told me sooner, sweetheart.” Her face distorts as she fights a wave of emotion, then she comes to hug me. “Jesus, this will give your father another heart attack.”

Pulling away from her, I say, “That’s why we aren’t going to tell him.”

“But...”

I shake my head. “No, Mom. We don’t tell him anything until he’s stronger. Let’s just wait a couple of months. Okay?”

The last thing I want is for Dad to hear what happened. It will be a death blow.

“Okay.” Her eyes flit over my face. “I can’t believe someone hurt you like this.”

“It looks worse than it feels,” I try to set her at ease.

The worry doesn’t leave her eyes. “Liam helped you?”

“Yes. He’s gone above and beyond to help.” I’ve never kept secrets from my mom, and I don’t want to start now.

“He’s arranged security for you until Finn is found and no longer a danger to us.”

Her eyebrows dart up. “Oh?”

When she smiles nervously, I tilt my head and ask, “You know Dad’s a part of the Irish mafia, don’t you?”

Shock flutters over her face. “You know?”

“I found out last week.”

“So, you know who Liam is?”

I nod.

“You have to be careful, Kiara. The mafia’s no place for the likes of us.”

“Liam won’t hurt me,” I say with dead certainty.

“But the world he lives in will.”

I refuse to believe it but answer, “It’s not like we’re dating. Relax, Mom. He’s just helping us out because his stepbrother’s responsible for the mess.”

My words seem to set Mom at ease, then she lifts her hand and brushes it over my cheek. Lowering her eyes, she frowns at the clothes.

“Liam’s,” I explain. “I haven’t had time to change.”

She lifts an eyebrow in warning, and it has me saying, “I’ll be careful.” Not wanting to keep Liam waiting for much longer, I gesture at the door. “Liam’s here. Can you pretend you don’t know who he is? He doesn’t know about Dad.”

“Of course.” She nods. “Yes, don’t let him find out who your father is. That would be a disaster.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I walk to the door but then stop to say, “Please be careful. I’ll ask him to introduce the guards to you. Don’t go anywhere without them.”

She nods quickly. “I’ll be careful.”

Opening the door, I peek into the hallway. Just as I thought, Liam’s standing in the middle of it with his arms crossed over his chest. I gesture for him to come. “My mom wants to meet you.”

When he steps into the doorway, his eyes sweep over the small space, looking just as displeased with it as he did with my apartment.

Can’t blame him. This is why I need to save up enough for us to move.

“Liam, this is my mom, Tara Murphy,” I introduce them. When Mom lifts her hand, I take hold of it, giving her a squeeze. “Liam doesn’t like being touched.”

Mom just stares at him with wide eyes.

“I wish we were meeting under better circumstances,” Liam says, his tone gentle.

“Me too,” Mom murmurs, her fingers curling around mine. “Thank you for all you’ve done for my daughter.”

He only nods, then glances at me.

“I told Mom everything. She knows about the guards, and I thought she should meet them.”

“Good idea.” He pulls his phone out and a couple of seconds later, says, “Gather the men and come to the apartment.”

Subtly, Mom steps closer to me. It's clear she's wary of Liam.

Minutes later, four men gather in the hallway. "Boss?" The one who seems to be the leader steps forward.

Liam gestures at him. "This is Rowan. That's Ian, Caleb, and Hudson," he introduces them.

"I'm Tara," Mom mutters, clearly rattled by all the men. I place my hand around her lower back, giving her a sideways hug.

"My mom will be safe with them, right?" I ask for Mom's benefit.

Liam glances between us. "They'll guard her with their lives," he locks eyes with Mom, "But I'd like to move you to a safe house until the threat's been dealt with."

"Oh." Mom glances at me. "I don't know about that."

"You can always come stay with me," I say.

Liam shakes his head. "You're not going back to the apartment." My eyebrows furrow. "But if it will make you feel better, I have a couple of guestrooms at the penthouse."

I blink at Liam, my mind racing a mile a minute.

"We can talk about it in three days," Liam says, sparing me from having to answer.

"Yes." I turn to Mom. "Don't worry about it now. I'll call you often to keep you up to date with what's happening."

"But you're going to stay with him?" Mom asks.

“Kiara’s safe with me,” Liam interjects. “And I’ve arranged guards for her as well.”

I hug Mom, then whisper, “I’ll be okay. Please don’t worry.”

“Call me every day.”

“I will. I promise.”

We pull apart, then Mom looks at Liam. “Please keep her safe.”

He nods. “I will.”

I feel the words in my bones, which is comforting because this man is all that stands between Finn and me.

I give Mom another hug. “I’ll call tomorrow.”

She nods, then her eyes follow us out of the apartment. We’re quiet as we leave the building, and only once Liam is steering the Bugatti down the street do I ask, “What did you mean when you said I’m not going back to my apartment?”

His eyes flick between the road and me, then he answers, “It’s not safe there. You can stay with me until we’ve made other arrangements.”

Live with him. Liam Byrne. My boss.

Ahh...

“Like I said, we can talk about it in a couple of days.”

Right. Why do I get the feeling the talk is not going to be in my favor?

Do I mind?

Dropping the subject, for now, I glance out of the window at the sidewalks bustling with people.

Suddenly something occurs to me, and I turn my gaze back to Liam. “Don’t you have guards following you around? I’ve only noticed them at the penthouse and company.”

A frown forms on his forehead. “Do I give you the impression that I need an entourage of guards?”

“No. I just thought...” *The head of the mafia would have guards.* “with you being a CEO of such a big company, you’d have protection.”

For the first time since we met, an arrogant smirk, that’s off the charts hot, tugs at his mouth. “I can protect myself.”

My stomach flutters crazily.

Yep, I’ve got it bad for this man.

My eyes drift over his muscled body and his hands, the veins snaking up his forearms and disappearing beneath the black fabric of the sleeves that have been rolled up.

Liam glances at me, and I quickly look out the window, my cheeks flushing from being caught staring at him.

Chapter 25

Kiara

After Liam showed me to the guest room, and I bathed, I changed into my own clothes. Not wanting to walk around in my usual leggings and t-shirt, I'm wearing one of the outfits I bought for work.

On a Saturday.

Which I'm spending with my boss.

Yeah, it's crazy.

When I come down the stairs, it's to find Liam in the kitchen, sizzling steak filling the air with a delicious aroma.

"Can I help?"

Liam glances at me, does a double-take, then stares at me. His eyes narrow. "That top looks familiar."

The bags he saw at Dad's. "Ah, I wore it to work before," I lie through my teeth.

He nods, then turns his attention back to the steak.

"So..." I walk closer, and resting my elbow on the counter, I place my chin in my hand, "anything I can help with?"

He shakes his head but then says, "You can pour the wine." He gestures to a wine cooler that's been built into the kitchen. "You choose."

I know nothing about wines. Opening the door, I peek over the selection then take the bottle nearest to me. “I have a question.” I set the bottle down on the marble top.

“Let me have it.”

“You said you don’t consume anything you didn’t prepare yourself, but you drink wine?”

Liam lets out a chuckle. “I figure the alcohol kills any germs there might be.”

My lips curve up into a smile. “Makes sense.” I point at the bottle. “I’ve never opened one. Can you help?”

He wipes his hands on a paper towel, and taking a wine opener from a drawer, he makes quick work of pulling the cork out.

I glance around the kitchen, and finding wine glasses, I take two and pour some wine into them.

Liam plates the food, steak and salad, then nods in the direction of the balcony. “Let’s eat out there.”

I carry the glasses outside and place them on a coffee table. A similar leather suite as the one in the living room is situated between potted plants, the view spectacular from up here.

Sitting down, I take a plate from Liam. “Thank you. It looks delicious.” Cutting a piece of the steak, I pop it into my mouth, and after chewing for a couple of seconds, my eyes drift closed. “God, this is really good.”

“Glad you like it.” We stare at the view of the city while eating, and only when I relax with the glass of wine in my

hand, my stomach full and happy, do I ask, “Where did you go for your vacation?”

Liam swallows the sip of wine he just took, then answers, “I had some business to take care of in Vancouver and Toronto, then visited my Uncle in Finland.”

“Do your parents live here in Chicago?”

He shakes his head. “My mother passed when I was eleven. My father remarried and has been traveling the world since.”

“I’m sorry about your mom.”

“She’s in a better place,” he murmurs before taking another sip. A frown forms on his forehead, then he asks, “What about your father? I should arrange protection for him.”

Oh shit.

I shake my head quickly. “Ah, no, he’s away on business.”

“Good.”

I down half the glass of wine to settle my nerves.

Steering the conversation away from our families, I ask, “What do you usually do on your weekends?”

“Work.”

I really want him to tell me about the mafia. Honestly, I’m curious how it fits in with Byrne Enterprises.

“But the office is closed over weekends.”

“Doesn’t mean I stop working.”

Damn, that’s true.

Suddenly my thoughts turn down a dark path, flashes from last night bombarding me once again.

I breathe through the chaotic emotions, taking gulps of the wine, hoping it will ease the trauma.

“You okay?” Liam murmurs.

I nod. “Yeah. It comes in waves.” I suck in a deep breath, then force a smile to my face so he won’t worry.

We sit in silence for a couple of minutes, then feeling brave from the glass of wine that’s almost empty, I ask, “If you don’t like being touched, does that mean you don’t do relationships?”

Yep. I just asked that, but getting to know Liam is a distraction I desperately need.

“Yes.”

My heart drops to my stomach. “Like ever?” My eyebrow pops up. “So, no intimacy.”

Shut up, woman.

An amused smile tugs at Liam’s mouth. “I’m not celibate, Kiara.” I finish the last of the wine in my glass, then he says, “But I’ve never been in a relationship.”

Shrugging, I murmur, “As long as you’re happy, it’s all that matters at the end of the day.”

“And you?”

My eyes widen. “Me?”

“Boyfriends? Celibacy?” Then he raises an eyebrow. “Virgin?”

“Ah... none of the above.” Reaching for the bottle, I refill our glasses.

The wine keeps flowing, stoking my bravery which I’ll probably regret tomorrow. “So, how does kissing work with you? Or do you just not do it?”

Liam watches me closely, his grin becoming hotter by the second. “You’re just full of questions, aren’t you?”

“Curious by nature.” And this is helping to keep my mind occupied.

His teeth scrape over his bottom lip, drawing my attention to his mouth. “I don’t kiss. It’s too personal.”

Such a pity.

Taking a deep breath, I glance at the setting sun. Minutes pass, and looking back at Liam, it’s to catch him staring at me.

“Penny for your thoughts,” I murmur, a comfortable atmosphere weaving around us that acts as a soothing balm.

“I’m wondering how you’re holding up after last night.”

My eyes lower to the glass in my hand, and I swirl the blood-red liquid. “I’m okay.” Lifting my gaze back to Liam’s, I admit, “I feel unsettled. You know... as if life’s a little off balance.” He nods, and I continue. “Things could’ve been so much worse, so I’m counting my blessings instead of letting it drag me down.” *At least, I’m trying to not let it overwhelm me.* I shrug. “Yeah, I’m rattled, and it was horrible, but I don’t want to think about it.” I force a smile to my face. “Plus, being in good company helps.”

A lot.

I think if I was alone, I would've dealt with it differently.

I'd probably still be trembling in a corner, crying my eyes out.

I stare at the view again, lost in thought, until Liam says, "Ask more questions. I don't like it when you're quiet."

A smile spreads over my face. "Oh, you're brave. I have no filter."

His lips curve up, the grin hot as sin. "Let me have it."

"Did you start Byrne Enterprises or inherited it?"

"I started the company when I was eighteen."

"So, did you always want to be in construction?"

Liam glances away, thinking before he answers, "It just came naturally."

Along with being the head of the mafia.

"Byrne is Irish, right?"

He nods. "Third-generation in Chicago."

"Explains why you don't have an accent."

My mind races for appropriate questions, but the only ones I can think of might offend him or give away that I know he's involved with the mafia.

"When was your last relationship?" he suddenly asks.

"Gosh, let me think." I count the months, then an eyebrow lifts. "Damn, it's been two years." I playfully narrow my eyes at him. "I like how you just assume I'm not in a relationship right now."

“You wouldn’t be sitting here if you were.”

Good point.

Liam seems to be deep in thought, then he smiles at me. “You’re a different person now than when you’re at the office.”

“In what way?”

“You’re skittish at the office.”

My happy bubble pops, and I scowl at the wine glass. “That was because of you-know-who.” Reaching for the bottle, I empty it into our glasses.

After a sip, I ask, “Devon will be back on Monday, right?”

“He should.” Liam surprises me when he admits, “I’m going to miss having you as an assistant, though.”

“I’ll still make coffee for you,” I joke.

It starts to get chilly, and Liam gets up, saying, “Let’s head inside.”

I help him carry the dishes to the kitchen, and not in the mood to finish the wine, I place the glass in the sink. “I’ll do the dishes.” I turn around just as Liam reaches past me to put his own glass in the sink, and I bump into his chest. His left hand grips hold of my hip, so I don’t stagger back. One of my hands land on his arm, the other pressed flat against his solid chest. Trapped between the counter and Liam, my eyes dart up to his.

Sweet Jesus.

Instantly, the atmosphere begins to sizzle with the same electric feeling from earlier. We stare for the longest moment,

the tension building until it hums over my skin.

Just as he begins to lower his head, his phone rings.

“Fuck,” he growls, then yanking the device out of his pocket, he says, “This better be important.” As if hit by an invisible fist, he staggers a step back, then snaps, “I’m on my way. Don’t leave his side.”

“Finn?”

Liam shakes his head, and grabbing hold of my hand, he starts to pull me toward the elevator. “One of my men is in the hospital.”

“Oh no.”

On the ride down to the basement, it’s clear Liam’s very upset. I just hold his hand, thinking it’s my turn to support him.

It doesn’t escape my attention that Liam really cares about the people who work for him. I’ve never heard of a boss rushing to the hospital, because one of his employees got hurt.

He’s so caring.

Chapter 26

Liam

Worried out of my mind, I rush into the hospital with Kiara's hand firmly in mine.

Will comes jogging toward me, his face grave as he shakes his head. My heart sinks, and I come to a stop in the middle of the hallway. "Jesus. No."

"They tried everything." Will shoves a hand through his hair, visibly shaken by the loss. "I was over at his place, and we were just talking. I was updating him on everything that happened with Finn last night, and the next second he dropped. It happened so fast. I got him to the hospital as fast as I could."

"Fuck," I snap, pulling my hand free from Kiara's. The loss of one of my men is never easy, and I have to breathe through the emotions.

A nurse walks toward us, then looks at Will. "Are there any family members we can call?"

Stepping forward, I say, "No. Jimmy worked for me. I'll handle everything."

"Jimmy?" Kiara gasps, her face turning horribly pale. "Jimmy Flanagan?"

The nurse nods, then Kiara staggers back, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. “No.” It’s only for a second. She darts down the hallway and starts to look into rooms. “Where is he?” she calls out, her tone distressed.

The nurse goes after Kiara, while I’m stunned by her strong reaction.

“Where’s my dad?” Kiara screams.

The words hit like a ten-pound hammer.

Holy fucking shit.

Her dad.

Jimmy.

Jesus Christ.

I move, going after them as the nurse shows Kiara to the room. Just as I rush inside, Kiara lets out a broken cry, slumping over Jimmy’s chest.

“No,” she cries. “No.” She pushes herself up, her face torn with shock and grief as she looks down at her father. “No, Daddy.”

Her father?

Will comes to stand next to me, muttering, “Fuck.”

Stunned, I glance at Will. “Did you know Jimmy had a daughter?”

He shakes his head. “No clue. I wouldn’t have told him about last night had I fucking known.”

The news of Kiara’s assault probably fucking killed Jimmy.
Jesus.

My eyes settle back on Kiara, who sobs uncontrollably as she wraps her arms around Jimmy, the sounds taking swings at my heart.

Fuck, if I had known...

Why the fuck didn't I know?

Kristine, the nurse who cared for Jimmy at his home, comes in. "I tried calling you," she says to Kiara as she goes to wrap an arm around her.

It takes a while before Kiara lets go of her father. She looks at Kristine while wiping the tears from her cheeks. "W-what happened?"

"His heart just couldn't handle another heart attack. It was quick. Before I could stop Will, he told your dad you were attacked." Kristine shakes her head while Will mutters under his breath before leaving the room.

Kiara's voice is hoarse as she says, "Thank you for t-taking care of him."

Kiara is Jimmy's daughter. She's a mafia princess.

When Kristine leaves the room, my eyes lock with Kiara's, then I do the only thing I can under the grim circumstances. I close the distance between us, and wrapping my arms around her, I hold her tightly to my chest.

Her body shudders, then she sobs, "He's gone, Liam."

"I'm so fucking sorry." I press a kiss to her hair. "Your father was one of the best men I knew."

A breath shudders through her, then she whimpers, "I killed my dad."

“God no,” I press a kiss to her temple. “We didn’t know you’re Jimmy’s daughter. Will wouldn’t have breathed a word to him. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Jesus.

I hold her until she manages to pull herself together again, then let go of her for a moment to step closer to the bed. I take in Jimmy’s still face. It looks like he’s sleeping. Lifting the sheet, I pull it over his head.

May you find peace, old man. I’ll look after your daughter.

Walking to Kiara, I wrap my arm around her and guide her out of the room.

Will’s leaning against the wall, looking pissed as fuck.

He’s probably blaming himself.

I give him a look, shaking my head. “You didn’t know.”

He nods, the grim expression not easing.

“Will you take care of the paperwork and bill?”

He nods. “Yeah, you take care of her.”

Kiara covers her mouth, sobs wracking her shoulders as she glances back into the room.

“Come,” I murmur, and tightening my hold on her so she’ll lean into me, I guide her back to the car. Helping her get into her seat, I quickly strap the seat belt over her. I shut the door, glancing for any sign of threats as I walk to the driver’s side.

The drive back is quiet, the sorrow-filled silence only broken by Kiara’s tears.

The moment we walk into the penthouse, I pull Kiara to a stop and ask, “You’re Jimmy’s daughter? Why did he hide you from me?”

Slowly she lifts her grief-stricken eyes to look up at me. “My dad didn’t want me anywhere near the mafia.”

She knows.

Nodding, I can’t help but feel hurt that Jimmy didn’t trust me enough to tell me about her. I thought we were closer than that. We were like family.

My eyes drift over Kiara’s face as she adds, “He did what he thought was best for me.”

Lifting a hand, I rub the pad of my thumb over my lips. “Why work at my company?” My muscles are tense as I wait for her answer.

Her gaze becomes pleading. “I didn’t know who you were. I only found out last week when I visited Dad. You came over while I was there. D-Dad...” Her voice breaks, and she takes a moment to breathe through the grief. “He told me to hide in the kitchen. Until then, I had no idea. I swear.” She tugs at the top she’s wearing. “This was in the shopping bag next to the couch.”

Jesus.

Apprehension slithers through my veins. “So, you know exactly who I am?”

As she nods, the realization and relief hit.

Kiara knew I’m the head of the mafia when she let me take care of her. She didn’t run for the hills.

The relief must show on my face because she asks, “You’re not angry with me?”

I shake my head, and taking hold of her, I pull her against my chest. “Christ, I can’t believe you’re Jimmy’s daughter.”

“Dad just wanted to protect me.” Her voice is hoarse, and I tighten my arms around her as the shock and grief hit her again.

She’s been through so much in such a short time.

Fuck this world for hurting her.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I murmur before pressing a kiss to her hair. “You’re a mafia princess and my responsibility. I’ll take care of you.”

After calming herself down, she pulls back. “You don’t have to. I was never a part of that world.”

Bringing my hands to her cheeks, I wipe the tear tracks away with my thumbs. I wait for her to look at me. “Let me do this. Okay? I need to take care of you.”

“Why?”

I don’t hesitate to answer, “Because you make me feel.” *Christ, do you make me feel.* My hands frame her face, my eyes burning intensely into hers. “Because I can touch you.” I tilt my head. “I. Can. Touch. You. Kiara.”

Her bottom lip starts to quiver, the sad expression on her face enough to make me lose my mind. “Okay,” she whispers, then her eyebrows draw together as the loss of her father hits again.

I wrap her against my chest, and lowering my head, I take a deep breath of her. “I’ll take care of everything. Okay?”

She nods against me, her arms wrapping around my waist to cling to me. It makes me feel like I’m the only thing keeping her standing.

All my life I’ve had power. I was born to lead the mafia.

But I didn’t know there was a gaping hole in my life until Kiara.

The princess I never knew existed and the only woman I want.

She’s mine. Especially now that I have a right to claim her.

Chapter 27

Kiara

Even though I knew it could happen, I can't believe Dad's gone.

I didn't get to say goodbye.

Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I don't take in the black dress Liam got for me. My sight blurs, my throat constricting while I try to remember our last conversation.

I'm sure I told him I loved him.

Closing my burning eyes, I swallow the tears down.

Daddy, I'm sorry.

What Finn couldn't do, Dad's death did. I feel broken as if my heart is nothing but shards. I tried so hard to not upset Dad, and then the news of the attack made his heart give out.

Guilt rears up, swirling into a ball of darkness inside me as it mixes with the grief.

I hear movement behind me, and opening my eyes, I suck in a fortifying breath. Today's going to be difficult.

I turn around as Liam stops behind me, and looking up at the man that's kept me from falling apart the past week, I don't know what I would've done without him.

First, the attack. Then, Dad died.

I can't handle anything else. It's all too much.

Taking a step forward, I wrap my arms around Liam's waist and rest my head against his chest. I feel the bulge of his gun behind his back, and it serves as a reminder of who he really is.

He holds me until I pull back. I suck in a quivering breath, feeling smaller than a speck of dust.

"Ready?" Liam asks, his tone gentle as always. I've started picking up on the fact that he only talks to me like this. There's a dangerous edge to his tone whenever he's speaking to another person.

He treats me as if I'm precious.

Nodding, I take hold of Liam's hand, following him out of the penthouse.

The drive to the church fills my stomach with burning coals. I keep glancing at Liam, the power he holds becoming more evident every day.

The church comes into view, and the hollow bitterness of death fills me.

I'm not ready.

After Liam parks the car and we get out, Mom comes walking toward me, Rowan hovering behind her. Silently we hug before we walk into the church.

Mom didn't have much of a relationship with Dad. They haven't even seen each other since I turned sixteen, so at least I don't have to worry about how she's handling this. But she's still worried that I'm staying at Liam's place.

Entering the church, I'm surprised to see the pews filled with people I've never met.

The mafia.

My eyes lock on the casket upfront. There's a beautiful photo of Dad that's been enlarged. It's one of the rare ones where he's smiling. My eyes mist as Mom takes a seat in the front row.

I suck in a trembling breath as I stop by the casket. Closing my eyes, it takes all the strength I have to keep the tears back. Slowly, I lift my lashes, then look down.

The sight of Dad's body, cold and lifeless, crushes my heart to dust.

Daddy.

Unable to stop it, my body shakes as sobs burst from me.

I'm going to miss you so much. I'm so sorry I didn't listen to you, and I took the job at Byrne Enterprises. If I had done as you asked, you'd still be here.

God, I'm sorry.

Leaning forward, I press a kiss to Dad's cold skin.

"Please forgive me," I whisper.

When I turn around, Liam's right behind me. His eyes are filled with compassion and worry as he takes hold of my arm, leading me to where Mom's sitting.

My eyes lock on Dad's photo, and when the priest starts the service, I don't take in a single word.

I snap out of the trance I slipped into when Liam gets up to say a couple of words. He walks to the front and takes a moment to look at the photo of Dad, then he chuckles and says, “I can hear him cursing us all for sitting here, telling us to get back to work.”

There’s a murmur of chuckles throughout the church, then Liam glances over all the people. “Jimmy was family. Jesus, he raised half of you.”

Murmurs of agreement spread out behind me.

Liam looks at the photo again. “I’ve never been good with words, so I’m going to steal for you, Jimmy. The words of Clare Harner.” He clears his throat, then recites, “Do not stand by my grave and weep. I am not there. I do not sleep. I am the thousand winds that blow. I am the diamond glints in snow. I am the sunlight on ripened grain. I am the gentle autumn rain.” Liam pauses to take a breath, then turns his eyes to me. “Do not stand by my grave and cry. I am not there. I did not die.” He pauses for a moment, just looking at me. “Jimmy left a piece of himself behind for us.” He looks at Dad’s photo again. “We’ll take care of her for you, old man. It’s time for you to rest.”

Liam gestures for me to come.

Taking a deep breath, I get up and walk to the front. When Liam gives me a hug, I whisper, “Thank you. That was beautiful.”

I wait for him to sit down, then glance over all the faces.

So many men called Dad family.

“You probably knew my dad better than me.” I swallow hard. “I only saw him when he took a break from work. But the times I got to spend with him are some of my favorite memories.” I have to take a moment to get air into my lungs. “I’d give anything to hear him call me lass one last time.” I turn my gaze to the photo and have to breathe through the wave of grief his smiling face brings. “It was an honor to be your daughter. I love you. Always will.”

After the service, Liam drove us to a warehouse.

A long table’s been set up on the side with snacks. There’s also coffee and tea. Not that I can force myself to have any.

I keep looking at all the men. Some seem normal, but others are downright scary.

Liam keeps his hand on my lower back, and when he starts steering me through the group of men, I instinctively inch closer to him.

A man glances at me, then turns and heads our way. He has a scar across his cheek, and every step he takes makes it look like he’s prowling for a victim.

I’m practically glued against Liam by the time the man stops in front of us, then he looks at Liam with respect. “Boss.”

Liam glances down at me. “This is Declan. He’ll guard you.”

“What?” the word burst from me.

I knew I was getting guards, but...

My eyes fly back to Declan’s face.

God, he looks scary.

Three more men come to join us. Liam gestures to each of them. “Waylon, Ezra, and Ryan. They’re Declan’s team.”

With wide eyes, I stare at the four men who will follow me around like shadows.

Declan tilts his head, his features softening a little but not enough to make him look any less threatening. “Sorry for your loss. Jimmy saved my arse. He was like a da to me.”

Hearing his Irish accent and how close he was to Dad eases some of the tension in me.

Then he adds, “Don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Thank you,” I manage to whisper.

Declan turns his attention to Liam, who says, “I have to be back at work first thing tomorrow morning. Be at the penthouse at five am.”

“Aye, boss.” Declan nods, then turns and walks away, the other three guards following him.

“I know he’s intimidating, but he’s one of my best,” Liam murmurs.

I glance up at him. “I’m not going to lie, he looks scary.”

“You’ll be safe with Declan. I trust him.”

My eyes search Liam’s eyes. If he trusts Declan... God, I’ll just have to take his word for it. He hasn’t given me any

reason to doubt him. “Okay.”

Slowly the men take turns to pay their respect to me. It’s clear all of them are loyal to Liam.

Just like Dad was.

My gaze rests on the man who’s quickly becoming a huge part of my life. I got to know him as a CEO, but I’m seeing a different side to him surrounded by the mafia.

The powerful side.

Liam’s eyes meet mine. “Something wrong?”

With our gazes locked, I ask, “So this is who you are?”

He nods. “You okay with it?”

Just like when I found out who Dad was and what he did for a living, I realize it doesn’t really matter. It didn’t change my love for Dad.

And it won’t stop me from falling for Liam.

“Yeah, I’m okay with it.”

The corner of his mouth lifts, and wrapping an arm around my shoulders, he tugs me to his side and presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Good.”

Chapter 28

Liam

Dressed in a suit, I head down the stairs so I can get my ass to work. There's a fuck ton to do today.

Finding Kiara in front of the window, drinking a cup of coffee, I say, "Declan will be here any minute."

She turns around. "I really think I should go to work."

I shake my head, and stealing the cup from her, I take a sip before handing it back. "At least just take today off. You need the time to deal."

Fuck does she need the time. It's the only reason I haven't gone caveman on her ass yet.

The urge to claim her rears up in my chest.

The elevator doors open, and Declan steps into the foyer. "Mornin'," he grumbles. The man is similar to me. We both don't like people.

"The rest of the team downstairs?" I ask.

"Yeah." He glances at Kiara. "Any restrictions?"

I shake my head. "None."

Pulling my wallet out of my jacket's pocket, I remove one of the credit cards and hold it out to Kiara.

She frowns at it.

“Take the card, Kiara.”

Confused eyes look up at me as she takes it from me.
“Why?”

“It’s for if you need anything.”

“But...” She tilts her head, still confused as fuck.

“You’re my responsibility,” I remind her. “Buy anything you want with the card.”

Her eyebrow pops up. “We’re going to talk about this when you get home.”

Home. Where she’ll be waiting for me.

Stepping forward, I lean down and press a kiss on her forehead. “I’ll try to be back early, but there’s a lot to catch up on.”

“Okay.”

When I leave the penthouse, I wish I could stay home.

That’s a first.

Stepping into the elevator, I turn, and my eyes lock on Kiara, where she’s staring after me. The doors shut, and I suck in a deep breath, mentally readying myself for the day ahead.

I’m going to promote Devon to director. He’s worked on the executive floor long enough to fill the position.

Everything in me wants to promote Kiara to the assistant position, but that would show favoritism. Denise has been working there longer.

Walking into the basement, I nod at my men. I take the SUV to work, and the moment I enter Byrne Enterprises, I head for the reception counter.

“Morning, Mr. Byrne,” Denise greets me with a professional smile.

“Morning. Kiara won’t be in today. Let HR know so they can send someone to assist you.”

Her eyes widen slightly, probably because I’m the one informing her about Kiara.

“Also, Finn no longer works here. Direct all his calls to Devon.”

“Yes, sir.”

With that done, I head upstairs, and when I find Devon at his desk, I ask, “Did you get everything handled with your sister?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for the time off. She moved in with me.”

“There goes your peace and quiet,” I joke, stopping at his desk. “Finn’s no longer working here.”

Relief settles over Devon’s face. “Best news you could’ve given me. But I figured something was up when he didn’t show up for work.”

I nod toward Finn’s old office. “Which means I’m promoting you to director.”

Instantly, a smile spreads over his face. “Are you serious?”

Nodding, I say, “Clear out Finn’s old office. Denise will take over from you but don’t say a word until she’s received

her promotion.”

He nods, clearly happy with the changes.

“You’ll handle all of the incoming calls for Finn.”

“Yes, sir.”

The corner of my mouth lifts. “Just Liam. Can’t have my director calling me sir.” I walk to my office, unbuttoning my jacket and pulling it off so I can hang it up and get to work.

Sitting down behind my desk, I take a deep breath, then look at the list of calls I have to return.

Just as I pick up the office phone, my personal one starts to ring. I dig the device out of my pocket, and seeing Finn’s name flashing on the screen, there’s an instant burst of rage in my chest.

I thought he got rid of the phone.

“You better be calling me from hell,” I growl.

He lets out an amused chuckle. “I’m sitting pretty in heaven.”

“You gonna keep hiding, coward?”

He sighs. “No. You have a couple of things that belong to me.”

An aggressive chuckle escapes me. “Delusional as always.”

“The mafia needs someone willing to expand it into new territories.”

“Let me guess. Sex slavery?”

“So much money to be made.”

“Not the kind of money I’m interested in.”

“I’m coming for the mafia and Kiara.”

This time my chuckle is filled with brutality. “This is my world. Every fucking square inch. That includes Kiara.”

“Pretty little thing isn’t she,” he taunts me. “Tastes like strawberries and cream.”

Closing my eyes against the overwhelming wave of rage, I growl, “Come say that to my face.”

“Soon.”

The call ends, and I drop the device on the desk before I’m tempted to crush it. Standing up, I turn to look out of the window in the direction of the penthouse, several blocks away.

I’m going to fucking kill him. Slowly.

Turning around, I pick up the phone again and dial Will’s number.

“I’m downstairs,” he answers.

“Stop flirting with Denise. Finn called. He’s still using his phone. See if you can track the fucking thing before he disables it again.”

“On it.”

As soon as I end the call, I dial Viktor’s number.

“Liam?” he answers.

“I’m going to kill you,” I hear a woman shout in the background.

Frowning, I ask, “Is that Rosalie?” When we helped Nikolas take down the head of the Sicilian mafia, Viktor took

the man's granddaughter.

Honestly, I forgot about it.

"Yes, turns out the little rose has thorns," he mutters. I hear him move and shut a door behind him. "Need something?"

"I'm sending you Finn's phone number. He's still using it."

"That will help find the fucker."

"Thanks."

Ending the call, I only wonder about what Viktor's going to do with Rosalie for a moment before my thoughts turn to Kiara.

Having her in my space has been nothing short of heavenly. It's mindblowing how quickly my feelings for her have grown.

I will have to be straight with her and make it clear she belongs to me. I'm never letting her go.

God only knows how she's going to handle it.

Chapter 29

Kiara

All the relaxed atmosphere left with Liam.

“Would you like some coffee?” I offer Declan, highly aware of the credit card in my hand.

“Please.” He walks around the living area as if he’s searching for a threat.

I go to the kitchen and quickly take the last sip of my beverage. The memory of Liam having some of my coffee makes the corner of my mouth lift.

And he gave you his credit card.

I look down at it.

Liam’s treating me as if we’re a couple.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach, the sensation a breath of fresh wind after the loss and trauma. Instantly the butterflies vanish, and the guilt and grief come back in full force.

It’s eating away at me that Dad died because of me. If I had listened to him, he’d still be alive.

Declan comes to stand next to me, and when he starts preparing the coffee, I whisper, “Sorry.”

“I’ve got it.”

I begin to walk away so I can go upstairs and put the credit card in a safe place when Declan says, “It gets better with time.”

Does it?

I glance at him from over my shoulder.

He doesn’t look at me but continues to stir the coffee. “I lost my parents when I was nine, before comin’ to Chicago. Jimmy took me under his wing. Practically raised me.”

I turn around. “You were close with my dad?”

Declan nods. “Kinda know how you feel right now.”

The uneasiness I feel being alone with him fades a little.

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Lost a dad, gained a sister.” He takes a sip of his coffee, then locks eyes with me. “I’m tellin’ you this so you’ll relax around me. Would make my job easier if we got along.”

I nod. “Okay.” I gesture to the stairs. “I’m just going to put the credit card away.”

“You don’t need to report everythin’ you’re goin’ to do. I’ll just shadow you.”

Nodding, I head upstairs to the guest room where my belongings are. At some point, I have to go home. It’s almost been two weeks. I can’t stay here indefinitely.

Even if I’d like to.

Opening my handbag, I take my wallet out and place the card in it. I sit down on the bed and decide to check my phone for messages.

There's one from Mom.

Let me know how you're doing.

Pressing dial on her number, I listen to the ringtone.

"Hi, sweetie. How are you feeling today?"

"Better." I glance around the room that's decorated in dark gray and white. "Liam's really good to me."

"Are you still staying at his home?"

"Yeah, but not for much longer. I have to go home at some point."

"You really think that man will let you go back to your apartment after he moved me out of mine?"

Shit. Good point.

My eyebrow lifts as I consider this. "Maybe he'll move me to where you are? I have no idea. We haven't talked about it yet." Wanting to set Mom at ease, I add, "He's doing what's best for us."

"It's not that I'm ungrateful, sweetheart. It's just, your father put the fear of God in me before you were born, and with all the secrecy over the years... I'm just scared the mafia will end up killing us."

"I understand," I murmur. "But Liam won't let that happen." I let out a deep breath, then admit, "I trust him, Mom."

"As long as you're safe, sweetheart. You're all I have."

"You won't lose me. I'm made of tough stuff," I joke.

“How are you feeling after the attack and your dad’s passing? Gosh, I wish I could hug you now.”

“Honestly, I feel so guilty.” My voice breaks, and I have to swallow hard on the sudden urge to cry. “If Dad hadn’t heard I was attacked, he’d still be here.”

“Don’t do that to yourself, sweetie. It wasn’t your fault. Anything could’ve made his heart give out, and you weren’t the one who told him.”

Doesn’t make me feel better.

“How are the bruises healing?” she changes the subject.

“They’re fading. At least I’ll be able to cover them with makeup.”

“Are you going back to work soon?”

“Yes, sitting around like this will only drive me insane.” I lie back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. “Tell me about the place you’re staying at.”

“Like I told you, it’s half a castle,” Mom mutters. “If Rowan leaves me alone long enough, I might just get lost.”

I let out a chuckle. “Are you getting along with your guards?”

“Yes, the boys are already buzzing around me, waiting for lunch.”

A smile curves my lips. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Let me go feed the vultures,” she mutters, but there’s no sting to her tone telling me she likes having the company.

“Okay. Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, sweetie.”

Ending the call, I drop the phone on the bed, feeling relieved that Mom’s adjusting well to the situation she’s been dragged into.

Needing to keep busy, I started with dinner, hoping Liam will be okay with the food I make.

Maybe I first should’ve asked him?

He drinks the coffee you make, he’ll eat the food too. Chill.

The aroma of chicken fried steaks and mashed potatoes hangs in the air when Liam walks into the foyer.

He talks to Declan for a moment and waits for my guard to leave before he walks to the kitchen. Unbuttoning his jacket, he takes it off while his eyes scan over me. “You cooked?”

“Comfort food. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Smells good.”

Laying his jacket down on the counter, he takes hold of my arm and presses a kiss to my forehead.

Couple.

He pulls back and smiles down at me. “How was your day?”

“Good.” My tongue darts out to wet my lips, the nervous energy I’ve been feeling around him buzzing to life in my stomach. “I had a long conversation with my mom that made

me feel better.” He looks pleased with my reply. “How was your day?”

“Got a lot done. Devon was glad to hear he got a promotion.” Liam goes to the fridge and takes out a bottle of water.

“Oh yeah?”

He nods. “I made him director.”

“Who are you going to put in his place?”

“Denise.”

A smile spreads over my face. “Really? Have you told her? What was her reaction?”

He shakes his head. “She’ll find out tomorrow.”

“I’m so not staying home.”

Liam lets out a chuckle. “You know this means you’ll be alone at reception for a while?”

“I don’t mind.” A sneaky grin forms on my face. “I’ll get Declan to help out.”

Laughing, Liam says, “Good luck with that.”

Gesturing to the plates of food, I ask, “Do you need time to unwind, or can we eat?”

He glances at the food. “You made everything yourself, right?”

I nod quickly but then say, “But I won’t take offense if you can’t eat it.”

He shakes his head, and reaching past me, he picks up a plate. “As long as you made it, I’m fine.”

Be still my heart.

“You want a glass of wine?” I ask as I carry my plate to the living room.

“You sit. I’ll get us some,” he says.

Plopping down on the couch, I cross my legs beneath me and set my plate down on my lap.

I hope the chicken isn’t too dry.

Cutting off a piece, I pop it in my mouth.

Damn, not bad if I have to say so myself.

Liam comes back and sets the glasses of wine down on the coffee table before taking a seat across from me. I watch him closely as he takes a bite.

My eyebrows lift, my heart beating a little faster.

The corner of his mouth lifts. “You’re taking over the cooking duties from now on.”

A wide smile spreads over my face. “It’s not too dry?”

He shakes his head. “It’s perfect.”

With the relaxed atmosphere back now that Liam’s home, we enjoy our meal while slowly sipping the wine.

Liam swallows the last bite, then sets his plate down on the coffee table. “After I’ve showered, we need to talk.”

“About?” I ask before finishing the last of my wine.

“Where to go from here.”

Right. I can’t stay here forever.

At some point, I have to get back to my life and face my problems on my own.

“I’ll clean up,” I murmur as I get up and gather the plates and glasses. I walk to the kitchen and load the dishes into the dishwasher.

I hear him head up the stairs while I try to ignore the fact even though the past week and a half has been the worst of my life, I’ve fallen for Liam.

God, I don’t know how to just go back to being his employee.

Chapter 30

Liam

Coming home to Kiara and having her prepare dinner for us was incredible.

It also obliterated the last of my patience. There's no doubt in my mind she's meant for me, and it's time she realizes it.

Mine.

Stripping out of my suit, I step into the shower and let the warm water rain down on me. Washing my body, my thoughts are held hostage by Kiara.

With Jimmy passing away, everything else took a back seat to making arrangements for the funeral. But now that everything is returning to semi-normal, it's time to claim her.

To own her.

Fuck patience. It's never been one of my strong points.

I want her, and I want her now.

She's been through hell, Liam.

I think about how I'm going to handle the situation.

You should probably hear how she feels before going caveman on her ass.

Stepping out of the shower, I quickly dry my body, then go to the walk-in closet to put on a pair of sweatpants and a shirt, impatient to have this talk with her.

After shoving the sleeves up to my elbows, I grab my Glock from the island in the middle of the dressing room and tuck it in behind my back.

Walking out of the bedroom and heading downstairs, it's to find the place empty. Like the impatient bastard I am, I stalk back up the fucking stairs and scowl at the closed door of the guest bedroom.

Calm your ass down.

It feels like it takes forever before the door opens, and Kiara steps out still dressed in work clothes even though she stayed at home today. A frown settles on my forehead. "Don't you own anything comfortable?"

She glances down at the light blue top and suit pants. "Yeah, but I'm not wearing it in front of you."

The corner of my mouth lifts, and I tip my head toward the room. "Change, Kiara."

She gives me a playful look. "Yes, sir." Mumbling something under her breath, she disappears into the room.

Sir.

Jesus.

A single word from her has me hardening.

I let out a sigh because I have to wait again until she comes out wearing tight as fuck pants and a t-shirt.

Now that's much better.

Being the impatient fuck I am, I corner her in the middle of the hallway, taking her eyes prisoner.

Her eyebrows draw together. “You want to talk here?”

I nod, and it has worry darkening her irises.

“This is all new to me,” I admit, hoping I don’t fuck things up.

“Everything’s pretty much taken care of,” she interrupts me, her fingers start to fidget with the shirt. “I can stay with my mom until the Finn problem is dealt with.”

“Fuck no,” the words burst from me. “That’s not what I mean.” Taking a breath of air, I mutter, “I’m not good at this. Just listen.”

Running a billion-dollar empire, I can do. Going to war, I can handle. But looking down at this woman who’s half my size, I’m in uncharted waters.

Confusion flutters over her face, but she gives me her full attention. “Okay.”

“I want you here,” I say so she won’t worry as much.

Her mouth curves up, drawing my attention to the fading bruises. Lifting my hand, my fingers flex before I place my palm against her cheek. I soak in how soft her skin is, how feminine she feels.

“Liam?” she whispers, her eyes searching mine.

Tilting my head, everything she makes me feel is clear in my voice. “I need you to stay. With me.”

“Until Finn’s been taken care of?”

I shake my head. “Forever.”

Her eyes widen. “You want me to move in with you?” Instantly her surprise is replaced with a nervous expression. “I... ah...”

I bring my other hand to her face and take a step closer. “I’ve never felt like this about anyone, Kiara. Jesus, I can touch you. You have no idea what that means, what you do to me.” Determination and possessiveness darken my tone. “I have full right to claim you.”

Her breath leaves her in a rush. “Dad warned me you might do that. It was one of the reasons he didn’t want me working at Byrne Enterprises.” Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. “So... are you going to?”

“Yes.” I take a deep breath, then shake my head. “But I need you to want this as well. I don’t want to force you.”

Lifting her arm, she takes hold of my wrist and pulls my hand away from her face.

Fuck, don’t make me force you.

“So you’re saying I don’t have a choice, but...” she shakes her head. “Honestly, I’m not sure what you’re saying.”

Frustration ripples through me. “I want you to want me.”

Confusion flutters over her features again. “But you don’t do relationships.”

“I didn’t.” I stare at her for a moment, the unseen force pulling me to her, tightening its hold on me. “Like I said, I’ve never done this before. All I know is I won’t be able to let you go. I want to be able to touch you whenever I want.” I close

the distance between us, my chest brushing against hers. The close proximity forces her to tilt her head back. "I want to own every inch of you."

"I'm not a possession you can claim," she says, her tone soft.

I suck in a deep breath of air, my chest brushing against hers. "I know." I pull my wrist free from her hold, then glancing down, I trail my fingers up her arm, watching goosebumps spread over her skin. "You feel it too, Kiara." My eyes lock with hers again. "We were meant to cross paths. It feels like you're the other half of me."

Her features soften, all the worry draining away, then the corner of her mouth lifts. "Are you even attracted to me?"

Nodding, I let out a chuckle, then admit, "I'm obsessed with you."

"That doesn't sound creepy at all," she teases me. "Sooo... you want to date?"

"No, I want you to be mine. In every way. So I can touch and kiss you whenever I want." There's a predatory tone to my voice as I add, "So I can fuck you."

"And here I thought you were a romantic," she chuckles, sounding slightly nervous again.

I probably should've waited before telling her I want to fuck her.

"Never claimed to be one." My gaze drifts over her face. "I want an answer." My fingers wrap around the side of her neck. "Are you going to give yourself to me?"

Because, fuck, I will take you if I have to.

She sucks in a deep breath, then glances down the hallway. “This is happening fast.” Lowering her head, she admits, “I really like you, and I’m not opposed to starting a relationship,” raising her chin, her eyes lift to mine again, “but I just need a little longer before...” she clears her throat, “jumping into bed with you.”

Instantly my negotiation skills come out to play. “Okay, but I want you in my bedroom.”

She raises an eyebrow at me. “but no intercourse until I say I’m ready.”

Reluctantly, I mutter, “It’s a deal.”

Laughter bubbles over her lips, then she gives me a look of warning, “If you pull out a contract for me to sign, I’m going to slap you with it.”

“No contract.” I start to lower my head. “Your word is enough for me.”

“Good,” she murmurs, her eyes lowering to my mouth.

“Say the words,” I demand, the urge to kiss her becoming overwhelming.

“Which ones?” her breaths fan over my lips.

“You’re mine.”

She lifts her hands, placing them against my chest. “I’m yours.”

My mouth crushes against hers, needing to taste the promise of her words. *Needing to taste her.*

My body pushes hers back until she's pressed against the wall, my self-control slipping through my fingers at the speed of light.

Her unique sweet flavor bursts over my tongue, the velvet feel of her mouth threatening to drive me wild.

Jesus.

I lift both my hands to her face, and holding her in place, I devour her. She sets my soul on fire, emotions exploding in my chest.

Mine.

Chapter 31

Kiara

The way Liam kisses me is unlike anything I've experienced before. The dominance pouring from him demands I give in – that I hand everything I am over to him so he can own me.

His mouth is so hot on mine, the friction causing my lips to tingle. His tongue tastes every inch of my mouth, his breaths becoming the very air I breathe.

It makes me delirious with need.

Lifting on my toes, I press as close to him as possible. He removes a hand from my face, only to take hold of my hip.

He wants me. This man wants me.

Dad warned me this would happen, and now that it has, I can't say I mind. I want to be with Liam. To get to know all of him.

"Jesus, Kiara," he groans into my mouth, then his tongue lashes at mine, stealing the air right from my lungs. I move my hands up to his neck, the feel of his warm skin soaking into my fingertips.

The kiss is so intense fireworks explode in my chest.

Oh. God.

He tastes like wine and everything sinful. My mind clouds with desire, every breath I take filled with his aftershave.

His other hand wraps around the back of my neck, the one on my hip tightening its hold on me. Our lips knead, our tongues dancing, then his teeth tug at my bottom lip, and I can't stop a moan from escaping.

Liam's body pushes harder against mine. I feel the bulge of his erection pressing to my stomach, his hand moving from my hip and slipping beneath my shirt. His fingers instantly set my skin on fire as they hungrily brush up my side.

A needy moan escapes me.

With an impatient growl, Liam grips hold of my hips, and I'm lifted against the wall. I wrap my legs around his waist, and it has him thrusting against the heat between my legs.

The kiss breaks, and as he thrusts again, he moves his hands up to frame my face, his eyes burning on me like the blue part of a flame. The hottest part.

God, this is intense. And so good.

The stark expression on his face looks like he's about to devour me. My abdomen clenches hard, my skin anticipating his touch, my body eager for his.

Instead of bringing his mouth to mine, hot kisses burn down my neck. My head falls back, my demand that we take it slow nowhere to be found.

When his palm covers my breast, I moan again, this time rubbing myself against his hard length when he thrusts up.

God. This man.

He lets out another impatient growl, and yanking my shirt up, my back arches as his mouth closes around my nipple.

Instantly, I'm doused in ice, worried that he will see the bite marks Finn left behind. They're healing slower than the ones on my face. Lowering my legs, I grab hold of my shirt and cover myself while slumping back against the wall. My breaths burst over my lips.

This is why I wanted to wait. I don't want him seeing the marks.

Liam takes a step back, shaking his head as if he's struggling to regain control. "Fuck." His chest rises and falls with the deep breaths he's taking. Slowly the hunger drains from his face. "Right. You said slow." His eyes scan my face. "Did I fuck up?"

I shake my head. "I just need time before we get to that." *Time for the bruises on my chest to go away.*

Liam must read something on my face because his features instantly fill with worry. "I'm an asshole." Stepping closer, he wraps his arms around me, letting out a deep sigh. "Of course, you need time." He presses a kiss to my hair, then he admits, "It feels good to hold you."

"It feels good being held by you," I whisper as I burrow closer to his chest. Closing my eyes, my mind is inundated with everything he said and what it means.

Part of me feels everything is happening fast, but then there's a part that already knows this is the man for me. Like he said, it's as if he's my other half. Before losing control with

the kiss, he knew exactly what I needed without me having to ask.

Like he already knows me inside out.

Lifting my head, I look up at him for a moment before pushing myself up on my toes and pressing a soft kiss to his mouth.

Holy crap, I'm dating Liam Byrne.

A hot grin spreads over his face. "Again."

I give him another quick kiss, then extract myself from his arms. "I need my daily dose of diabetes." *Like pronto.*

Following me to the stairs, he chuckles. "Donuts it is."

While Liam tells Paul to make a run for donuts, I curl up on the couch, my eyes finding the view beyond the windows.

Liam grabs the remote from the TV stand, then comes to sit next to me. Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, he tugs me closer until I'm leaning against him.

"Mind if I catch up on the news?" he asks.

"Not at all." I snuggle into him, closing my eyes.

I hear the presenter giving the daily updates of what's happening around the world but don't pay attention to any of it.

Taking a deep breath, I inhale Liam's scent, then I start to wonder what would've happened if I didn't stop him. "I'm curious."

His body shakes with silent laughter. "Aren't you always?" I can feel him looking at me. "What's the question?"

I sit up a bit straighter so I can meet his eyes. “How does sex with you work?” *That doesn’t sound weird at all.* “I mean, with the no touching and all.”

He looks at me for a moment, probably thinking about how to answer my question. “It’s usually clinical.” Shrugging, he adds, “I never undress.”

My eyebrows lift. “You do the deed fully dressed?”

Chuckling at me, he nods. “Only one body part is needed to get the job done.”

“God, you make it sound like a chore.”

“That’s because it was.” With his arm still around my shoulders, he tugs me against him and lowers his head until his breath fans over my ear. “But make no mistake, Kiara. When the time comes, I’m going to enjoy stripping you naked, so I can feel every inch of you pressed against me while I sink deep into you.”

Holy shit.

Heat floods my body, my abdomen tightening from his hungry words. My eyes lower to his lap, and seeing the proof of his desire, hard and long beneath the sweatpants, my eyebrow darts up again.

He’s big.

Damn the bruises for not fading faster.

I shift to create some friction between my legs.

His teeth nip at my earlobe, intense tingles spreading over my body. “I’m going to feast on your skin, sucking on your nipples until you’re begging me to take you.”

A strangled moan escapes me.

Liam pulls me closer, and positioning me on his lap, so I'm straddling him, I feel his hard length between my legs.

God, it's insane. I want to ride him until I come.

His hands rest on my hips, his eyes burning on me. "And you will beg."

It takes all my strength to not grind down on him. My lips part, my breaths coming faster.

Good God, I want him something fierce.

His lashes lower until he looks downright predatory and ready to fuck me senseless.

Screw what I said about needing time. This feels so good.

Unable to control my body, I push down on his erection, the relief instant.

So so good.

Shaking his head, he asks, "Why are you holding back?" The dominance pours off him, demanding I submit. "Take what you want, Kiara."

God.

My eyes search his, wondering how I'm ever going to be able to stand my ground around him.

His grip on my hips tightens, then he thrusts against my aching core. The mixture of pleasure and relief is so intense, my eyes drift shut.

I hear the elevator doors open, and my eyes snap open. Before I can move off Liam, his arm shoots around me to keep

me in place, and he growls, "Don't you dare fucking move." Then he barks at Paul. "Just set the box down."

Stuck on Liam's lap, I listen until the elevator doors shut again. Liam's eyes take mine prisoner with burning possessiveness. "Why are you holding back?" he asks again.

"Ahhh," I have to search for an answer, then spew the first thing that comes to mind, "we became a couple like five minutes ago."

Liam's features soften. "Is that really it?" He tilts his head, the questioning look telling me he knows I'm hiding something.

Giving in, I admit, "There are marks on my chest. I don't want you to see them."

Understanding dawns in his eyes. "I've already seen them."

An eyebrow pops up. "When?"

Liam lets out a deep breath. "You were naked, Kiara. Even though the circumstances were fucking horrific, there was no way I could not look at you."

My shoulders slump, and leaning forward, I press my forehead to his chest. "True." I can't remember half of what happened that Friday night. Just me fighting with everything I had.

Liam wraps his arms around me, brushing a hand up and down my back. He's no longer hard, so it's safe to say I killed the mood.

“I’m not going to lie and say the marks don’t bother me,” he murmurs close to my ear. “I fucking hate every single bruise, but it doesn’t change the way I see you.”

Lifting my head, I try to smile.

Affection, possessiveness, and an intense jealousy that should scare me but doesn’t, have tightened his features.

Not once has Liam looked at me like I’m tainted, and I’m not about to let Finn dig his filthy claws into my self-esteem.

With my gaze drinking in the way Liam’s looking at me, I decide to once again fight for myself. But this time, I’m also fighting for what I want. Liam.

His mouth curves up. “Jesus, you’re beautiful. It looks like your eyes are alive with sparks.”

I lift my hands to frame his jaw, and leaning forward, I press my mouth to his. I initiate the kiss, and he lets me set the pace. It’s empowering that I get to take the lead, and wrapping an arm around his neck, I press my body against his.

My lips knead his, my teeth getting to nip at his bottom lip. Quickly the desire floods back, washing every bit of hesitancy from me.

Chapter 32

Liam

Kiara moans as she tilts her head, her hair forming a curtain of silk around us while she finally kisses me without any restraint.

She starts to move, rubbing her body against mine, and it takes more strength than I knew I had to not take over and fuck her raw.

Jesus, woman. You're going to kill me at this rate.

I harden at the speed of light, my cock threatening to tear through my pants to get to her heat.

Then she takes hold of my shirt and starts to drag the fabric up. Out of habit, I wait for the dread to rear up in my chest, but there's nothing but burning desire. She tosses the shirt to the side, her eyes lowering to take in the triquetra tattooed over my heart.

With the tip of her finger, she traces the three interlinking loops before moving on to the words tattooed across one of my ribs. "What does this one mean?"

"*Tada gan iarracht*," I read the words before translating, "Nothing without effort."

Her lips curve up, then she lifts her eyes back to my face. Titling her head, wonderment fills her breathtaking features.

“So grumpy with others, yet you’re gentle with me.”

“Not without effort,” I repeat the words, earning a chuckle from her. Then I add, “Everything is different with you.”

She stares at me as if I’m some miracle that happened to her and not the other way around. Shaking my head, I whisper, “You’re the miracle, baby.”

Flattening her palms against my chest, she drags them down to my abs while watching my reaction.

Jesus, that feels good.

Reading the question in her eyes, I answer, “Yes, you’re the first woman to touch my chest.” I look at her with every ounce of the obsession I feel for her. “Everything with you is a first for me.”

Her eyebrows draw together as if it saddens her, then she leans forward and presses a kiss to my shoulder. “Tell me if I do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

I let out a chuckle. “Not possible.” Then I tease her, “Have your way with me.” I grip her hips. “Please.”

Letting out a burst of laughter, her breaths fans over my neck as she kisses her way up to my jaw. Suddenly she asks, “Why do you have a right to claim me?”

“As the head of the mafia, I get first pick.”

“No other mafia princesses ever piqued your interest?”

“No.” Our eyes meet again. “Your dad knew what he was doing when he hid you. There’s no way you would’ve made it past nineteen without me claiming you.”

“So that’s it? You decide I’m yours, and that’s the end of the story?”

My mouth curves up. “No, it’s the beginning of the story.”

My words make a beautiful smile spread over her face. She leans into me again, her mouth skimming over my throat and jaw. Her hands keep exploring my chest, a satisfied moan drifting over her lips before her mouth latches onto mine.

Fuck this shit.

Gripping her tightly, I twist her around in a single, fluid move, her back hitting the couch. Crawling over her, I shake my head. “Enough teasing.”

My mouth claims hers with the wild desire stripping me of my sanity. My hands push beneath the fabric of her shirt, feasting on the feel of her skin until I cover her breasts, massaging them with barely restrained control.

When I thrust against her scorching heat that I can feel through our clothes, her back arches, a pleading moan spilling into my mouth.

I tear my mouth from hers and take in the desire on her face, making her look angelic. “Are you sure, Kiara? Once I cross this line, I’ll own every inch of you. This is the last chance I’ll give you to back out.”

Don’t.

I’ll lose my fucking mind.

She stares at me for a moment. “You’ll never hurt me.”

It’s not a question, but still I vow with everything that makes me a man, “Never.”

“You’ll protect me from your world?”

It will become your world too.

“With my last breath.”

I see the moment she submits, then she nods. “Own me, Liam.”

Resting an arm next to her head, I press a tender kiss to her lips. My other hand brushes up and down her side, memorizing the curve of her body. When I kiss her again, her hands move to my back. Her fingers trail over my skin, goosebumps spreading over my body.

Wanting to drive her as insane as she’s making me, I begin to rock against her. I push her shirt up, and this time she doesn’t stop me, but instead helps to get the fabric off. My eyes lower to the fading bruises on her breasts and side, my fingers gently caressing them.

Lowering my head, I take her right nipple into my mouth. My tongue swirls around the hard bud.

“God, Liam,” she moans, arching her back.

Pushing myself up, I take hold of her leggings and drag the fabric down her legs. I stand up, my eyes taking in her naked body.

Mine.

Removing the Glock from behind my back, I slide it partially beneath the couch, so it’s within reach. I take hold of the waistband, noticing Kiara’s lips parting, her eyes focused on me as I push them down and step out of the fabric. For the first time in my life, I stand naked in front of a woman.

“You’re perfect,” Kiara whispers, awe in her voice.

Crawling over her, I settle my body against hers, her skin touching every inch of me. There’s no way to describe how it feels to have her beneath me. Heavenly doesn’t get close to it.

“I’m taking you bare.” There’s no way I can have anything between us. Ever. Not with this woman.

Her eyes search mine, then she lifts her hips, pressing her heat against my cock. “I’m on birth control.”

I’m hit with unrelenting need, so fucking hard, I lose total control.

My mouth slams against hers, the kiss instantly filthy, dominating, and possessive. Reaching between us, my fingers explore the valley between her legs, and feeling how wet she is for me, only drives me wilder.

I’ve never done slow before, and unable to do so now, I align my cock with her entrance. In a single, hard thrust, I drive inside her tightness, my vision blurring from how incredible it feels.

“Oh God,” she gasps.

I groan, my body hit with an intense wave of pleasure. “Jesus, Kiara.”

I have to keep still, so it’s not over before I’ve even gotten started. Lifting my head, I lock eyes with her.

The moment registers as I look into her amber irises while she’s breathing through the discomfort of having me inside her. “You okay?”

She nods. “Yeah. Just a tight fit.”

Slowly, I pull out of her, my eyes closing from how fucking deliriously good it feels to have her wrapped around me.

Kiara's hands frame my jaw, pulling me back to her mouth. When I enter her on a hard thrust, her breaths burst into me.

My entire being transforms as if I'm being reborn. I begin to worship Kiara with my mouth and hands, my cock taking ownership of her pussy, stroking her so fucking hard, she will only remember me being inside her from this moment on.

I lay my soul at the altar of her body, and she reshapes me into a man who will burn the world down for her. A man who loves her. *Only her.*

I give Kiara everything I am.

My wealth.

My heart.

My body.

I give her the blood staining my hands. The loyalty of every man who works for me. Over a hundred last breaths who will die for her.

Kiara accepts my offering as her mouth devours mine. She's in complete sync with me, her moans and my harsh breaths blending with the sounds of our bodies connecting.

"Christ, I get to love you," I breathe against her mouth. "Only you."

We're wrapped in a cocoon of ecstasy, Kiara's eyes misting until they look like sparkling stars. "Liam," she

whimpers before pure bliss washes over her face, her body convulsing beneath mine.

Her tight walls grip me so fucking hard, pleasure shoots like a bullet down my spine, my balls tighten, and I explode, my pace faltering as I jerk inside her.

Mother of God.

My vision goes black, and I become as vulnerable as I'll ever be from the powerful orgasm paralyzing me.

Aftershocks of pleasure electrify us, our bodies spasming until we're both gasping for air. Slumping over Kiara, I can barely lift my head. "Jesus, woman," I breathe. "Pretty sure you're going to kill me."

"Uh-huh." Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. "But what a way to die."

Finally, strength returns to my body, and I'm able to pull out of her. Kiara spasms. "Good God, Liam. I'm so sensitive."

Satisfaction fills my chest, and I grin like an idiot. "Still feeling me inside you?"

She nods.

"Good, the second you no longer feel me, tell me."

She lets out a chuckle. "Why?"

"So I can fuck you again." I press a kiss to her parted lips. "I want you to feel me every second of every day."

Chapter 33

Kiara

When I yawn again, Liam switches off the TV, and getting up, he slips his arms under me, lifting me bridal style.

“You really like carrying me around,” I tease and wrap my arms around his neck.

“Safest place for you is in my arms,” he murmurs as he climbs the stairs.

Today was so much better. Even though everything’s changed. I lost Dad, but I gained Liam.

Oh, and I’ve moved in with him.

“At some point, I need to go back to my apartment,” I mention right before he sets me down on his bed.

“Only to get the rest of your belongings,” he mutters, a not-negotiable tone to his voice.

“Yes, sir.” I smile when the desire sparks to life in his eyes. I’ve caught on the word ‘*sir*’ is a turn-on for him.

Liam tugs the covers back, then removes his gun and tucks it beneath the pillow. “Move over. I sleep closest to the door.”

I scoot to the other side, crawling beneath the covers. Liam lies down beside me, then turns his head to look at me. The corner of his mouth lifts. “Right where you belong.”

Snuggling into his side, I ask, “Are you serious about us?”

“Which part of you are mine, didn’t you understand?”

Glancing up at him, I explain, “It just happened really quick.”

“Your point?”

“What if a week from now you realize you made a mistake?”

He lets out a burst of silent laughter. “In my world, a mistake is the difference between life and death.” He shakes his head. “I don’t make mistakes, Kiara.”

“I just don’t...” I wet my lips. “I don’t want to give my heart to you only to have it thrown back at me.”

His eyes hold mine with a serious intensity. “That will never happen. Your heart will be the most important thing I own.”

“So that’s it? You’ve decided I’m the one for you?”

“As simple as that.”

I rest my head against his shoulder and take a deep breath.

‘Jesus, I get to love you.’

Even though I think he said it in the heat of the moment, the words settle inside me.

Suddenly Liam asks, “What did Jimmy tell you about the mafia? You mentioned he warned you that I’d claim you.”

Right. I’m going to have to sit up for this conversation.

Pushing myself up, I turn to face Liam, folding my legs beneath me. He pulls himself up, and placing a pillow behind

his back, he locks eyes with me.

“So Dad didn’t actually tell me anything. He just wanted me to resign from Byrne Enterprises. He only said the second you find out who I am, you’d claim me.”

Worry tightens Liam’s features. “You know nothing?”

I shrug. “I Googled the mafia. Does that count?” Letting out a nervous chuckle, I admit, “Honestly, I didn’t even know the mafia was still a thing until I spoke with Dad.”

Liam lets out a heavy breath. “Fuck.”

Fuck?

Why fuck?

His teeth scrape over his bottom lip, then he pins me with a serious look. “Before I continue, you need to know there’s no way I’m letting you go.”

Hearing the warning in his tone, it makes apprehension slither into my chest.

“The mafia is an illegal crime organization,” he gives me the definition I read online.

“I gathered as much,” I whisper.

“Crime, Kiara. I’m a criminal.”

Hesitantly, I ask, “So you can be arrested any day?”

He lets out an amused chuckle. “No. I have half the police force and politicians in my pocket.”

Oh-kay. I guess money does buy you power.

His eyes are intense on mine. “I’ve killed, and I’ll kill again.”

His words don't hit as hard as I expected them to.
"Innocent people?"

He shakes his head. "Enemies."

"Like Finn?"

When he nods, I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. "Okay." My eyebrows furrow together. "What else?"

"Money laundering mostly. Illegal gambling. Arms."

"Arms? Like weapons?"

He nods. "I belong to a group called the Priesthood. Mostly I clean their money and help out with the transporting of weapons."

I should be upset about this, right?

But that would mean being against the person Dad was, being against Liam, who's been nothing but good to me.

The realization hits me right in the heart. I can never be against them. Dad... God, he was my father. And Liam, he's my future. I'll stay loyal to them until I die.

Liam lifts his hand, brushing his fingers over my cheek.
"You're not trying to run."

The corner of my mouth lifts. "How far would I get?"

He shakes his head. "You won't make it off this bed."

Heat pours into my veins, my abdomen clenching.

Damn, that's a turn-on. I want to be owned by this man, and I don't care that it's crazy.

Moving, I crawl onto his lap, straddling him. My hands frame his jaw, my eyes drifting over his attractive features.

“That was really hot.”

A sinful smirk forms on his face, then he comments, “You like it when I’m dominant.”

I nod as I slowly lean forward. “I do.”

“Like I said, you were made for me.”

I brush my lips against his. “If any other man tried to dominate me, I’d slap him into next week.”

“Good,” he growls as his hands find my butt, his fingers squeezing me hard. He thrusts up, his hard length rubbing where I need it most.

“You told me to tell you when I can’t feel you inside me anymore.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs, then his mouth nips at mine.

“I can’t feel you any longer,” I lie because I’m still sensitive from our earlier lovemaking.

Liam pushes my t-shirt up and over my head, tossing it to the side. “Get naked, baby. I need to feel you stretched around my cock.”

Holy shit.

I quickly shove my leggings down while Liam takes off his sweatpants, then I’m pulled onto his lap again to straddle him, his hands grabbing hold of my ass once more.

“You’re going to ride me until I come,” he orders, the fierce desire he feels for me clear in his voice.

“Yes, sir.”

Liam positions his erection at my entrance, and with one hard thrust up, he buries himself deep inside me. My body curves forward, my lips parting from the ache of him stretching me.

“God,” I gasp, my palm slapping against his rock-hard chest to keep myself from slumping forward.

“That’s it, baby. Feel every inch of me inside you,” he groans.

Liam brings his hands to my hips, then lifts me as he pulls out before slamming back inside me. This time I fall forward, my breasts hitting his chest. “So good,” I moan. “So, so good.”

There’s a slap to my butt, making my abdomen clench hard. “Jesus. Ride me, Kiara.”

I place my hands on his shoulders and swivel my hips, slowly moving up and down. It’s delicious torture, feeling every inch of his hard length stroke inside me.

Liam’s fingers dig into my skin, and with a tight grip, he starts to move me faster until the pace suits him. His thrusts are relentless, and I wrap my arms around his neck, my breasts rubbing against his chest.

“Liam,” I whimper, my body totally under his control.

“Come, baby,” he orders, his tone hoarse.

On command, my body seizes up, and the only thing keeping me from splintering apart is Liam. The pleasure steals my ability to breathe, to think, and all I can do is feel.

He jerks inside me, and with a hot as hell groan, he comes, his arms engulfing me in an almost painful hug.

“Eyes on me,” he demands, and when I open them, I see everything he feels for me laid bare in his eyes.

We ride our pleasure out with our gazes locked, our breaths mingling, the moment the most intense of my life.

With Liam buried deep inside me, I realize he meant every word he said. He’s obsessed with me. He loves me.

This man fell instantly for me.

When I’m able to catch my breath, I whisper, “Was it love at first sight?”

He kisses me softly. “I loved you long before you came into my life. When you bumped into me, my body recognized yours. When you looked for safety in my arms, my heart knew you were the one.”

My heart.

There’s so much emotion building between us, his eyes a color of blue I’ve never seen before. “Mine. Always have been. Always will be.”

His.

Chapter 34

Kiara

Considering I slept in Liam's bed for the first time, I didn't wake once, and there were no nightmares.

And he woke me up with kisses.

Needless to say, I've fallen head over heels for the man.

After getting ready for work, I head downstairs but stop halfway when I see Liam in the foyer, where he's talking to Will and Declan.

"Still can't believe it," Will says. "Never thought I'd live to see the day you fall for a woman."

"Shut up," Liam growls at his friend, then turns his attention to Declan. "You don't let her out of your sight."

"Aye, boss."

"No sign of Finn?" Liam asks.

"Nothing. Can't track the fucker's phone either. He probably disabled it after calling you," Will replies, a frustrated frown settling on his forehead.

Liam mutters, "Fuck. I want him found." He looks at Will, his expression grim.

Seeing Liam in mafia mode, my eyes widen.

“Luca’s funds cleaned and transferred?” he asks Will.

Will nods. “Yeah, it’s back in his account.”

“Good. And the shipment of incendiary grenades?”

“Reached Nikolas at three this morning.”

Liam takes a deep breath, adjusting his tie. “At least that’s done.”

Butterflies erupt in my stomach, because seeing Liam in his role as head of the mafia is really, really hot.

“We have new soldiers joining,” Will informs Liam. “When do you want to hold the ceremony?”

“After we’ve dealt with Finn.”

Liam glances toward the stairs, and it has me moving. “Morning,” I say, hoping he doesn’t realize I eavesdropped.

“Morning.” Will smiles at me. Declan just nods.

Liam holds his hand out to me. “Ready?”

I place my palm in his, eagerly pressing into his side. “Yes, boss,” I tease him, making Will chuckle.

Liam looks down at me, the corner of his mouth lifting in a hot smirk.

Does he know I listened in on their conversation?

He presses a kiss to my forehead, then moves his mouth to my ear, murmuring, “You don’t have to hide when I’m talking business.”

Busted.

I nod, feeling relieved that he's not hiding this side of his life from me.

We all step into the elevator, and only then do I think to ask, "What do I tell Denise?"

Liam glances down at me, his thumb brushing over mine. "Whatever you're comfortable with sharing."

"Is it okay if she finds out about us?"

"Soon, all of Chicago will know," Will mumbles under his breath.

My head snaps to him. "What do you mean?"

"We'll put out a press release today that the most eligible bachelor has been snatched up."

Holy shit.

"You fucking do that, and you better run," Liam growls.

Will just shrugs. "Got to keep up the pretense of successful CEO."

The elevator doors open, and stepping out, there's a group of men waiting – my guards and the ones for the penthouse.

Frowning, I look at Will again. "You're not going to mention my name, right?"

Liam stops walking and tugs on my hand. "Would it bother you?"

"Ah... It's not that it would bother me to be associated with you. I just don't want my name out there."

Will shakes his head. "It's bound to happen. We won't be able to keep it under wraps for long."

Liam leads me to the SUV, opening the back door for me while Will and Declan get into the front.

This is different.

Liam slides in next to me, unbuttoning his jacket.

Leaning close to him, I whisper, “I like you better in sweatpants.”

He chuckles, takes my hand, and settles my palm on his thigh. “I like you better naked.”

“Oversharing,” Will mutters as he starts the engine.

The other three guards pile into another SUV, following close behind us as Will drives us to Byrne Enterprises.

When Will stops right in front of the entrance, I figure I’m going to have to tell Denise the truth seeing as she has a front-row view of us all getting out of the SUV.

“Enjoy your day, Mr. Byrne,” I tease as I start to walk away, but Liam grabs hold of my hand and yanks me back.

I plow into his chest, then his mouth is hot on mine. The kiss is downright possessive, and when he finally lets me breathe, he smirks, “You too, baby.”

With flushed cheeks, I walk into the lobby. Denise is watching me with raised eyebrows.

“Morning, Mr. Byrne, Mr. Gillen,” she greets Liam and Will, and as soon as they head for the elevators, she widens her eyes even more at me. “Someone has a lot to tell me.” Her eyes snap to Declan. “Can we help you, sir?”

“He’s with me. Declan. Denise,” I quickly introduce them. “Where can I get an extra chair for him.”

“I won’t be sittin’.” He moves to the wall, where he’ll have a clear view of the lobby and outside.

“He’s with you?” Denise asks.

Taking out my phone, I place my bag in the bottom drawer. I sit down, then reply. “Yeah, he’s one of my guards.”

Denise just blinks at me.

“So, a lot has happened,” I start, which has her nodding. “A little over a week ago, Finn attacked me, but he got away. Liam arranged guards to protect me until Finn is found,” I give her the short version.

Denise gapes at me. “Holy crap on a cracker, woman. When exactly did this happen?”

“The Friday of the board meeting.”

“I’m so sorry,” she breathes. “Are you okay?”

I nod, my lips curving up. “Thanks to Liam.”

“So you and Mr.-Don’t-touch-me?”

I let out a chuckle, my cheeks flushing. “Kinda happened fast. My head’s still spinning.”

“I’d say so. I’m still trying to get Will to take me to dinner,” she mutters, then her eyes widen. “I forgot to ask him how he’s holding up. He lost a good friend.”

Right. Will had to cancel their date.

The pang of grief hits, and I let the wave move through me. “It was my dad. He had a heart attack the Saturday after the assault. The funeral was this past Monday.”

Denise's face fills with shock and compassion, then she pulls me in for a hug. "I'm so sorry, Kiara. Shit, you've had a crazy week." Letting go, she asks, "Is there anything I can do?"

I shake my head. "Liam's taken care of everything."

"So, you're a couple?" she asks.

"Yeah." The smile returns to my face.

I'm dating Liam Byrne.

The internal line rings, and taking the call, I say, "Kiara speaking."

"It's Gina from HR. Please come up."

"Okay." Ending the call, I frown at Denise as I get up. "I have to go to HR."

"Probably to sign a form for the days you were absent."

"Right." When I walk to the elevator, it opens, and Will comes out.

"Where are the two of you heading?"

Two?

I glance over my shoulder and see Declan right behind me. Turning my attention back to Will, I answer, "Up to HR."

Stepping into the small space, I glance at Declan again.

"You can relax, Kiara. Pretend I'm not here."

Giving Declan a smile, I ask, "How long have you worked for Liam?"

"Since I turned sixteen."

“How old are you now?”

“Thirty-one.” Declan looks at me when the doors slide open, reminding me, “Your father trained me, so I’m more than capable of protectin’ you.” He waits for me to exit, then follows after me.

When we walk into Gina’s office, she smiles at us. “Before I forget, Liam wants Declan to have an access card. No restrictions.”

“You know each other?” I ask, gesturing between her and Declan.

“Yes,” Gina answers. “I’m aware of Liam’s other business.”

Okay. Who else knows?

Pointing at a form, she says, “Just sign here for me. I’m sorry for your loss. Jimmy was your father?”

I nod, and picking up a pen, I check to make sure the form is for the days I took off before scribbling my signature on the line.

Gina gives me a sympathetic smile as she takes the signed document. “That will be all.”

Walking back toward the elevator, I ask Declan, “Will you be okay standing the entire day?”

He nods. “Just pretend I’m not there.”

I shake my head, having no intention of doing that. “Seeing as you’ll be glued to my side, I’d rather get to know you. Maybe we can even become friends.”

I really want to get along with my guards.

The corner of his mouth lifts as he waits for me to walk into the elevator. “I’d like that.”

Chapter 35

Liam

Not wanting to leave Kiara in Chicago, I brought her with me to LA for the meeting with the Priesthood.

The men were kind enough to postpone the meeting by a week, so I could deal with Jimmy's funeral.

With Declan and his team guarding Kiara at the hotel we'll spend the night, I head to the high-end bar where the Priesthood always meets.

Entering the private room reserved for us, the scent of leather and power fills the air. These meetings are primarily for us all to touch base.

The other heads are already seated around the table, and sitting down, I say, "Sorry, I'm late. I had to drop Kiara off at the hotel."

Luca lets out a chuckle. "So, it's true? You're settling down?"

Nodding, the corner of my mouth lifts. "Yes."

"You're the last person I expected to fall for a woman," Nikolas comments.

"Makes two of us."

Gabriel just offers me half a smile. Out of the entire group gathered here, he's the quiet one. I might not be a people person, but Gabriel takes it to a whole new level.

Although fighting alongside him, when we helped Nikolas take care of the Sicilians, has created a bond between us. He had my back, and I had his.

A server takes our orders, and while we wait for the drinks, Viktor asks, "Any word on Finn?"

I shake my head. "Not yet, but I'll find him soon." I can feel it in my bones.

"Need help?" Luca asks.

"No, I'm handling it." This is personal and something I have to do myself.

After the server brings our drinks, and the door shuts behind him, Luca clears his throat. He always takes lead of the meetings. "Anyone has a problem they want to raise?"

We all shake our heads, but then Viktor chuckles. "Rosalie's a wild one. Any tips on how to tame a woman?"

Gabriel makes a gruff sound in his throat. "We killed her grandfather and uncle. Doubt any tips will help."

"Are you keeping her?" Nikolas asks.

Viktor nods. "Can't exactly throw her out on her ass."

I don't miss the possessive look in his eyes.

Yeah, there's no way he'll ever let the girl go.

"Any actual business to discuss?" Gabriel asks, checking the time on his Rolex.

“I’m sending out shipments of weapons tomorrow to Seattle and Chicago. They’re bound for Canada,” Luca gestures at Nikolas. “Make sure the trucks reach the border.”

“Will do,” I murmur. Gabriel just nods.

Luca asks about each member’s business dealings, then leans back in his chair. “I’m going to Italy for six months. The Albanians are moving into my territory.” He nods at Viktor. “If you can’t get a hold of me, call Viktor.”

“You need help?” Nikolas asks.

“No, the Italian mafia will handle them.”

The conversation turns away from business, and we enjoy our drinks, socializing, and just relaxing for a while.

Viktor finishes the last of his vodka, then rises to his feet, signaling the meeting has come to an end. “I need to get back before Rosalie sets my house on fire.”

Chuckling, I get up, buttoning my jacket. “So, no meeting in three months?”

Luca nods. “We’ll meet once I’m back.”

We all leave the room, an urgency to get back to Kiara, making me walk faster.

My phone starts ringing, and pulling it out of my pocket, I answer, “Liam.”

“What is this I’m hearin’ of you and Finn?” My father snaps.

“None of your fucking business,” I growl into the device. I haven’t heard from the man in almost a year, and I definitely don’t have time for him now.

“You will leave him alone. Gemma’s not happy.”

I let out a dark chuckle. “You think I care what your wife thinks? Stay out of my business.”

“Don’t make me come back there,” he threatens.

Stopping by the hired vehicle, my body vibrates with anger. “Set foot on my turf, and you’ll get the same treatment as Finn. The *family* no longer belongs to you. You turned your fucking back on us for that woman, now live with the consequences.”

Finally, getting to tell the man how I feel, is liberating. He’s never been a father to me. A fucking nanny raised me. He was only interested in me for one thing, and that was grooming a soldier to take over the mafia.

“You’re turnin’ your back on me?” he barks, rage packing his voice pitch.

“You turned your back on me long ago. I’m just repaying the favor.” Done with this conversation, I mutter, “Chicago belongs to me. If I ever see you again, you’ll be looking down the barrel of my Glock.”

I end the call, and placing my hand on the car’s roof, I take deep breaths to calm the rage boiling inside of me.

It’s done. Now he knows exactly how I feel, and I get to put it behind me.

When I get back to the suite at the hotel, I find Kiara watching a cooking show while Declan and the other men are stuffing their faces with fried chicken.

“Enjoying yourselves?” I ask as I take off my jacket, my shoulders still tense from the conversation with Owen Byrne.

I refuse to think of him as my father any longer.

Kiara climbs to her feet, and coming to me, she wraps her arms around my waist, giving me a hug.

“Yes,” Waylon mumbles around a mouthful.

I press a kiss to Kiara’s hair. “Ready for bed?”

She nods, and as we walk to the bedroom, she says, “Night, guys.”

They all pause to say goodnight before digging into the food again.

Stepping into the bedroom, I shut the door. Kiara takes hold of my hand, and pulling me to the bed, she says, “Did the meeting go well?”

“Yes.”

She motions for me to sit down, which I do. When I give her a questioning look, she asks, “Why do you look upset?”

Not wanting to rehash the phone call, I shake my head. “Nothing.”

Nodding, she kneels between my thighs. “Let me help you blow off some steam.”

I let out a chuckle. “Yeah?”

She gives me a mischievous smile. “Take off your shirt.”

I like where this is going.

While I'm undoing the buttons, Kiara takes off my belt. Unbuttoning the suit pants, and pulling down the zipper, she tugs at the fabric. I lift my ass so she can drag the pants off me.

When she has me naked, she settles between my thighs again, and having her kneel before me, does something to my insides.

Jesus, she's so beautiful.

Her fingers wrap around my cock, and she begins to stroke me. I've given myself handjobs, but none of them felt half as good as having her hand on me.

"You going to get naked, baby?"

She shakes her head, then her lips part, and before I can process what she's doing, she sucks me into her mouth.

Jesus Christ.

I have to brace myself with a hand on the bed. Unable to control my body, my ass lifts, and I thrust deeper. "Fuck," I grind out between clenched teeth as Kiara goes to work on my cock, sucking the ever-loving fuck out of me.

Her eyes lift to mine, her lips stretched around my girth, and the sight has me losing all control. Grabbing hold of her hair with my other hand, I start to thrust harder. Her throat grips my cock on each stroke, and within seconds, I unravel.

Jesus.

There's no stopping myself as I come hard, my ass clenched, my cock pulsing. My vision goes black, every

muscle in my body straining as she sucks me dry.

Breathless and paralyzed, I slump back on the bed. Kiara licks my shaft, her tongue twirls around the sensitive head, then she stands up and leans over me. “Good?”

“Jesus,” I gasp for air. “Under...statement.”

A proud smile curves her swollen lips. I lift my arm, wrap my fingers around the back of her neck, and yank her down on top of me. My mouth takes hers, and tasting my orgasm on her tongue, I fear I’ll never regain control of myself when it comes to this woman.

She fucking owns me.

She’s all I need in this life.

She’s all I’ll ever need.

Rolling her over onto her back, my hands hungrily explore her body, the kiss downright dirty as I dominate her.

Just the way my woman loves it.

Chapter 36

Kiara

Setting down Denise's cup, I take a seat and sip of my own coffee.

"Sooo, how are things between you and Mr. Byrne?" she asks as she brings the cup to her lips.

Instantly, I grin like an idiot. "So good." I shake my head. "It's surreal. I swear the man is Prince Charming."

The internal line rings, and with a huge smile, I answer, "Kiara speaking."

"Hmm... how can you be downstairs, and I already miss you?"

My grin widens, my cheeks warming. Clearing my throat, I use the best professional tone I have, "Can I help you, Mr. Byrne?"

"Jesus, woman. I want you on your knees beneath my desk, sucking my fucking cock dry while I deal with business."

Good god.

I fan my face with my hand, slightly turning my back to Denise, who starts laughing at me.

“You’re making it really hard for me to work right now,” I whisper.

“Not the only thing that’s hard, baby. Can you send Denise up? Make it sound like she’s in trouble.”

Yasss! She’s getting her promotion.

“Of course. I’ll tell her.” I force my face into a worried expression, widening my eyes as I turn to Denise. “You better run. I’ve never heard him so angry before.”

“What?” she gapes. “At me? Why?”

Shoving at her chair, I keep my tone urgent. “Go, woman! Before he loses his shit.”

Denise is up and jogging toward the elevators, and the second she’s inside, I slump back in my chair, then grin at Declan, where he’s leaning against the wall. “She’s getting a promotion.”

“Hmm,” he mutters, his eyes not leaving the glass wall at the front entrance.

Party pooper.

I turn my gaze back to the elevator, already anxious for Denise to come back with the good news.

It takes a while before the doors slide open, and Denise comes out, waving an envelope as she runs toward me. I shoot out of my chair, and meeting her halfway, I grab her in a hug.

“You deserve it so much,” I say excitedly. “I’m so happy for you.”

She jumps up and down, lets out a happy shriek, then shoves the envelope in my face. “Look! Assistant to the CEO!”

Oh my God!”

Taking the envelope, I read her promotion letter, then we’re both shrieking.

“What happened?” Will suddenly asks.

Denise lets out another happy shriek, then she storms Will, practically jumping in his arms.

“She got promoted,” I tell him, then wanting to give them some time alone to celebrate, I return to the desk.

Will has to practically carry Denise to the kitchen where they’ll have privacy.

Today’s a good day.

I grin at Declan again, and this time he has a smirk on his face. “He’s gettin’ lucky tonight.”

“Dude, seriously?” I scowl at him. “That’s where your mind went?”

“That’s where my mind lives,” he mutters, returning his attention to scanning the sidewalk.

With residual excitement still bubbling in my chest, I get back to work, wanting to stay ahead of the load, especially now that I’ll be working reception alone for a while.

Ten minutes later, Will walks across the lobby’s floor, a broad smile on his face, his hair mused.

When Denise appears, fidgeting with her dress, I let out a burst of laughter.

“Scratch that, someone just got lucky,” Declan mutters.

“Shht!”

Luckily, Denise doesn't hear what Declan said. She sits down, trying to look all professional, but the moment her eyes lock with mine, a smile stretches over her face, and she slumps back in her chair. "Don't say a word."

"My lips are sealed." I wag my eyebrows at her.

She shoves playfully at my shoulder. "Stop."

"Uh-hmm." I get back to work, the atmosphere in the lobby so light and happy, nothing can ruin it.

When it's time for lunch, I get up and ask, "Want me to grab you something from the deli?"

Denise shakes her head. "I'm too happy to eat." Every couple of minutes, I catch her reading her promotion letter.

I grab my bag from the bottom drawer, and tucking my phone inside, I wait for Declan before leaving the building. Waylon and the other guards fall in behind us as we walk the short distance to the deli.

Suddenly Declan comments, "You're really happy for her."

I glance up at him. "Of course. She's my friend."

"You're good people, Kiara."

It's almost time to go home, and I'm counting down the minutes.

Damn, I've never been this excited for the day to end.

I just want to enjoy dinner with Liam, curl against his side, and watch boring news with him.

Denise starts packing up her things, then glances at me. “You’ll be okay alone down here?”

“Yes, besides, you’re just a call away.”

I take hold of my phone, and checking my messages, I see two.

I open the one from Mom.

Miss you. Are we getting together for lunch or dinner soon?

I quickly type out a response.

Saturday? We can go to the Navy Pier and grab something to eat there?

Mom responds immediately.

It’s a date xxx

The corner of my mouth lifts as I exit the chat and open the other text.

Your apartment.

Frowning, I wonder if the owner of the building sent the message. There’s a video. I press play, thinking it might be a presentation of some sorts of repairs that will be made.

It’s about time.

The footage begins, showing my living room, then moving to my bedroom. Whoever made the recording goes to my dresser, and opening a drawer, he takes my underwear out, throwing it on the bed.

What the hell?

'So, this is the dump you live in?'

I know that voice.

Ice spreads through my veins, my heart instantly thumping heavily in my chest.

The camera turns, then I'm hit with the sickening sight of Finn's erection. He strokes himself.

Bile churns in my stomach, the shock shuddering through me as my breaths come shallow and fast.

'Liam can't protect you from me. I'm going to fuck you so good.'

Flashes of that Friday night hit hard, mixing with the current shock, creating a chaotic mess of my emotions.

"What are you watching?" Denise asks, leaning closer to see.

I sit frozen in horror as Finn ejaculates over my underwear and bed, groaning, *'Kiara. Kiara. Kiara.'*

Denise grabs the device from my hands, switching it off. "God, that's disgusting!"

The punches.

The groping.

The bites.

His hand between my legs.

Her arm wraps around me. "Kiara?" My breaths keep coming faster, the trauma rushing back full force. "Shit, Declan, help!"

“What’s wrong?” I hear him ask, then everything becomes too much to bear, and a sob breaks free.

Darting up, I run for the emergency stairs, and rush up them until I’m breathless and sobbing.

“Kiara!” Declan shouts behind me, but I don’t stop until I burst into Liam’s office.

“Baby?” he shoots out of his chair and only has time to open his arms before I slam into him.

I’m safe.

His arms wrap around me, giving me the cocoon of safety I need so I can try to calm down. Clinging to Liam, I struggle to regain control and force the tears back.

“What the fuck happened?” he snaps angrily.

“I don’t know,” Declan answers.

“Shit... need... air,” Denise gasps from running after me. “Video from Finn. Disgusting shit,” she explains. “Masturbating.”

The panic and fear start to retreat, but I press as close to Liam as I can get. “Don’t let go,” I whisper, breathing through the emotions.

“Not a chance, baby.” He presses a kiss to my hair. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

I nod, my cheek rubbing against his vest and shirt.

I’m safe.

It was just a video.

Finn can’t get to me.

Chapter 37

Liam

Jesus fucking Christ.

I keep pressing kisses to her hair, then shoot Declan a look.
“Bring me the phone.”

He turns and rushes out of the office.

“Should I bring her something to drink?” Denise asks, concern etched over her face.

I shake my head. “You can go. Shut the door.”

When we’re alone, I lean down, and taking hold of Kiara’s chin, I lift her face. “You’re safe, baby.”

She nods, lost sobs escaping her every couple of seconds.

My fucking heart.

I wrap her against my chest again. “What can I do?”

“Just hold me,” she whispers.

I do what she wants until she calms down and pulls back.
“I’m sorry. It just brought everything back.”

He fucking triggered her trauma. Rage detonates in my chest, my need to end the fucker becoming a living force of its own.

“Don’t apologize.” Lifting my hands to her face, I wipe her tears away.

Declan comes rushing back into the office, holding the phone out. I grab it from his hand, and definitely not wanting to see the fucker jerking off, I throw the fucking thing as hard as possible. The device shatters against the wall, not offering me any satisfaction.

I’m going to crush Finn like the fucking bug he is.

“We’re leaving,” I tell Declan.

While he calls to notify the other men, I wrap my arm around Kiara. Pulling her to my side, I say, “Let’s go home, baby.”

“I want to go to my apartment,” she says. She gives me a pleading look. “My belongings. I want them out of there.”

What the fuck could she possibly want from that place?

“Another day.”

She shakes her head, wild determinations starting to burn in her eyes. “No. I want my belongings. They’re important.”

“I understand, but not tonight, Kiara,” I say with finality. “I’m taking you home.”

Her chin trembles. “It’s all my memories of my dad, Liam.”

Jesus Christ.

Letting out an unhappy breath, I look at Declan, who only shrugs at me. The fucker is no help.

Unable to say no to Kiara when she's in such a state, I give in. "Okay. But I'm only giving you ten minutes in there."

"Okay."

"Ten minutes, Kiara."

She nods frantically. "Okay. I only need five. I just want a box, then we never have to go back," she whimpers, the trauma from the video threatening to drag her under.

If the box will make her feel better, then we'll go get it.

Leaving Byrne Enterprises, I'm already regretting agreeing to Kiara's request. This is not the time to go to her apartment. She needs to be at home where I can do damage control on the trauma Finn subjected her to.

When I park the SUV in front of the apartment building, Declan and his team stop behind us. I don't give a rat's ass that we're double-parked.

"Ten minutes," I remind Kiara. She's still white as a ghost but seems to have her emotions under control.

Climbing out of the vehicle, I take her hand while constantly scanning the area for threats.

"Ezra, Ryan, stand guard by the building's entrance," I order. "Declan, you and Waylon are with us."

I tighten my hold on Kiara's hand. "Let's get your box, baby."

When we walk down the hallway, I instantly notice the door to Kiara's apartment standing wide open. I'm about to yell retreat when she pulls free from me, running into the fucking apartment.

“Kiara!” I shout, darting after her while pulling my Glock from behind my back.

I chase her to the bedroom, and before I can grab hold of her, she drops to her knees, hauling a shoebox from beneath the bed. She cradles the fucking thing to her chest like it’s a baby.

Then I notice the underwear scattered over the bed, and...
is that cum?

My eyes snap up to the wall.

You will be mine.

Jesus.

I grab Kiara’s arm, yanking her to me, but I’m too late as she glances at the bed and the wall. She makes a strangled sound, and I’m about to wrap my arms around her when Declan shouts, “Boss, we gotta move!”

Tightening my hold on Kiara’s arm, I shove her out of the bedroom. When we burst into the hallway, I start to run, tightening my grip on her. I hold my gun raised as we take the stairs down.

The moment we reach the lobby, Ezra motions for us to move faster. “There was a drive-by. They’re watching the building.”

Jesus H. Christ.

I can fucking guess what the video was about, and now more than ever, I regret not watching it. I would’ve fucking known not to come here.

“Fuck!” I snap angrily as I drag Kiara out of the building.

It was a trap, and I fucking walked right into it.

Chapter 38

Kiara

Liam shoves me into the passenger seat, straps on the seat belt, then slams the door shut. With wide eyes, I watch as he runs around the front of the car.

He slides behind the steering wheel, then tires squeal as we race away from my apartment building. I quickly shove the box down by my feet. It contains all my memories of Dad. I couldn't just leave it in the apartment.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Declan and the other guards follow close behind us in their SUV. Waylon's checking the clip of his gun.

"What's going on?" I ask, confusion lacing my words.

Something slams into the car, and I let out a startled shriek.

"It was a fucking trap," Liam bites out between clenched teeth. "I fucking should've known. Fuck!" He slams a hand against the steering wheel.

I've never seen him so angry and cringe into the seat.

I put his life in danger.

The realization rips through the trauma and grief that sent me into a spiral, just wanting to get the box. I only left it

behind because I thought I was staying at Liam's place for a couple of days.

Shit, this is my fault.

Bullets spray the side of the SUV. I scream, then Liam's hand is on the back of my head, and I'm shoved forward, until my face presses against my knees.

"Stay down, **baby,**" he orders, all the gentleness gone from his voice and replaced with absolute brutality.

What have I done?

More bullets hit the car, and the windows shatter, raining glass down on my back. "Liam," I cry, turning my face so I can see if he's okay.

He shoves his arm out the window, then gunshots vibrate through the SUV as he fires shots at our attackers.

Dear God. It sounds like I'm in a war zone.

"Fuckers," Liam growls, then yanking the steering wheel hard to the right, we skid as he takes the corner like a freaking experienced racecar driver.

Holy shit.

This is really happening.

"Almost there," he mutters. "Come on, fuckers, keep following us."

My eyes go to his face, and seeing the brutal smile curving his mouth, my lips part.

This isn't the Liam I've fallen in love with.

This man is the head of the mafia.

The realization finally sinks in.

This is what Dad was protecting me from.

Liam takes another sharp corner, his body not even shifting in the seat, while I'm thrown against the door.

"Brace yourself," Liam growls.

Something hits the SUV, the sound of metal bending and scraping. I grab hold of the dashboard as our vehicle shoots forward, then we're spinning in a full circle.

Liam's arm is out the window, firing one shot after the other, then we're speeding again.

He shoves his gun at me. "There are clips in the compartment. Put in a new one."

I take the weapon from him, not knowing what to do. Pulling a full clip from the compartment in front of me, I ask, "What do I do?"

Liam reaches over, presses something on the gun, the empty clip popping out. "Shove the other one in," he orders.

I do as he says, then the gun is ripped from my hand.

Shit.

In absolute shock, I stare at the empty clip on my lap.

"Get ready," he shouts, then the SUV swerves sharply, and we come to a sudden stop.

"Get out and fucking run toward the exit at the back," Liam orders sharply as he throws his door open. "Get out of here, Kiara!"

With trembling hands, I shove my own door open and almost fall out of the SUV.

My eyes dart around the warehouse, and I watch as men run to help Liam. Three black sedans come to a stop right by the entrance.

Waylon grabs my arm, then I'm dragged in the opposite direction of the fight.

Heavy gunfire echoes through the warehouse. Waylon grabs hold of my head, and I'm forced to run with it pressed to his chest as he covers me.

"Go! Go! Go!" Declan shouts, then his arms sweep me from my feet.

Waylon stops running with us, and from over Declan's shoulder, I watch as Waylon draws his gun, shouting, "Get her out of here. I'll keep them back."

God Almighty.

My eyes flit over the men by the SUVs, searching for Liam. I can't find him, which makes raw panic and fear explode in my chest.

"Liam!" I scream. "Stop, Declan!"

"Not a chance, princess," he growls.

I begin to struggle and manage to free my body from his arms. I fall to the ground, shoot up to my feet, then dart around Declan. I run back toward the fight, screaming, "Liam!" Frantically, I search for him while men fire at each other and bodies drop to the ground.

Death and destruction bleed before me like something from a horror movie.

Declan grabs hold of me, my body goes airborne again, and I'm thrown over his shoulder. I try to keep my eyes on the war by the front entrance, but it disappears as Declan darts out the exit.

I'm tossed backward, my feet hitting the ground hard, then I'm running as Declan pulls me into a maze of scrap metal.

He leads me deeper into the maze, then shoves me to the ground behind a large stack of crushed cars. "Stay down," he breathes.

Holding his gun ready for action, he stands in front of me, peeking around the metal.

Gravel digs into my palms, my breaths burning up my throat.

Liam.

My eyes fall shut, and all I see are images of bodies and blood. All I hear is gunfire.

Liam.

Intense guilt rips my heart clean from my chest.

It's my fault.

I didn't know it would be a trap. I just wanted the box of memories.

Still, it's my fault, so many men are dying tonight.

Chapter 39

Liam

Every body that drops next to me takes a swing at my heart.

It's a fucking blood bath, but we fight back, killing the twelve Sicilians who came after us.

That's twelve fewer fuckers to worry about.

Kiara.

When Collin takes out the last man, my arm slowly lowers to my side, extreme exhaustion warring with the adrenaline flooding my veins.

My eyes scan over the bodies of my enemies, then I look around me at my fallen men.

Aaron. Sebastian. Nolan. Silas. Gavin.

My brothers.

The intense loss shudders through my body like a tidal wave.

"You're bleeding," Collin says. He takes hold of my arm, but I can't tear my eyes away from my fallen men. "Just a flesh wound." When I don't respond, he asks, "Boss?"

I snap out of the grief and lock eyes with each of the men who survived the attack. "Take care of our own and burn the fucking Sicilians," I order.

Turning my eyes to Collin, I lift my hand to the back of his neck. The familiar feeling of disgust ripples over my skin, but he's only eighteen and already one of my best. Pulling the boy closer, I say, "You did good."

I let go of him and start walking toward Waylon. "Where's Kiara?"

He nods toward the exit, then follows me out of the warehouse. "Declan?" I shout.

"Is it clear?" he calls from the junkyard's direction.

"Yes. Come out."

I expect to see Declan first, but Kiara comes flying from between a stack of cars. "Liam!" She slams into me, then she rambles, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

I wrap one arm around her shoulders, the image of my fallen men's lifeless faces flashing through my mind.

She's safe.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers.

She's fucking safe.

"Let's go home," I murmur, the exhaustion setting in fast as the adrenaline fades away.

We all head back to the SUVs, Collin and the other men, carrying the dead Sicilians out of the warehouse and loading them into the sedans.

Stopping by the passenger door, I wait for Kiara to climb in, then I slam it shut.

This is my fucking fault. Kiara didn't know better because I haven't taught her a single fucking thing about the mafia.

That's changing tonight.

I walk around the SUV and slide behind the steering wheel. Starting the engine, I glance at the box by Kiara's feet.

I put the vehicle in reverse and steer us out of the warehouse. The drive back to the penthouse is filled with crushing silence, but I can't bring myself to talk yet.

The loss is too fresh, and I just need some time to process it.

I can feel the worry coming in waves from Kiara, but I don't have it in me to comfort her right now.

Aaron. Sebastian. Nolan. Silas. Gavin.

An incoming call grabs my attention, and seeing Will's name on the screen, I press the button on the steering wheel. "You need to go to the scrap metal warehouse."

"I'm already here. What the fuck happened?" he asks, disbelief coating his words.

"Finn set a trap at Kiara's apartment. I went to the warehouse for backup."

"Are you okay? Collin said you took a bullet."

Kiara's eyes snap to me. "What?"

"Not now," I mutter to her, then tell Will, "As soon as everything is taken care of at the warehouse, I need you to take care of the lease on that fucking apartment and clear it out."

"Okay."

“Make sure our men’s families receive their payments.”

“Will do.” Will sucks in a breath of air. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

I end the call and steer the vehicle into the basement.

“You were shot?” Kiara asks, her voice filled with caution.

“It’s nothing,” I mutter as I shove the door open and get out. I slam it shut, and waiting for Kiara, I take hold of her hand and walk to the elevator, the box beneath her arm.

As soon as we step into the penthouse, I let go of her and stalk to the cabinet on the side of the living room. I pour myself a whiskey and down the liquid.

Jesus.

My men.

Kiara could’ve been killed.

Fuck.

Bracing my hands on the cabinet, I lower my head, working through the loss I suffered tonight.

Shoving the grief into the darkest corner of my heart, I lift my head, and pushing away from the cabinet, I turn to face Kiara.

Her features are drawn tight with worry, her arms wrapped around her waist. “Can I look at your arm? Please.”

I glance down at the bloodstain, then nod.

She gets the first aid kit, then points to the couch. “Will you come sit down?”

I unbutton the vest, and pulling it off, I drop it on the floor before taking a seat. I take off the shirt as well, then stare out the windows at the city lights.

I could've lost her.

Kiara sits down next to me, takes out an antiseptic wipe, and gently cleans the flesh wound. "Tell me if it hurts," she whispers.

I glance down at her, taking in her pale face. "Rule number one; never trust anyone."

She nods.

"Everything can be a trap. You have to be on guard at all times."

"Okay."

"You never fucking run toward the gunfire. You get your ass as far away from it as possible."

She lifts her head, her eyes locking with mine. "You can't expect me to leave you behind?"

"I lost five men tonight, and it fucking hurts, Kiara. If I had lost you?" I shake my head. "You fucking listen to Declan and run. I can't do my job and worry about you."

I can see she disagrees, but at least she nods.

"Right now, we're fighting the Sicilians. Finn's gathered the remaining men after we wiped out most in Toronto a couple of months back."

She keeps cleaning the wound as she listens to me giving her a crash course in all things mafia.

“I’m sorry about your men,” she whispers. She swallows hard, and meeting my eyes, continues, “I know it’s no excuse for the loss you’ve suffered, but I didn’t know that would happen.”

“Of course, baby. This is all on me.” I nod at the box. “Show me what’s in the box.”

“Just a minute.” She wraps a bandage around my bicep, then gets up and gets the box from where she left it in the foyer. She comes to sit down again and takes the lid off.

I look inside, seeing a deflated balloon, a photo of a much younger Jimmy laughing with Kiara. She can’t be much older than four in the picture, chocolate ice cream covering her mouth. There’s a little crown, two bottle caps, and various other things.

“It’s all my memories. Every time I got to see Dad.”

To me, it’s nothing but random stuff, but to her, it’s every moment she spent with Jimmy. It’s her entire past.

Sorrow hangs heavy over our heads.

I lean back against the couch, letting out a sigh. “Tell me the story behind the deflated balloon.”

Tell me something happy.

“It was my birthday. I was five. Dad blew this one up.” Her lips curve up in a sad smile. “He almost hacked up a lung because he was still smoking back then.” She looks at me. “He never missed a birthday.”

She sets the box down on the coffee table, then turns to face me. “I’m so sorry about your men.”

I shake my head. "It's the life we live."

"The reason Dad didn't want me near the mafia."

I nod, now understanding why Jimmy kept her hidden.

"But you protected me."

I nod. "And Chicago. Finn wants to take over."

She scrunches her nose in disgust.

But he won't.

I'll never let him get his hands on my city and woman.

Lifting my arm, I wrap it around Kiara's shoulders and pull her against my side. I press a kiss to her hair. "How are you holding up with everything that happened?"

She wraps her arm around my waist, pressing closer to my body. "My head is spinning."

I'd think so. Today's been one hell of a fucking day.

The video alone traumatized her, never mind the fucking gunfight. I tug her closer, so she straddles me, then let her rest against my chest.

Rubbing my hand up and down her back, I keep pressing kisses on her hair, temple, and cheek. "As soon as we're done with all this shit, I'm taking you away for a weekend."

She wraps her arms around my neck and presses her face against me. "I just want to hide in your arms."

"Hide all you want, baby," I murmur. Closing my eyes, I hold her as tight as I can.

Time slips away as we comfort each other, only our whispers disturbing the silence.

Chapter 40

Liam

After we've showered, Kiara climbs into bed.

I sit down on the side, calling Will.

"Warehouse is clean, and we barbequed the Sicilians," he answers.

"Good. Our men?"

"Taken to the morgue. The families will be notified, and I'll make the payments tomorrow."

Rubbing tiredly over my forehead, I say, "I want to know when the funerals are."

"I'll find out."

"Thanks for everything."

"That's what I'm here for."

Ending the call, I set the device down on the bedside table. I pick up my Glock, and turning so Kiara can see, I say, "This is how you change a clip." I go through the procedure, then hand the gun to her. "You do it."

She scoots closer and takes the weapon. I watch as she struggles through her first time, then I order, "Again."

I have her take out the clip and shove it back in until I'm sure she has the hang of it. Wrapping my hands around hers, I continue with the lesson, "This is the safety. If it's on, you can't fire the gun. Flick this off, and you're good to go."

"Okay." Her eyes meet mine. "Will you take me for shooting lessons?"

I nod. "We'll start this Saturday."

"I have a lunch date with my mom."

"What time?"

"We're meeting at eleven am."

"We'll go to the shooting range at eight."

A smile spreads over her face, but then she asks, "Are you angry with me?"

Tucking the Glock under the pillow, I shake my head. "No, it was just a huge loss." I lift my hand to her cheek, brushing my fingers over her soft skin. "Having you in the line of fire took ten years of my life."

Kiara shifts closer and wraps her arms around my neck. She presses a kiss to my temple. "I've got you."

The corner of my mouth lifts. "Thanks, baby."

Lying down with Kiara in my arms, I bury my face in her hair and rub a hand up and down her back.

Slowly her scent drifts through the gunpowder still stuck in my lungs. Her touch soothes the sorrow.

Turning my face to hers, my lips nip at hers as I move my hand down between us. I push beneath the fabric of her

leggings and cover her pussy.

Letting out a satisfied moan, I nudge her onto her back as I start to massage her clit, my tongue thrusting into her mouth.

I need her more than ever tonight.

I part her and rub a finger over her clit, then push inside her heat. “Always so wet for me,” I growl before my teeth tug at her bottom lip.

“Just for you,” she murmurs, desire coating her words.

Kiara brings her hands to the sides of my neck, and as I let the kiss spiral out of control, her palms roam down my chest and abs.

Freeing her mouth, I thrust my finger deeper, trailing biting kisses down the column of her throat before pulling my hand out of her leggings and saying, “Clothes off.”

I grab her pants and yank them down her legs while she takes off her shirt. The second Kiara’s naked, my teeth feast on her nipples, my tongue lashing at them until they’re pebbled. Her moans tell me how much she loves my mouth on her.

There’s only this woman and what she does to me.

Moving down her body, I grab hold of her thighs and spread her wide open for me. My eyes drink in the sight of her bare and ready for my cock. I bury my face between her legs, lapping at her arousal, feasting on her unique taste.

Kiara’s hips lift off the mattress, and she rubs herself harder against my mouth as moans and gasps spill over her lips.

“Liam,” she whimpers. “God, Liam!”

I devour her until her thighs clench against my shoulders, and her body convulses as if I'm electrocuting her.

Not having the patience to step out of my sweatpants, I shove the fabric down, and freeing my cock, I position myself at her opening. Only then do I lock eyes with her again. Gripping her hip tightly with my other hand, I thrust hard inside her, burying myself to the hilt.

The pleasure is instant, zipping down my spine, making me thrust harder, grinding my pelvis against hers.

Jesus. Incredible.

"Oh, God. Liam," Kiara gasps. "So good."

My lips curve up, and then I pull out to the last inch before slamming back inside her, loving how her heat wraps around me.

With my gaze still locked with hers, I groan, "So fucking beautiful." I take a deep breath, then move, fucking her fast and hard.

I pour my heartache into her and find comfort in her body.

The sounds of our skin slapping and how wet she is for me fill the air, and it makes me drive harder into her.

"Liam," she moans, ecstasy washing over her features. "Yes. God, yes."

I watch goosebumps spread over Kiara's breasts and stomach, hardening her nipples even more.

Mine.

My thrusts become forceful, my need to own her overwhelming me.

My need to make her mine in every way, driving me to move harder and faster.

It's moments like this one that make living and dying worth it.

Chapter 41

Kiara

When the needy whimper slips over my lips, Liam's eyes light up with satisfaction.

Bracing a forearm beside my head, his mouth nips at mine while he keeps powering into me as if he'll die if he has to slow down for a second.

The way he owns me makes me feel delirious, causing tingles of absolute pleasure to rush through my body.

There's only Liam.

I drag my nails down his back, shove my hands beneath his sweatpants and dig my fingers into his asscheeks, feeling the power in his muscles as he slams into me.

Our eyes remain locked, and the possessiveness shining from him makes me feel protected and loved.

"Liam," I whisper breathlessly, my abdomen tightening with the impending orgasm. "I love you."

His mouth slams down on mine, and devouring the words I said, he powers into me until I explode in a quivering mess beneath him.

"Jesus," he groans. "You clamp so fucking hard around me when you come."

As the orgasm tears through me, I watch as Liam falls apart. Jerking inside me, his features tense, his eyes burning into mine.

Slumping down, his chest presses against mine. We gasp, breathing the same air.

Pleasure keeps spasming through me, making him groan. “Love the way you come, baby. As if I’m electrocuting you.” He presses a tender kiss to my mouth. “I fucking love everything about you.”

His arms wrap around me, squashing me to him while he remains buried inside me. I relish in the feel of his body covering mine, the way he’s holding me, telling me he’ll never let go.

I’m his forever.

After a long moment of us relishing in the intimacy we shared, Liam lifts his head, his eyes finding mine again. “All mine.”

“All yours,” I whisper.

I’ll never again put you in the position you were in today. I need to learn how to protect myself and Liam. I have to become the woman the head of the mafia needs.

A satisfied smirk curves his lips, and he presses a possessive kiss to my lips before pulling out of me.

I push myself up and scoot off the bed. Walking to the bathroom, I quickly take care of business.

When I come out, I see Liam standing in front of the windows, staring out over the city. I walk to him and squeeze

into the gap between his body and the window.

Liam chuckles as I lean back against his chest, his arms wrapping around my front. Resting my head against his shoulder, I let out a satisfied sigh.

“You asked why I live in a penthouse when I don’t like heights.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s so I can keep watch over my city.” I feel his chest expand as he takes a deep breath. “So I can remind myself what I’m fighting for. What I have to protect.”

“After you teach me how to shoot a gun, I can help you protect your first love,” I murmur.

“No, baby. Chicago is in my blood, but you’re my first love. My only love.” He presses a kiss to the side of my neck, then flattens a hand over my stomach. “Are you going to give me children?”

“God-willing, one day,” I chuckle softly, not wanting to disturb the intimate feeling between us.

Today was bitter-sweet. I need this moment.

His mouth brushes over my shoulder. “Marry me, Kiara.”

Shock flutters through me. Instantly, I smile, my heart bursting at the seams. “Is that a question or an order?”

Liam turns me to face him, his eyes filled with all the love he feels for me. Standing naked, not even clothes between us, he asks, “Will you marry me, Kiara?”

I stare into the loving gaze of the man who changed my entire world in such a short space of time.

He's proven himself to me. Over and over. I know without a doubt, I won't find a better man than him.

And love him.

God, I love him so much.

We've been to hell and back, and now I want my happily ever after with him.

"Yes, Liam."

His eyes lower to my mouth. "Say it again."

"Yes, Liam. I'll marry you."

The corner of his mouth lifts with a satisfied smirk, then without a word, he walks into the walk-in closet. I move closer, watching as he keys in a code into a build-in safe. It opens with a click, and he reaches inside.

When he comes back to me, I glance down at the box in his hand.

"This was my mother's and my grandmother's before that." He opens it, taking out a golden band with an enormous diamond set in the bed of emeralds. "Not sure it will fit." Then he chuckles. "As you can see, I didn't quite plan this."

My tongue darts out, wetting my lips as nervous energy spins in my stomach.

"Give me your hand, baby."

I lift my left hand, and when Liam slips the ring onto my finger, emotion wells in my chest. It almost fits. It probably just needs to be adjusted one size smaller.

Liam lifts an eyebrow. “See, even the ring agrees you’re meant for me.”

Wrapping an arm around my waist, he tugs me against his body. “Now I get to fuck my fiancée for the first time.”

I let out a chuckle. “I like the sound of that, sir.”

His eyes flare with desire, then he pushes me back against the window. Gripping hold of my butt, he lifts me, and I quickly wrap my legs around him.

Knowing it will drive him wild, I say, “Please fuck me, sir.”

“Jesus, Kiara,” he growls right before he thrusts up, filling me with every inch of him. His eyes lock on mine, dominance making them shine like the diamond on my finger.

Holding my butt with one hand, he places his other one against the window, then starts to move hard and fast. My body shifts against the window with each thrust.

With our foreheads pressed together, I feel his breaths on my lips.

Liam sets my body on fire, demanding I only focus on him.

“Tell me again,” he murmurs. “Tell me how much you love me.”

“With all my heart,” I gasp. “All my soul.” My arms tighten around his neck as the orgasm starts to build in me. “With all of my body.” I let out a cry as intense pleasure floods me. “I love you.”

Chapter 42

Liam

I've thrown Devon and Denise into the deep end. They have to run Byrne Enterprises, so I can settle this shit with Finn once and for all and check on all the warehouses.

I have every available man scouring the city for any sign of Finn and the remaining Sicilians.

Every last one of them will die.

Standing in the warehouse where we keep our weapons, Will and I are checking to make sure we have enough.

"We've got a solid stash," Will mutters. "Two machine guns per man. A fuck ton of incendiary grenades. There's enough."

He's right, but I check again. Picking up random weapons, I inspect them to make sure everything works just fine.

When I'm done, Will gives me a bored look. "Are you done now?"

"We can't afford anything to go wrong," I mutter. "As soon as we find out where the fucker is hiding, we need to attack."

"I'm well aware of that."

I glare at Will.

Rolling his fucking eyes, he lets out a sigh. “Fine, you want to check them again?”

I shake my head. “Have you heard when the funerals are being held?”

“Monday. You won’t be able to stay the full service.”

“I just want to make an appearance at each one. They deserve it.”

I suck in a deep breath of air as the loss rolls over my shoulders. I glance at the men in the warehouse. Each one of them has a family. Someone who will miss them. Still, their loyalty belongs to me.

As if Will can read my thoughts, he steps forward to lock eyes with me. “They know you care, Liam. They’re here because they chose to follow you.”

I nod.

Will tilts his head. “So Collin told me you hugged him.”

I let out a silent chuckle. “Just happened in the moment. I was glad the kid survived.”

“But you won’t fucking hug me,” he says, all disgruntled.

My eyebrows fly up. “You want a fucking hug?”

“Oh no. Don’t want you to feel uncom—”

I grab hold of his shoulder and yank him to me. My body tenses, and the familiar feelings hit, but I ignore them, hugging my best friend.

Just for a second or two.

Pulling away, I mutter, “Happy now.”

The fucker pretends to wipe a tear away. “Happiest moment of my life. I’ll never forget it.”

“Fuck off.”

We start to laugh, and it eases some of the tension in my chest.

“Let’s go.”

I walk with Will toward his SUV, and climbing in, he steers us toward the next warehouse.

We spend the entire day making sure everything is in order, and I take a moment to speak with each of my men. I want them to know they’re not just soldiers but family.

By the time I get home, it’s almost eleven pm. I walk into the penthouse only to find Kiara and Declan playing poker.

“I’m home,” I say.

Declan doesn’t look up from the shitty cards in his hand. “Heard you come in.”

“Just a second.” Kiara narrows her eyes on her cards, then pushes all her chips into the middle of the coffee table.

“You’re bluffin’,” Declan grumbles. He stares at her, trying to intimidate her into revealing her hand, but my woman keeps her poker face expressionless.

I walk around the back of the couch, and seeing her hand, I lift an eyebrow.

“Fuck, I’m out.” Declan throws his hand on the table.

Kiara jumps up and does a happy dance, shaking her sexy ass. “Sucker.” She drops her cards on the table, her hand even

shittier than Declan's.

He immediately scowls at me. "You looked impressed!"

"No, I was surprised that you both can't play poker to save your lives."

Kiara comes around the couch, and wrapping her arms around my waist, she tilts her head back. "I missed you at the office. How was your day?"

I press a kiss to her lips. "Busy, but we got a lot done."

Declan nods at me, then walks to the elevator. Once the doors shut behind him, I glance down at Kiara again.

"I made dinner. Can I warm it up for you?" she asks.

Engulfing her in my arms, I shake my head. "I just want to hold you for a couple of minutes."

She rests her cheek against my chest, then asks, "Are we still going shooting tomorrow morning?"

"Definitely. The sooner you can handle a gun, the sooner I'll find rest for my soul."

I let her go, and as she walks to the kitchen, I say, "I'm going to shower."

"Okay. What are you going to drink with your food?"

I head toward the stairs. "Just a bottle of water, baby."

Rushing through the shower because I seriously don't have energy tonight, I quickly dry off and pull on a pair of sweatpants.

When I come down the stairs, Kiara grins at me. "Do you know gray sweatpants on a man is porn for a woman?"

“Is that so?” I chuckle as I take a seat on the couch.

Kiara hands me the plate of spaghetti bolognese she made and sets the bottle of water on the coffee table.

“Yep, especially if the guy has those fuck-me-muscles you have.”

I lift an eyebrow at her. “Fuck-me-muscles?”

“The V by your hips. It’s like an arrow straight to your cock.”

I can’t keep the grin in any longer. “It’s cute when you say fuck and cock.”

She packs up the cards and chips, then pins me with one hell of a seductive look. “I want you to fuck me so hard with your cock that I won’t be able to walk a straight line tomorrow.”

No longer cute. Jesus.

I lean forward to set the plate on the coffee table, but Kiara wags a finger at me. “Oh no, first have your dinner before you can have dessert.”

I give an incredulous look. “Are you trying to kill me, woman?”

She lets out a burst of laughter. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“Let me hear it.”

“For every bite you take, I’ll take off a piece of clothing.”

“Deal.” I shovel a bite into my mouth.

Kiara bends right over and takes a sock off.

The little game continues until she's standing in her bra and panties, and I've had enough.

Setting the plate down, I get up. "You wet for me, baby?"

"Soaked," she purrs.

I slip my hand between her thighs, and feeling the evidence of her arousal, I smirk. "Good. Now bend over the couch and hold on tight."

Chapter 43

Kiara

Standing in a cubicle at the shooting range, Liam's chest presses to my back, his arms coming around to my front and holding my hands.

"Lock your elbows in," he murmurs near my ear, and of course, my mind goes straight to the gutter instead of focusing on the task at hand.

"When you pull the trigger, the recoil's going to hit and push you back. Don't get a fright."

With my man at my back, I train the barrel on the target.

"Squeeze the trigger." His breath fans over my ear, sending goosebumps scattering over my skin.

So hard to focus right now.

I pull the trigger, and a force has me slamming into Liam. His hands grip my hips to help me steady myself.

"You make it look so easy," I grumble. "I didn't even hit the target."

"Don't worry about the target. First, get used to the power of the gun. You have to think of it as an extension of your arm." His hold on my hips tightens. "Again."

This time, I brace myself, and pulling the trigger, I don't bump into Liam but manage to hold my ground.

"Again."

I keep firing until my hands are tingling from the vibration of each shot.

"Reload the clip," Liam orders.

I let the empty one slide out and shove a new clip in. When I take aim, Liam's hand trails down my butt, slipping between my legs. He starts to stroke the skin where my shorts end.

"I'm trying to concentrate," I mutter.

"Fire the gun, baby."

I pull the trigger as he starts rubbing me. "I'm going to kill someone by accident if you keep doing that."

"You won't. Just keep firing." His voice is low and tempting as hell.

I line up the barrel again, then Liam unbuttons my shorts and shoves his hand down the front.

Oh, God. I'm really going to kill someone.

His fingers massage the hell out of me. "Shoot, Kiara."

I pull the trigger as he pushes a finger inside me.

"People are going to see," I moan.

"I don't give a shit. Just focus on shooting."

"While you're fingering me?" *Oh, God.* "Are you insane?"

"If I want you coming on my hand, you'll fucking come on my hand." He pinches my clit, making me almost cry out.

“Don’t you dare cry out. Pull the fucking trigger.”

I fire at the target, my breaths speeding up as he works my clit into a frenzy of pleasure. “Liam,” I whimper.

He rubs his cock against my lower back. “Feel how fucking hard you make me. Seeing you handle my gun is like watching you suck my cock. A fucking turn-on. Shoot, baby.”

I fire another shot, then my body curls forward as I come apart on his fingers.

When the last pleasure spasms through me, reality returns full force. I glance around to check if anyone saw and let out a relieved sigh when I don’t find some person gawking at us.

Liam pulls his hand out of my shorts, and bringing his finger to my mouth, he orders, “Open.” My lips part, and he pushes his finger inside. “Suck, baby.”

Sweet Jesus.

My tongue swirls around his finger as I taste my arousal.

“So fucking good,” his voice rumbles in my ear. Pulling his finger out, he orders, “Fire the gun.”

After my shooting slash orgasming lesson, I head to Navy Pier to meet Mom.

We said we’d meet by the Ferris wheel, so I stop nearby and glance up at Declan. We’ve been avoiding the subject of what happened at the warehouse, and it’s really starting to bother me.

“Thank you for keeping me safe.”

Declan glances down at me, then nods. He takes a deep breath, his eyes scanning over all the people. “You can’t fight me when I’m tryin’ to keep you alive. You get that, right?”

I nod. “But you can’t blame me for not wanting to leave Liam.”

“I get that.”

“So, what do we do when that happens again?”

Declan shakes his head. “You’re my priority, Kiara. I’ll fuckin’ throw you over my shoulder again.”

“You’re like an overprotective brother. Never had one of those.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Pain in the ass, little sister. Always wanted one.”

We’re both smiling like idiots when Mom walks toward us with Rowan, Ian, Caleb, and Hudson, practically surrounding her.

Rowan sticks to Mom’s side, where the others fall back.

“Hey, sweetie,” Mom smiles.

We hug each other, and I take a deep breath of her familiar scent. “Hi, Mom.”

When we pull back, she looks at my shorts. “It’s a bit chilly today. Aren’t you cold?”

“You’re cold?” Rowan asks her, already starting to remove his jacket. Before Mom can answer, he places it over her shoulders.

She gives him a grateful look. "Such a caring boy." Turning her attention back to me, she says, "Let's get some coffee."

After we have our beverages, we find a spot where we can stare at the lake. "How are things? Are you still moving in with Liam?"

Nodding, I twirl the ring on my finger. "I have something to tell you."

"Oh no, did something happen?"

I'm so not telling her about the video and attack. "I love Liam, Mom."

Her eyebrows dart up. "But you haven't even known the man for that long."

I shrug. "I love him." Letting out a slow breath, I continue, "He's everything I ever wanted and more. He makes me unbelievably happy."

Mom tilts her head, her eyes searching for the truth in my words. "That's all I want, sweetie. If you're happy, I'm happy."

A smile stretches over my face. "Sooo." Lifting my hand, I let her see the ring. "He proposed, and I said yes."

"Sweet Jesus," she gasps, covering her mouth with a hand. With wide eyes, she stares at the diamond on my finger, then she looks at me. "Are you sure this is what you want? Are you ready for such a big commitment?"

"I am," I reply with certainty. "I want to spend the rest of my life with Liam."

“But, sweetie. It’s all happening so quick.”

I understand why Mom’s worried, so I explain, “I know it’s quick. At first, I had my reservations, but, Mom, I’ve found a man who would move heaven and earth to keep me safe, to love me, to make me happy.” I glance out over the lake, then shake my head. “It’s like he’s always been a part of me. It feels like I’ve known him my entire life. Like I’m finally home.”

Emotion washes over Mom’s face, then she reaches for me. As we hug, she murmurs, “I’m happy you’ve found your soulmate.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

With the news out of the way, we spend an hour snacking on food from nearby stands while Mom tells me how her guards have practically adopted her as their second mother.

When Mom and her boys leave, Declan shoves the last of his hotdog into his mouth. His phone starts ringing, and digging the device out, he answers around a full mouth, “Declan.” I glance to where Waylon, Ezra, and Ryan are waiting. “I’ll do that... Okay.”

Tucking the device back into his pocket, Declan takes hold of my arm. “Let’s go home so I can kick your ass in poker.”

“You wish,” I laugh.

Chapter 44

Liam

While Kiara's enjoying lunch with her mom, Will and I are making sure Luca's shipment is transferred to a new truck and sent on its way toward the border.

My phone starts ringing, and seeing Viktor's name flashing on the screen, I answer, "Liam."

"I've just become your favorite person."

My heart kicks up a beat faster. Letting out a chuckle, I say, "That all depends."

"Finn's at the Damen Silos. One of my men tracked him there. Get your ass there before he disappears again."

Fucking finally.

"I owe you," I breathe, my heart beating double time.

"I know."

The call ends, and I look at Will. "We've got the fucker."

Will's arm flies up, signaling to the men as he lets out a loud whistle. "Time to go hunting, boys. Gear up."

Finally.

Today that fucker dies.

My men run to the vehicles we've loaded with weapons, and as I walk to the SUV, I quickly dial Declan's number.

"Declan," he mumbles in my ear.

"We've found Finn. Don't let Kiara find out. I don't want her to worry. Just keep her busy for the day."

"I'll do that," he answers.

"Keep her safe, Declan."

"Okay."

He ends the call, and knowing I don't have to worry about Kiara, I reach into the backseat, taking out the armored vest. I strap it on, then grab hold of the bag with our weapons and climb into the passenger seat. Will slides behind the steering wheel, a grin on his face.

"Fuck, this day's been coming a long time," I mutter as I open the bag and remove the machine guns and clips.

Will starts the engine, and we all form a motor brigade as we leave the warehouse, heading in the direction of the Damen Silos. The place has been abandoned for years, but trust a rat like Finn to take up residence there.

We stop a distance away from the silos, so Finn doesn't see us coming.

"Collin, find a spot where you can watch from," I order.

The boy hightails it across the field, moving like a rabbit, his sniper rifle slung over his back.

I hold out my hand to Will, who looks at me with surprise before clasping it. Yanking him closer, our shoulders meet in a

brotherly hug. “I want you in one fucking piece when this is over.”

“You too.”

Letting go of him, I watch as he takes his team so they can approach from the right side of the property. The left is facing the water, so that only leaves the front for my team and me to breach through.

In broad fucking daylight.

I can't wait for nightfall. I can't risk the fucker slipping through my fingers.

“Let's go,” I say as I lift my machine gun.

Everyone's wearing an earpiece and is heavily armed. Hoping Collin found a good spot from where he can take out any of the Sicilians trying to escape, we slowly creep closer to the entrance.

The place is run down, but there are chunks of concrete offering some cover. We move around the left side of the building, and with the water right beside us, we carefully work our way over loose bricks and rubble. I find a small hatch in one of the steel doors.

I motion for the men to enter and watch as each of them ducks down and rolls through the opening. Getting down, I roll into the factory, then move into a crouching position, my weapon ready as I glance around the area.

Graffiti covers the walls, and there are holes in the ceiling, allowing light to spill in.

My gaze scans over a group standing around in a circle. It sounds like they're in an argument about the men they lost.

Then my eyes lock on Finn. He's watching the Sicilians with a bored expression on his face, his arms crossed over his chest.

Got you, fucker.

"Ready?" I murmur into the earpiece, my heartbeat speeding up from the impending action.

'Ready,' Collin answers.

'In position,' Will's voice comes over the earpiece. *'Don't kill them all. Leave some for me.'*

I chuckle quietly, then give the order, "Attack."

Rapid gunfire fills the air, the smell of gunpowder flooding my lungs. The group of Sicilians scatters in different directions, Finn making a run for the back.

My machinegun vibrates in my grip as one bullet after the other flies, riddling the bodies of the Sicilians as they try to flee.

Finn runs toward a doorway and slips through just as I spray the area where he was with bullets.

Pushing forward, my men and I move deeper into the warehouse. I run after Finn, every nerve ending in my body on high alert for any sudden movements. I keep scanning over the graffitied walls, checking for the holes in the ground, so I don't step in one.

Come out and face me.

I take cover behind the wall, then order, “Will, give me an update.”

‘I’m in some fucking tunnel—’ Loud gunfire rattles over the earpiece, *‘Fucking rats. Smells like a sewer down here.’*

The corner of my mouth lifts, and making sure it’s clear for me to move, I dart into the room.

Seeing a set of old stairs, I dart up, finding Finn where he’s hiding behind a broken piece of wall, right by a huge gap.

Not even fucking thinking, I lunge forward, and tackling the fucker, we both fall through the gap.

I hit the ground hard with the left side of my body.

Pain shudders through me, but I roll over and dart to my feet. Finn’s still shaking his head as he struggles to stand up. Lunging at him, I tackle him back to the ground. I crouch over him and start to swing wildly, my fist repeatedly slamming into his face.

“This.” *Punch.* “Is.” *Punch.* “My.” *Crack.* “Fucking.” *Punch.* “World.”

Pulling back, I climb to my feet, sucking in breaths of air as rage boils in my veins.

Finn groans, rolls onto his side, and pushes himself up. Chuckling, he spits out some blood. “Go fuck yourself, Liam.”

“You betrayed me,” I grind the words out between clenched teeth. Pulling my Glock from behind my back, I train the barrel on his knee and pull the trigger.

Finn lets out a howl of pain, clamping his hands around the wound. “Fuck you.”

“You hurt my woman.” I fire a shot at his other knee.

He squirms on the ground, crying from the pain.

I take a step closer. “You threatened my city.”

“Fuck you!” He shouts, spittle and blood flying from his mouth. “You were just lucky he gave you the mafia, but you never fucking deserved it. You don’t have the balls to make the mafia great.”

I hear my men approaching, my finger flexing on the trigger. Gesturing at my soldiers forming a solid group around us, I let out a bitter chuckle, “They’re loyal to me. They’re my fucking family.” I train the gun back on Finn. “Kiara said yes. She’s marrying me. She’ll give birth to my future.”

Finn tries to sit up, his blood soaking into the ground and dried grass beneath him, then he sneers at me. “I tasted her first.”

Fuck this.

Holding my gun out, one of my men takes it. I lunge forward, my foot connecting with Finn’s chin. His head snaps back, and as he drops to the ground, I crouch over him again. My left hand grips his shirt and I yank him up, slamming my right fist into his nose. I yank him up again, and whisper in his ear, “But you didn’t hear her moan. You didn’t feel her come.” I slam my fist into his face again, then yank him closer again. “You didn’t hear her say I love you.”

Dropping him to the ground, I start to pummel his face, grinding the words out, “And. You. Never. Fucking. Will.”

I keep hitting, until I feel a sharp pain in my wrist, and Finn’s nothing but a bloody mess beneath me. Gasping for air,

I stare down at the bane of my existence. His eyes are mere slits, the stare blank and lifeless.

“Rot in fucking hell,” I growl.

Climbing to my feet, I take a step back. With my men around me and my enemy dead at my feet, I lift my head and find Will’s eyes.

Slowly a smile spreads over his face, then he nods at me.

It’s done.

Chapter 45

Kiara

I check my phone to see if Liam returned my message, but there's nothing. Letting out a sigh, I frown at the cards in my hand.

I suck at this. I need to Google how to play poker.

“One thousand,” Declan says with triumph in his voice. He throws the chips into the pile between us.

My eyes narrow on his face, trying to figure out if he's bluffing.

I tilt my head, and faking a sigh, I throw double the chips into the pile. “Aaand I raise you one thousand.”

His eyes flick to my face, the left one twitching.

Gotcha.

Declan tries to stare me down, but I hold his gaze. “You're bluffin'.”

I shrug, then nod at the pile. “Give me your money, sucker.”

The elevator doors open, and my eyes snap to the foyer. The air wooshes from my lungs, and throwing the cards down, I dart to my feet. Running to Liam, I'm horrified at the blood

above his temple, the disarray of his clothes, and the limp he's walking with.

"What happened?" I gasp as I grab his arm, my other hand and eyes searching his body for any wounds.

"Just took a dive," he grins at me. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," I snap. When my hand slides down to his wrist, he flinches, pulling away from me. "Liam?"

I take in the swelling around his wrist, the broken skin on his knuckles. My eyebrows draw together as my eyes meet his.

The grin doesn't leave his face. "I just sprained it." He tips his chin at Declan.

"Everything okay?" Declan asks as he shrugs on his jacket.

"Yeah. It's over."

Confused, I watch as Declan leaves, then turn my gaze on Liam. "What's over?"

He lifts his good hand to the side of my neck and presses his forehead to mine. "Finn's dead."

The words shudder through me, the news hitting so hard, I stagger a step back. Liam tightens his grip on me, and tilting his head, he says, "I killed him."

Finn's dead.

Again the wave hits, my lips parting, but no words coming out.

Finn's dead.

Liam's mouth curves into a tender smile. "He'll never hurt you again."

Slowly my hands lift to cover my mouth. Intense relief fills me, making tears push up my throat.

Liam tugs me against his chest, and I notice the droplets of blood staining his shirt. My arms fly around his neck, and I press myself against him.

It takes me a couple of minutes of processing the news before I whisper, "Tell me he suffered."

"He died bloody," Liam replies, his tone unforgiving and brutal.

Pulling back, I gently take hold of Liam's right hand. "You beat him?"

He nods, tilting his head to look at me as I brush a finger softly over the back of his hand.

It's over.

"Chicago is safe," I whisper.

Liam protected his city.

"And you," he adds.

Lifting my head, I meet his eyes again. "And me."

Tugging him to the stairs, I pull him to our bedroom. "Sit on the bed." Liam listens, his eyes following me as I go to the bathroom. I wet a towel and squeeze out the excess water.

Walking back into the room, I kneel by Liam's feet, and gently start to clean the cuts on his knuckles.

"Are you sure it's just sprained?" I ask, not liking the swelling around his wrist.

“Yeah. It will heal in a couple of days,” he murmurs, his eyes watching me closely.

He’s waiting for me to break down.

Reaching up, I clean the blood from his temple and the dust coating his skin.

“And your men? They’re okay?” I ask.

Liam nods. “We didn’t lose anyone.”

Good.

Sitting back on my haunches, I stare up at him. “I’m not going to break down.”

His eyes search my face. “It’s over, baby.”

I place my hands on his knees, and pushing up, I press a kiss to his mouth. “Thank you.”

Liam wraps a hand around the back of my neck, and keeping me in place, his mouth crushes against mine. The kiss is different. I taste the revenge he got for us on his tongue. I feel the residual anger in the wildness of his lips on mine.

When Liam breaks the kiss, I’m breathless. Our eyes lock, and we stare at each other.

This man.

He’s my entire world.

My guardian angel.

I drink in his handsome features, the ruggedness from who he really is, giving him an edge.

My avenging angel.

“Food?” I ask.

A smile stretches over his face. “Yeah, let’s get some comfort food in you.”

After I made us grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, I’m snuggled against Liam’s side, holding an icepack to his wrist.

He lets out a relieved breath, then his mouth curves up in a brutal smile.

“What?” I ask, adjusting the icepack.

“Just relishing in Finn’s last moments.” He leans his head against the back of the couch. “And I’m finally rid of the Sicilians.”

I press a kiss to his jaw. “My badass man.”

His smile turns tender, his eyes filling with love. “My soon-to-be wife.” He flexes his fingers. “You need to plan the wedding. I’m not waiting long to marry you.”

Setting the icepack down, I gently place his hand on his lap, careful not to jar it. “How long do I have?”

A playful grin tugs at his lips. “A month too soon?”

My eyebrows fly up. “Are you serious?”

“Woman, I’d drag you to a court on Monday if I had my way.”

“Okay then.” Reaching for my phone on the table, I pull up a calendar. “November... twelve?”

Liam checks the calendar, then nods. “Works for me.”

“What kind of wedding?” I ask, setting the device down and getting comfortable.

He lifts his left hand and tucks a couple of strands behind my ear. “I want your hair down.”

“Okay.” When he doesn’t say anything else, I ask, “That’s it? You have nothing to contribute?”

“I’ll pay, you plan.”

Chuckling, I nod. “Okay, but if we have a black wedding, don’t get angry.”

“Definitely not black. I want you in white.”

“Can we have it at the same church we had the service for Dad?”

He nods. “I’d like that.”

I snuggle closer and resting my head on his shoulder, I let out another relieved breath and close my eyes.

No more Finn.

No more Sicilians.

“What happens now?”

“What do you mean?”

I move, resting my chin on his shoulder. “You’ve dealt with your enemies. What now?”

“Work. I have a fuck ton to catch up on.” He presses a kiss to the tip of my nose. “And I have to make arrangements for our honeymoon.”

Excitement sparks to life in my chest. “Where?”

“Bali. I think you’d love it.”

Grinning at him, I tease, “On second thought, let’s do the court thing on Monday.”

He shakes his head. “I want you walking down the aisle.”

Suddenly it occurs to me that Liam killing Finn can’t possibly go down well with his family. Worry creases my forehead. “What about your dad? Won’t he be upset that you killed Finn?”

Liam’s features tighten. “I really don’t give a fuck how he feels.” Shaking his head, he adds, “I’ve disowned him. The only family I have is you, my men, and my uncle.”

“Will your uncle come to the wedding?”

“Yeah, Cillian will be there.”

We fall silent, just happy to be close to each other. After a while, Liam murmurs, “You haven’t used the credit card I gave you.”

“Honestly, I forgot I had it.” I tilt my head back to look up at him. “You want it back?”

“No, it’s yours. Please use it. For whatever you need. For the wedding.” He gestures around the penthouse. “Whatever you want.”

I straighten up again, then say, “What’s the limit for the wedding?”

Liam rolls his head, looking at me. "There's no limit."

Frowning, I shake my head. "You have to give me a limit. I don't want to spend a thousand dollars on flowers and get in trouble."

Slowly his mouth curves into a hot smirk. "Baby, if you don't spend at least a hundred thousand dollars a month, you'll be in trouble."

My eyes widen at the amount. Liam leans closer, pressing a kiss to my throat. "So much fucking trouble."

When he starts to push me down onto the couch, I protest, "Your wrist."

"Not the body part I need to fuck you with."

Chapter 46

Liam

My Monday morning is spent attending each of the funerals with Will by my side.

We watch the services, a safe distance from each grave, so the family members don't notice us. At each funeral, I see my men scattered between the mourners. It offers me comfort knowing they're there.

Tipping my head in the direction of Jimmy's grave, I say, "Give me a moment."

"I'll wait at the SUV," Will murmurs.

Walking across the manicured lawn, I glance at the gravestones as I make my way to Jimmy's final resting place.

I stop in front of the grave and let out a sigh. "Hey, old man. I hope you're giving them hell up there." I crouch down, and brush some dust from the dark marble slab. "I'm sorry I'm doing this backward, but I asked Kiara to marry me. I'd really like your blessing." I read his name, feeling the pang of loss deep in my heart. Not having words of my own, I steal once again for him. "There's an Irish blessing you always use to say before getting drunk as fuck." I take a deep breath. "I promise, if I steal, it will be to steal her heart. If I cheat, it's to cheat death so I can stay with her longer. If I fight, it will be to

protect her.” Then I add my own twist, “If she cries, it will be tears of happiness. If she’s in pain, it will be because she’s giving birth to our children.” I clear my throat, and pulling a pocketknife from my jacket, I flip it open and cut my thumb. Pressing the drop of blood to the gravestone, I say, “I make this blood vow to you, Jimmy.”

Rising to my feet, I put the pocketknife away. I stare down at the grave for a moment longer, then turn and walk toward the SUV.

When we get back to the office, the pressure in my chest eases at the sight of Kiara behind the reception counter.

Her eyes snap in our direction, and as I walk closer, I school my face into pure professionalism. “Everything okay down here, Miss Murphy?”

Playfulness sparks to life in her eyes. “Yes, Mr. Byrne.” She nods at Will. “Mr. Gillen.”

He chuckles, then heads for the elevators. “Going to look for my own woman to flirt with.”

Kiara’s eyes lower to my right hand. “How’s your wrist?”

“Getting better.” I lean against the counter and motion for her to come closer. Kiara stands up, and bracing her hands on the desk, she leans toward me. “Closer,” I murmur. She does as I ask until she’s a breath away. I brush my lips over her cheek. “Three o’clock. My office. I want you spread open on my desk.”

Her breath fans over my skin. “You have a conference at two-thirty.”

“Then you’ll just have to keep quiet while I fuck you.”

Bringing my mouth to hers, my tongue darts out over her bottom lip before my teeth nip at it. “Three o’clock.”

Walking away with a smirk on my face, I hear Kiara slump down into her chair. “Yes, sir.”

Jesus.

When the elevator doors close behind me, I reach down and adjust my hard as fuck cock.

Just an hour, then I’ll get to sink into her body.

The doors open, and I’m greeted by the scene of Will sitting on Denise’s desk, practically drooling over the girl.

Just like you were drooling over yours a minute ago.

Denise slaps his leg. “Move.” Then she smiles at me. “Afternoon, Mr. Byrne.” She gathers a list of messages, scowls at Will to move faster, then walks with me to my office. “Mrs. Crowe wants to change the paneling. Again. Mr. Jaggard wants to meet you at the building site on Wednesday. Mr. Morrow needs you to call him back.”

Walking into my office, she goes through a list that will keep me busy for hours. I take the message slips from her and sort them into two groups. Handing a bunch back to her, I say, “Have Devon deal with these.”

When I notice Will hovering behind Denise, I narrow my eyes at him. “Stop distracting her from her work before I ban your ass from the building.”

“You love me too much,” he gestures at Denise, “and so does she.”

Her head snaps to him. “I never said that.” She hurries out of the office, pulling the door shut behind her.

Will chuckles, “Only a matter of time.”

“Poor girl doesn’t stand a chance,” I agree as I take off my jacket and sit down behind my desk. “Pretty sure you have work to do.”

“Yeah-yeah.”

I pull the messages closer and get to work on them. The call with Mrs. Crowe takes longer than the others because the woman won’t stop talking about her new grandson. I listen patiently, giving the appropriate responses when needed.

Finally setting the phone down, I lean back in my chair, letting out a sigh.

I need to hire someone else to take over as CEO. This job will bore me into an early grave.

My personal phone starts to ring, and pulling it from my pocket, I see Viktor’s name flashing on the screen.

“Liam.”

“How did it go?” He pauses, then adds, “You’re still alive, so it had to be good.”

“Yeah, Finn and the Sicilians are no longer a problem.”

“Good.”

“Let me guess. You’ll let me know when and where to repay the favor.”

“You guessed right.”

“It’s a deal.” One I’ll never back out on.

Not long after talking to Viktor, the conference call starts. I’m staring at the ceiling, willing time to go faster as Mr. Jackson drones on and on about using cheaper concrete. The building site manager won’t back down, and I’m in the middle.

“Cheaper concrete means the building won’t last,” I mutter. “I don’t build shit, Mr. Jackson. Listen to Dwayne. The man knows what he’s talking about.”

“Yeah, but the money’s coming out of my pocket,” Mr. Jackson complains.

Then don’t build the fucking mall.

I check the time on my laptop. I’m impatient for this call to end.

Where’s Kiara?

Just then, my office door opens, and Kiara comes in. She walks closer, shrugging at me.

Picking up a pen, I pull a random piece of paper closer and write, **Get naked, baby.**

She scrunches her nose and points at the phone, Mr. Jackson and Dwayne’s arguing filling the air.

“I don’t work with cheap concrete,” Dwayne sticks to his guns.

“Then you pay for it,” Mr. Jackson demands.

I raise my eyebrows at her, motioning for her to undress.

She widens her eyes at me but takes hold of her top and pulls it over her head. Then she steps out of her pants, standing next to me in a lace bra and panties.

I move everything on my desk out of the way and nod at it.

Kiara makes a point of looking at the phone again, a nervous smile tugging at her lips, but she takes a seat on the edge of my desk and lies back.

“Good,” I praise her.

“What’s good?” Mr. Jackson asks. “Nothing about this is good.”

“You’re talking things out. That’s progress.” I move my chair closer to the desk, and taking hold of Kiara’s ankles, I spread her wider.

“You call this talking? I’m the one paying. I’m the client. I want cheaper concrete.”

Leaning closer, I drag my mouth over her inner thigh. “And it’s my construction company. I will not have the name tarnished by building a subpar mall.”

Taking hold of her panties, I drag the lace down her legs. My eyes rest on the valley between her legs. I reach for her hand and bring it to her pussy. Moving her fingers, I make her rub herself.

Kiara starts to get the hang of what I want, her back arching, her middle finger sinking inside her.

Jesus.

“Move this meeting along,” I demand, needing to feast on my woman.

Her fingers start moving faster, her hips swirling.

I stand up, and I swear, she looks like a fucking porn star as her other hand massages her breast. Her eyes lock with mine, she draws her bottom lip between her teeth, looking like the goddess of seduction.

Then her fucking lips part, her features starting to tighten.

Fuck this.

Pressing a button, I end the call. I grab hold of her hips and yank her to the edge of the desk. “You like touching yourself, don’t you baby?”

“I like your touch more,” she moans, still dragging her fingers through her slick heat.

Unzipping my pants, I pull out my hard as fuck cock, and slam into her, trapping her fingers between us. “Jesus. You better hold on to something.”

Kiara doesn’t have time as I tighten my grip on her hips and start to hammer into her.

With relentless need, I don’t slow down until both our bodies are seizing with ecstasy.

Slumping over her, our eyes lock. “I’ve never had a connection like this to anyone. I’m going to take every chance I get to fuck you, baby.” Breathing into her mouth, I add, “And forever won’t be enough to satisfy me.”

Every day.

For the rest of our lives.

This woman is mine.

Epilogue 1

Kiara

Looking at my wedding dress – the bodice, a corset design of crystal embellishments and sheer paneling, and the skirt made of white silk with a thigh-high slit – I feel like the luckiest woman in the world.

Today I'm marrying Liam.

I wish Dad was here to walk me down the aisle. I'm sure if he saw how much Liam loved me, he would've approved.

"Smile down on me from heaven, Daddy," I whisper.

"I'm sure he is," Mom says as she comes to stand behind me. She places her hands on my shoulders and turns me to face her, adjusting my veil.

"Sweet Jesus, my baby's getting married," she says, her voice straining as emotion threatens to overwhelm her.

My throat closes up, and I have to blink fast to keep the tears back. "Don't make me cry, Mom. The makeup."

"I'll just fix it again," Denise says while she's sipping on a glass of champagne. "But let's not tempt fate." Setting the flute down, she picks up my bouquet and brings it to me.

I take the flowers from her and suck in a deep breath of air. "God, it's really happening."

“Deeper breaths,” Denise laughs at me, then glances at Mom. “You too. You’re both going to pass out at this rate.”

Denise walks to the door and opening it, she says to Will, “She’s ready.” Glancing back, she gives me a warm smile. “See you downstairs.”

I swallow hard on the emotion welling in my chest, then take hold of Mom’s hand. The wedding’s being held in the same church where we had Dad’s funeral. I wanted to be as close as I could get to him today.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I look at Mom.

“Ready, sweetie?”

I nod, the smile around my mouth trembling. “You?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

The opening notes for *‘I get to love you’* by *Ruelle* start to fill the air.

With my hand tightly in Mom’s, we slowly take the stairs down. When I reach the bottom, and I lift my head, it’s to see Liam taking a step back as if he was physically punched. He presses a fist to his mouth, shaking his head, his features drawn tight with awe.

That’s my man up there.

We’ve decorated the ceiling of the church with lightbulbs hanging down. The warm light shining from them makes everything look magical. White lilies adorn the pews, a white carpet rolled out down the aisle.

Slowly, Mom walks me up the aisle. I don’t take in any of the guests. Just Liam.

Unable to contain the love I feel for him, a tear slips down my cheek.

Stopping in front, Mom lifts my veil and presses a kiss on my cheek. “I hope you find all the happiness this world has to offer with Liam.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

She gives Liam a hug, whispering something to him.

Finally, he comes to stand in front of me. He doesn't bother wiping the tear escaping his right eye. “You're so beautiful it hurts.”

Reaching up, I catch the teardrop with the tip of my finger.

We turn to face the priest, who clears his throat then says, “Dearly beloved, we're gathered here today to celebrate the holy union of Liam Owen Byrne and Kiara Murphy.”

I don't take in half of the ceremony, my heart fluttering as if it's grown wings.

Turning to face Liam, my heart takes flight.

“I, Liam Owen Byrne, take thee, Kiara Murphy, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”

Our love wraps us up in a safe cocoon where nothing can hurt me.

When it's my turn, I say, “I, Kiara Murphy, take thee, Liam Owen Byrne, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for

poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”

Liam’s mouth curves up, satisfaction darkening the circle around his blue irises, then he murmurs, “Mine.”

The priest lets out a chuckle. “Yes, she’s yours. I pronounce you husband and wife. You may k –”

Liam wraps his arms around me, and I’m yanked to his chest, his mouth taking mine with the same hunger as when he first kissed me.

The church and all the guests fall away until there’s only us and our happily ever after.

Liam

Two years later...

I’m in the middle of a board meeting when my phone vibrates on the table. Seeing Declan’s name flashing on the screen, I grab the device. “What?”

“You better come now!” he says, then shouts, “Get a fuckin’ doctor now, or I swear, so help me God–”

“Stop threatening the nurse,” Kiara snaps at him. “Oh, God. I’m going to die.”

“What the fuck is going on?” I shout to get Declan’s attention while shooting up from my chair and rushing out of the boardroom.

“Kiara’s havin’ contractions. You better come. I don’t know what to fuckin’ do. I wasn’t trained for– You’re breakin’ my fuckin’ hand!”

“Don’t shout at me,” Kiara yells, then she growls, “Don’t you dare let go.”

“You hold her fucking hand, Declan. I swear I’ll shoot you in the knee if you let go,” I threaten him as I take the emergency stairs down because I don’t have time for the elevator.

“Hurry, boss. Just fuckin’ hurry.” He gulps deep breaths. “Jesus, where’s the doctor?”

“Will you all calm down,” I hear another woman’s voice. “She’s still dilating. You’d swear the baby’s about to pop out.”

“Put me on speaker,” I order.

“Good to go, boss.”

“Kiara? Baby?”

“Tell me you’re almost here,” she cries.

“I’m almost there. Five minutes.” I say as I climb into the SUV. The phone connects to Bluetooth, so I can put it down in the holder. “You’re doing the breathing exercises, right?”

“God, Liam, I don’t have time to breathe.” I hear her groan, the sound agonizing.

“I’m almost there. Breathe with me.” I push the gas pedal to the floor. “In.” I listen as she takes a breath. “Out.” It

wooshes from her, then she groans again.

“Don’t push yet,” the nurse says.

“It h-hurts,” Kiara sobs.

“Give her something for the pain!” I shout as I take a turn sharp, the SUV’s tail skidding.

Just then, I hear, “Mrs. Byrne, you’re a whole two weeks early.”

“Dr. Boyle, give her something for the pain,” I tell the man.

“Just about to give her an epidural,” he says, his tone comforting.

I find a parking space, and grabbing the phone, I hightail it out of the SUV. “I’m here. Where do I go?”

“Comin’ to get you, boss,” Declan says.

I end the call, tucking the device into my pocket, and jog through the entrance of the hospital.

I head in the direction of the maternity ward, figuring they’ll be in that area. When I see Declan jogging toward me, relief on his face, I ask, “Where’s she?”

“This way.” He flexes his fingers. “She’s got one hell of a grip.”

“Of course, she’s my wife,” I mutter, then finally walking into the room, I go straight to Kiara, taking her hand. Leaning over her, I press a kiss to her damp forehead.

She starts to sob and leaning closer, I whisper, “You’ve got this, baby. Break my hand if you have to. I know you can do

this. Okay?”

“Don’t let go,” she whimpers.

Pulling back, I lock eyes with her. “Never.” I glance at Declan, who looks like he’s going to be sick. “Get out of here and call her mom.”

He runs out of the room, not able to leave quick enough.

Turning my attention back to Kiara, I keep encouraging her as the waves of pain hit, wishing there was a way I could take it from her.

An hour later, Dr. Boyle positions himself between my wife’s legs. I clench my teeth and hold Kiara’s hand tighter.

You can’t kill him. He needs to deliver your firstborn.

“When you feel the need to push, go ahead,” Dr. Boyle tells Kiara.

Her fingers flex around mine, her eyes locking on me.

“You can do this,” I encourage her again.

My phone starts to vibrate in my pocket, but I ignore it, all my attention on my wife. She begins to pant, her eyebrows drawing together. Placing my other hand behind her neck to help brace her, I say, “Come on, baby, you can squeeze my hand tighter than that.”

With a threatening scowl from her, she starts to groan, curling forward as she pushes. The sound is downright feral, then it morphs into a broken cry.

Jesus.

Leaning closer, I will all my strength to her, emotion flooding my chest.

Kiara's in so much fucking pain to give birth to our child.

"Christ, I've never respected anyone more," I say my thoughts aloud. "And you've never been more beautiful."

She cries again, her fingers tightening like a vice around mine, making me feel the strength it's taking from her to push.

"You're so strong, baby. You're almost there."

It takes Kiara twenty more minutes, and by the time Dr. Boyle pulls our child from her, Kiara looks like death.

My heart races in my chest, worry clouding my vision. "Is she okay?" I ask, fear darkening my words.

"Your son is a healthy boy," Dr. Boyle replies.

"Is my fucking wife okay?" I shout when Kiara drifts in and out of consciousness.

"Yes, her vitals are good. She's just resting before the next round starts."

My head snaps to him. "Next round?"

"The afterbirth."

Jesus.

Our baby lets out his first cry, and instantly Kiara's head snaps in his direction. She pulls her hand from mine, stretching out her arms. "I want to see him."

"Just one more push," Dr. Boyle says.

The final contraction hits, and Kiara barely has the strength to push through it, but she gets the job done.

“Please... tell me it’s... over,” she gasps.

“All done,” Dr. Boyle smiles at her. “Well done, Mommy.”

The nurse wraps our baby up in a blanket and brings him over. My eyes dart between Kiara’s face and our baby, the moment too overwhelming. Tears slip silently down my face as I witness the wonder on Kiara’s face, then the wrinkled little being in her arms.

My family.

“Look,” she whispers, her voice hoarse with emotion, not taking her eyes off our child. “Isn’t he perfect?”

Leaning over them, I press my mouth to Kiara’s temple.
“Just as perfect as you. Thank you for making me a father.”

Kiara laughs through a sob. “Say hi, Daddy.”

With my head pressed to Kiara’s, I take in our beautiful son. “Hi, James.”

He makes a fussing sound. Kiara coos, and me... I stand in utter amazement before my wife and son.

The loves of my life.

Epilogue 2

Kiara

Two months later...

James' cry echoes through the penthouse.

Groaning, I throw my leg from the bed, trying to gather the strength to get up.

Liam takes hold of my hip and pulls me back onto the bed.

“Stay, baby. I’ve got this.”

“You’re the best,” I mumble. I feel the mattress dip as he gets up.

Prying my eyes open, I watch as he turns on the nightlamp we got for the cradle. Reaching inside, he gently picks up our baby, then cradles him against his chest. “Is my boy hungry?” He lays James down on the bed and checks his diaper. “Yes, definitely hungry,”

I pull myself up against the pillows, then Liam lays James, who’s got a red line running down his forehead from all the crying, in my arms. While our son latches on, Liam leaves the bedroom.

I blink a couple of times to rid my eyes of the scratchy sensation, then stare down at James eagerly sucking me dry.

Just as the thirst hits, Liam comes back with a bottle of water. He uncaps it and hands it to me.

Only after I've drank half do I smile at my husband. "Go to sleep. I've got this."

"I'll wait until he's had enough." Reaching beneath the covers, Liam brushes his hand up and down my leg, his eyes on James.

It's three in the morning. We're both dead tired.

Still, how lucky am I?

I have the best husband in the world sitting next to me. Our healthy son in my arms. No worries besides when I'll have my next nap.

Life is insanely good.

James makes fussing noises, and instantly Liam's lips curve up, his eyes filled with adoration.

When James frees my nipple, Liam takes him from me, and standing up, he picks up a towel, placing it against his shoulder before gently burping our son.

"I'm jealous," I mutter as I cover myself. "I don't know how you burp him."

"Rub. Pat. Rub. Pat," Liam teases me. James lets out a loud one, then makes a gurgling sound that melts my heart.

Liam moves him into a cradling position, slowly rocking him.

Taking in the sight of my husband and son, who are entirely in love with each other, my heart feels full.

When James drifts off to sleep, his little hands open, his lips parted, Liam presses a kiss to his forehead. “Sweet dreams, my boy.” He lays him in the cradle, then turns off the light.

I snuggle down into my pillow, but the moment Liam climbs back in bed, he takes hold of my hips, and pulls my butt against his pelvis.

Feeling his hardness, I mumble, “Sleep.”

He pulls my leggings and panties down. “You can sleep. Don’t mind me.”

I let out a chuckle, which turns to a moan as he thrusts inside me. “I’ve changed my mind. Fuck me.”

Liam presses a kiss to my neck, his chest pressed against my back, then asks, “When can we have another baby?”

His body rocks mine with hard thrusts, making it impossible to talk. When my orgasm hits, I smother my cries against the pillow.

Liam jerks inside me, his teeth sinking into my shoulder to smother his groan.

We lie still for a moment, then he asks, “When?”

“As soon as James is on solids.”

He kisses my shoulder, then murmurs, “Good.” When he pulls out of me, he turns me onto my back, pressing a kiss to my mouth. Caressing my cheek with his fingers, he murmurs, “I love you, baby.”

“Another kiss,” I demand playfully, now wide awake.

This time when his mouth takes mine, he deepens it. It doesn't take long before Liam thrusts inside me again.

"I love you," I breathe against his lips.

So much.

Just when I think I can't love the man any more than I already do, he does something that makes me fall in love even deeper.

"Mine," he groans, his arms wrapping me tightly to his chest as he makes love to me.

Liam

Two years later...

"Liam, have you seen Lily's bag?" Kiara calls from upstairs.

Just then, James decides to turn his box of toys over, sending them spilling across the floor.

"Have you checked the nursery?" I yell, crouching to pick up the toys.

"Not here."

James grabs two cars and makes a run for the foyer. "Our bedroom?"

"Already checked. Not there."

Climbing to my feet, I walk to the stairs, stopping to grab hold of James. Throwing him over my shoulder, he lets out a bark of laughter, then proceeds to drive his cars up and down my back.

I find Kiara in the nursery, with Lily, our newborn daughter, cradled in her arms. Glancing around the room, I walk to the side of the cradle and pick up the bag.

“Oops.” My wife just shrugs at me.

I give her a playful glare. “If it was a snake, I’d be sucking the venom out of you.”

“Hmm... kinky,” she teases me.

“Don’t want to be late for Grammy,” I say, which has James’ head popping up.

He places his hands on my shoulders, the cars digging into me. “I want Grammy.”

Tara’s babysitting for us so we can get some alone time. Since Lily’s birth, she’s been helping out once a month so we can have time to focus on ourselves for a couple of hours.

At first, we spent our date nights worrying about the kids, but now we have a tradition of going out for dinner.

“Let’s go,” Kiara says, walking out of the room. “I’m in the mood for a fish platter.”

“We can share,” I mention as I follow after her.

“Wrrroom-wrroooooooooom.” James’ spit hits my neck as the cars crash on my other shoulder, but I’m at the point where I don’t even care anymore.

After handling Kiara's morning sickness and a fuck ton of diapers, a little spit is nothing.

We leave the penthouse, and the moment the elevator doors slide open, James excitedly yells, "Declan!"

I hand my son to Declan, who grins. "I like your cars, little man."

"Watch out," Kiara warns. "Lately, they're weapons."

"I'm tough."

Kiara helps Declan bundle the kids into their car seats while I place the bag in the trunk. Sliding behind the steering wheel, I wait for Kiara to climb in, and watch Declan and his team pile into their SUV.

As I steer us out of the basement, I pick up Kiara's hand and press a kiss to her skin, then place it on my thigh.

"I want Grammy," James shouts.

"Ten minutes, my boy," I murmur.

This is our life now. Kids. Family. Date nights. Sex at midnight before one of the kids wakes up. Running the mafia and Byrne Enterprises.

Stopping at a red light, I look at my wife. "I love you, baby."

"And me," James chuckles.

"Yes, Daddy loves you and Lily too," I laugh.

Kiara leans over and presses a quick kiss to my jaw. "And we love you."

Mine. The whole lot of them.

The End.

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