



SAVAGE HUNT

A DARK ROMANCE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ANGELA SNYDER

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34

CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41
CHAPTER 42
CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
EPILOGUE

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SAVING HIM

Book 2 of the Keep Me Series

ANGELA SNYDER

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Saving Him is Book 2 in the Keep Me Series and is not intended to be read as a standalone. Please read Keeping Her: Book 1 of the Keep Me Series before reading this book.

The books in the series feature adult content and touch upon some very serious issues and sensitive topics that could be considered as triggers for some readers.

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SAVING HIM

(KEEP ME SERIES BOOK 2)

I was kidnapped and sold to a monster.

My abductor told me he would let me go...after he got what he wanted. So I offered him my virginity in exchange for my freedom, but he broke that promise. And now he's decided to keep me.

When my past suddenly collides with my present, it's an all-out war.

How could I have ever guessed that my captor would turn into my protector?

I don't know if we can survive this, but now it's my turn to save him.

Saving Him is the conclusion of the two-book dark romance Keep Me Series and is not intended to be read as a standalone. It contains adult content for mature readers.

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PLAYLIST

MISSIO - *Bottom of the Deep Blue Sea*

Papa Roach - *Before I Die*

Lorde - *Perfect Places*

Nothing More - *Go to War*

Smashing Pumpkins - *Disarm*

Falling in Reverse - *Superhero*

I Prevail - *Alone*

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Thank you to Barbara M.C. for always showing your love and support, sharing my books with other readers and being an amazing admin in our Facebook group/street team, [Book Boyfriends Wanted](#).

When I needed to come up with a kind and empathetic character to support Adeline along her journey, your name instantly popped into my mind.

I truly appreciate everything you've done for me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>SAVING HIM</u>
<u>COPYRIGHT</u>
<u>AUTHOR'S NOTE</u>
<u>SAVING HIM</u>
<u>PLAYLIST</u>
<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>
<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>
<u>CHAPTER 1</u>
<u>CHAPTER 2</u>
<u>CHAPTER 3</u>
<u>CHAPTER 4</u>
<u>CHAPTER 5</u>
<u>CHAPTER 6</u>
<u>CHAPTER 7</u>
<u>CHAPTER 8</u>
<u>CHAPTER 9</u>
<u>CHAPTER 10</u>
<u>CHAPTER 11</u>
<u>CHAPTER 12</u>
<u>CHAPTER 13</u>
<u>CHAPTER 14</u>
<u>CHAPTER 15</u>
<u>CHAPTER 16</u>
<u>CHAPTER 17</u>
<u>CHAPTER 18</u>
<u>CHAPTER 19</u>
<u>CHAPTER 20</u>
<u>CHAPTER 21</u>
<u>CHAPTER 22</u>
<u>CHAPTER 23</u>
<u>CHAPTER 24</u>
<u>CHAPTER 25</u>
<u>CHAPTER 26</u>
<u>CHAPTER 27</u>
<u>CHAPTER 28</u>
<u>CHAPTER 29</u>
<u>CHAPTER 30</u>
<u>CHAPTER 31</u>
<u>CHAPTER 32</u>
<u>CHAPTER 33</u>
<u>CHAPTER 34</u>
<u>CHAPTER 35</u>
<u>CHAPTER 36</u>
<u>CHAPTER 37</u>
<u>CHAPTER 38</u>
<u>CHAPTER 39</u>
<u>CHAPTER 40</u>
<u>CHAPTER 41</u>
<u>CHAPTER 42</u>
<u>CHAPTER 43</u>
<u>CHAPTER 44</u>
<u>EPILOGUE</u>
<u>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</u>

CHAPTER 1

LUCIEN

WHILE IN THE midst of going through hours of painstakingly important, albeit boring, data analyses, my cell phone suddenly begins to beep rapidly. Glancing at the screen, I realize alert notifications for Adeline's whereabouts are quickly piling up.

Growling, I pull up the app connected to her watch and stare at my screen in confusion...and anger. Seems my little captive is straying too far away from the mansion, and the protocols I put in place are alarming me of that fact.

"Where are you going, Adeline?" I wonder out loud as I watch her GPS coordinates moving on my screen.

I'd been too absorbed with my work today to even check on her whereabouts, and I curse myself silently in my head as I realize my fuck-up. I let my guard down with her, something I never fucking do, and that clearly was a mistake. And one I won't make ever again.

We've been getting along so well lately. Why would she run? And why now? I think to myself.

I just can't make sense of the limitless questions rolling around in my skull.

Clicking to her data page, my eyes scan her vitals. Based on the data that's showing, her heartbeat is elevated to a level that would suggest extremely rigorous exercise.

Adeline knows she's not allowed to venture outside the perimeter, so either she's blatantly disobeying me...or something else is going on entirely and she's in trouble.

Cursing under my breath, I jerk open the bottom drawer of my desk, remove the false bottom and grab my gun and clip. I'm not willing to take any chances.

Deep down in my gut I knew she'd try to run first chance she got... even if lately I've been trying to convince myself otherwise.

I leave my office and jog to the front of the house, snapping the clip into the gun and clicking off the safety.

I pass Jackson on the way. He shoots me a bewildered look, and his eyes widen when he sees the gun in my hand. "What happened? Luc, where's Adeline? Wait! Where are you going?"

I ignore his multitude of questions and run out the front door. My bare feet sink into the lush grass as I run. When I reach dirt and gravel, the

stones and debris cut into my soles, but I barely register the feeling as a million different scenarios run through my mind.

Did someone betray me? Did she? Did her father and Giovanni finally come for her?

Her father is a powerful man. Even though I've covered my tracks, there are hackers out there that are still better than me and men with more resources...and much more to gain by taking me out.

My phone begins to beep again, but in a different, more urgent pattern this time. The app is indicating that there is no longer a heartbeat detected.

I stop suddenly as the blood flowing through my veins turns to ice, chilling me to the fucking bone. I stumble back, almost falling to my knees.

"No," I whisper, my voice strangled.

Gritting my teeth, I force my feet to move forward. I continue on the path towards where the GPS is still blinking on my phone. I force myself to continue on my search even if I might not like the end result...even if I find her...*dead*.

Up ahead, I see her tennis shoe lying on the ground, a sign that she was possibly struggling to get away from someone. Someone who might have been hurting her. Someone who might have already *killed* her.

A fear I have never known before is coursing through me at the thought of losing her.

I can't lose her.

She has been the only light in my dark, dark world, and I'm not ready to give her up. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Shaking off the unwanted and confusing feelings I suddenly realize I have for her, I begin to run towards the dot on the map. I need to find her.

And if she's hurt or dead, I hope whoever is responsible is ready to meet his maker today.

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CHAPTER 2

ADELINE

HIS DIRTY FINGERS tear at my clothes, and I scream around the musty rag that Rafael had stuffed into my mouth just moments earlier. No one is going to hear my pleas. No one is coming to save me.

He loosely tied my hands with another scrap of cloth, and I wriggle my wrists back and forth, slowly loosening the material and trying to get enough slack so that I can break free. Tears stream down my cheeks as I realize how foolish I was to believe that I could escape...or trust *anyone* on this island.

Rafael forces me onto my stomach, and I feel the bile rising up to my throat. I can't vomit without the risk of choking to death, and so I try my hardest to swallow it back down. But the nausea and undiluted fear grow even greater as he jerks my denim capris down my legs in one sweep.

I try to kick out at him, but the denim bunched around my knees restricts my movement, making it almost impossible to defend myself. I push up with my bound hands that are pinned under me, trying to rise, but

his strong hand firmly presses me back down, locking me in place against the mattress.

Chewing on the disgusting, filthy rag in my mouth, I finally get it gathered up enough into a ball that I can push my tongue against the material. It flies out of my mouth along with a scream so high pitch and full of fear that it doesn't even sound like a noise that could come from me, let alone a human.

Suddenly, I'm flipped onto my back, and the quick movement makes me dizzy. The scream dies in my throat as Rafael curses at me in Spanish and strikes me across the face. The moment the metallic taste of my blood from the cut on my lip touches my tongue, it spurs me on and only makes me fight harder, scream louder.

"Shut up, bitch!" he yells.

He grasps onto my panties, and his nails rake down my thighs, digging into my skin as he pulls the lacey material down my legs. Then his grubby hands move to his own clothes as he tries to undress himself.

The sound of the zipper going down causes a sob to rip from my throat as the panic sets in as to what's going to happen to me. Struggling hastily with the ratty cloth binding me, I'm finally able to break the stitching, releasing my wrists.

His dick is in one hand as he moves closer to me, trying to pry my legs apart with his other hand. I slam my palms against his chest, straightening my arms and holding him back as best I can, struggling under the overbearing weight of his stocky frame.

"No!" I sob. "Please!"

In a last-ditched effort, I move one of my hands upwards, digging my fingernails into his cheek and dragging down until he's howling in pain and blood covers the side of his face.

He spits something out of his mouth that I don't understand before one of his hands comes down on my throat, squeezing harder and harder until my arms fall limp to my sides and I'm on the edge of consciousness. My body bucks underneath him, but I'm not strong enough to throw him off, and I feel like I'm fading fast.

My mouth opens, gaping like a fish out of water as I try to inhale just one tiny breath of oxygen. Dark spots cloud my vision. And just as my eyes begin to flutter closed...I can hear Lucien's voice calling for me. He sounds so far away...

Suddenly, the grip on my neck and the weight on top of me is gone.

And I can breathe again.

I gasp and wheeze, sucking oxygen into my depleted lungs as my eyes snap open.

Lucien has Rafael pinned on the floor as his fists rain blows down upon his face. Each loud smack of his fists makes me shudder, and Rafael's face slowly morphs into something unrecognizable — muscle, tissue and blood.

So much blood.

Rafael tries to talk, but his jaw looks like it's dislocated and his teeth are gone, scattered across the concrete floor.

"Don't you fucking dare speak!" Lucien roars like a wild animal as he wraps his hands around Rafael's throat. He chokes him brutally until the snap of his neck echoes through the small cottage.

All I can do is stare in shock and awe as Lucien stands up, pulls a gun out of his waistband and fires round after round into Rafael.

My entire body jolts with each shot as bullet after bullet rips through my attacker.

Only once the clip is spent does Lucien finally stop shooting. He stands there, panting with harsh, unsteady breaths, watching the blood pooling around Rafael's dead body.

Lucien doesn't even look human anymore. He looks feral, like some kind of wild beast, his chest heaving and his back bowed. He's disheveled

with a desolate look in his eye that I've never seen before.

A thrill of terror runs through me...but it doesn't last long. I'm not afraid of him even though I should be.

Lucien saved me from a brutal, unforgiving fate. He protected me. *He killed for me.*

CHAPTER 3

LUCIEN

I STARE DOWN at Adeline curled up in a ball on the dirty mattress. She looks so small and vulnerable in that moment, and I instantly have flashbacks from my fucked-up childhood. I squeeze my eyes shut and force the thoughts from my mind. Now is not the time to reminisce about things I cannot change. I need to stay focused. I need to stay in the present.

Jackson comes running in just then, taking in the situation quickly. "I heard gunshots," he says in alarm. "I-I thought..."

He doesn't finish his sentence, but he doesn't have to. He clearly thought one of us was wounded...or maybe even dead...and I watch the panic subside on his face when he sees Rafael's dead body on the floor.

I tuck the gun into my waistband and spot Adeline's bracelet lying on the floor beside my foot. It must have fallen off during the struggle which is why the app showed her as having no heartbeat. I scoop it up and place it in my pocket with the intent on seeing what I can salvage and fix later.

Slowly, I approach Adeline, who looks like a scared, little, lost girl at the moment, and it makes that black hole where my heart should be ache

with a pain I've never experienced before.

Her eyes dart to the dead body on the floor and then back to me. When I reach for her, I expect her to fight me, push me away. She knows I'm a killer now, willing to do anything to keep her safe and to keep her here with me. And I expect her hatred for what I've done right in front of her eyes.

I expect all of those things. What I don't expect is when she climbs off the bed and stumbles into my open arms, clinging to me like I'm her only lifeline, and sobbing against my chest.

"Lucien, Lucien, Lucien," she cries, repeating my name over and over again like it's a benediction on her lips as she weeps.

Slowly, I snake my arms around her and hold her tightly against me. My nose presses into the top of her head, and I inhale her coconut scent. I want to tell her so much in that moment.

Thank god I made it in time.

Thank god you're okay.

I'm so glad you're alive.

And I don't know why, but just the thought of losing you hurts so fucking much...like a thousand knives piercing my skin all at once.

But I tell her none of those things. Instead, I reach down and scoop her into my arms.

And then I carry her home.

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CHAPTER 4

LUCIEN

I PACE THE floor several feet away as Jackson hovers over Adeline on the couch in the living room, assessing the damage that was done. Watching his fingers trailing over her perfect, delicate skin is making me insane with jealousy.

I don't even want to think about what the gardener did to her. The thought makes me rage with an anger I never knew before and makes me want to burn the entire world and everyone in it to the fucking ground.

If only she hadn't run.

But I can't change the past. I can only make her obey me in the future. I'm sure she's learned her lesson, but she can't be allowed to leave me.

Ever again.

I've never felt so fucking helpless as I watch Jax dressing her wounds and evaluating her condition. Adeline lies motionless on the couch, in and out of consciousness due in part from the medications Jax has given her to help with the pain.

The smell of blood and antiseptic takes me back to a time when my uncle finally rescued me from my wretched life. The first stop was to the hospital. *I fucking hate hospitals.* I hate doctors too, even though they were only trying to help me. I had grown to abhor being touched long before that day, and I almost lost my mind in that hospital from being poked and prodded over and over again.

Growing up, I feared any kind of affection only because I knew where it would eventually lead — soul-shattering pain.

My mother would cuddle up to me sometimes just to get me out of my hiding spots in the back of the closet or from under a bed or sofa. I fell for her tricks many times, but they all ended up the same way. Her smiling face would soon twist and morph into a horrible mask of hatred. All those soothing words would slowly turn into hate-filled screams. She would beat me until I couldn't walk, until I was a hollow, numb shell of my former self.

That's where her affection for me always led. The same horrible path every goddamn time.

My attention snaps to Jax as he slowly stands and walks over to me on the other side of the room. "She has a gash and a huge bump on the back of her head and a mild concussion," he tells me. "Lacerations, contusions, bruises. Lots of them," he adds. Swiping a hand down his face, he shakes

his head. "She'll heal from all of those with time and rest." His eyes meet mine, and he hesitates for a long time, his brows furrowing. "Was Adeline...raped?" he asks so quietly I almost don't hear him.

The question chills me down to my very bones. I think about the situation I walked into. Adeline half naked and struggling on the bed while Rafael had his dirty, disgusting fingers wrapped around her delicate neck. His pants were still on, but his tiny cock was sticking out, rubbing against her thigh, trying to find its way into her core as he strangled her almost to the point of death.

Pulses of anger flash through me, causing my entire body to tremble with disquieting wrath. My hands clench into fists at my sides as the dark muscle in my chest pumps black blood faster and faster through every vein in my body.

I stare at Adeline's prone form, my vision clouding from the rage swirling around in my mind. She's helpless and so damn innocent. And she didn't ask for any of this.

If I had the chance, I would kill Rafael all over again. I would take his life again and again without even a moment's hesitation.

He touched what's mine. He stripped Adeline of her innocence and became the ultimate boogeyman to her nightmares.

And the sad part is...I know exactly what she's going through. I know that fear and anxiety. I know it all too well.

"Lucien," Jax says softly, clasping his hand over my shoulder and shattering my thoughts.

My eyes meet his with a murderous glare, and he quickly relinquishes his grip and takes a step back.

Smart move on his part.

I step away as well, not trusting myself right now to not murder everyone in sight and take my anger out on the people who truly don't deserve it.

The man who does deserve all of my hatred is dead, unfortunately, and I deeply regret not prolonging his suffering.

Raking my fingers through my hair in desperation, I meet Jax's concerned gaze. "No," I croak out the answer to his question. "I think I got to her just in time."

Jax nods solemnly and goes back to Adeline, kneeling down beside the couch. He murmurs softly to her even though she's now dead to the world thanks to the pain pills he gave her. And then I watch as he gently brushes the back of his knuckles against her soft cheek.

I squeeze my eyes shut and breathe through clenched teeth. Jax is lucky that he's family, or he'd be dead right now for touching my girl.

My girl?

I don't know exactly when the switch flipped, but this possessive need over Adeline has been in full force the past few hours. I don't want anyone touching her or even fucking looking at her. And I want — no, *need* to keep her safe at any cost.

In that same respect, I realize she's my biggest weakness, and I've never allowed myself to have one before. In the work that I do, I always have enemies, big or small. And I never worried about death. I know it will come for me eventually and probably brutally.

But now...now I have something worth living for. I have *someone* worth living for. And the only reason I would willingly leave this earth is if I was sacrificing my life for hers.

My legs carry me over to both of them before my brain has a chance to stop me. Jax stares lovingly down at the sleeping beauty...her face now marred with cuts, scrapes and deep, purplish bruises...but still just as beautiful as ever.

"I'm going to clean and dress her wounds. The bruising should go away within a couple of weeks," Jax tells me.

The thought of seeing the evidence of what happened tonight in the upcoming weeks ahead nearly guts me. Her flawless skin will be tarnished with perfect reminders of what took place, and I won't even be able to look at her without feeling the profound guilt of the fact that I didn't protect her when she needed me most.

Every cut and scratch on her is like another slice to my black soul, slowly stabbing me from the inside out.

This is all my fault. If only I had let her go...none of this would have happened.

"Take care of her, Jax," I grit out before walking away from them.

Unable to take any more self-loathing, I force myself from the room and go to my office where I know there are two loyal friends who I usually try to stay away from, but who are always waiting for me — *Jack* and *Jameson*.

CHAPTER 5

ADELINE

MY EYELIDS SLOWLY flutter open. Groaning, I work open my sore mouth and swallow hard, wincing at the discomfort in my tender throat.

There's a dull ache all over my body under a layer of fog that must be from some kind of medicine. It's making my brain feel like mush and my thoughts muddled together.

Feeling around to the soft surface below me, I peer through my tangled hair around the dark room. I squint, trying to see something...anything... with the help of the moonlight filtering in through the two large windows to my left.

I'm not in my room. I know that for a fact.

And having no idea where I am throws me right into a panic.

Whose room is this? I wonder as my eyes sweep over the king-sized bed with expensive sheets I'm currently laying in.

Slowly and carefully, I struggle to sit up. The room instantly turns on its axis, spinning faster and faster. My head throbs with a ferocious

headache, and I have to force myself not to throw up after bile quickly collects in the back of my sore throat.

I collapse back against the soft pillows and press my fingers against my temples until everything eventually stops spinning.

I hear a noise, and it draws my attention to the dark corner of the room. That's when I see a shadowed figure of a man in a chair. He's hunched over, swirling a glass with ice and dark liquid with one hand and holding a bottle of liquor with the other, the top of the bottle precariously clenched between his thumb and index finger.

Memories of Rafael's assault bombard my conscious mind, and I gasp a shuddering breath. The dark figure's head snaps up at the sound, and that's when I realize the man is Lucien. His dark eyes narrow at me, and then he slowly stands, almost completely shrouded by the shadows.

Tears stream down my face as my body slowly begins to tremble. "Lucien," I whisper. "Rafael...he...he was going to...you...you stopped..." I'm quickly becoming a babbling and crying mess, not even capable of forming a complete sentence to describe the complete and utter terror I experienced.

Lucien stalks towards me, his face set in a mask of cold indifference. He sits on the edge of the mattress near my legs before placing the items in

his hands down on the nightstand beside the bed. "You ran from me," he spits out, not looking at me, his voice as cold as the ice in the glass.

"I...I'm sorry, Lucien," I blurt out with a sob.

He cringes at the sound of his name coming from my lips, and it destroys me. He thinks I betrayed him.

And that's because...I did.

I betrayed his trust, and look where it got me. Look what I made him do.

Lucien killed for me.

Another shudder wracks my body, and Lucien turns, his eyes piercing mine. "I don't know what I would have done if..." his voice trails off, thick with emotion.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I cry. "I'll never leave you again. I swear!" My voice wavers as I speak. I'd never been so scared in my life, not even when I was first kidnapped and brought here.

For a while I thought Lucien was the worst thing that could ever happen to me.

But I was wrong.

So wrong.

"It all happened so fast," I tell him, needing to explain. "He asked me if I wanted to leave. I started following him...I don't know what I was thinking."

"You were thinking that you wanted to leave the island. You wanted to leave *me*," he says, his words slurring like acid on his tongue.

I stare into his molten-chocolate eyes. "It was a split-second decision. And I made the wrong choice. I know that now." I swallow hard. "But I did change my mind. It was just too late by then."

He scoffs and shakes his head at my words as if he doesn't believe me.

"It's true!" I shout. "When I thought that..." I hesitate, closing my eyes for a moment before continuing. "I couldn't leave without knowing if I would ever see you again."

His brows furrow, but I see an infinitesimal hint of trust in his eyes.

"Please...please don't hate me," I beg him. I can't bear his aloofness right now...not after everything that happened...not after he saved my life.

"I need you, Lucien," I whisper my secret into the dark room.

And all the feelings I've been shoving to the backburner come rushing forward. I should have never tried to leave this place. I should have never tried to leave him. And I know now that I will never try again.

His eyes search my face for a while before he winces and frowns. He slowly stands before saying, "What you need is to rest."

There's been this wild tug of war between us since I arrived here, with me always pushing Lucien away while he's always trying to pull me back in.

And I think now that he's finally withdrawing, it causes me to snap.

I seize his hand before he can walk away. His eyes immediately lock onto our connection, but he doesn't withdraw from my touch. He simply stares. "Adeline," he warns with a soft growl. His breathing eventually grows unsteady, and then his eyes meet mine once more.

"Please. Stay with me. Just for a little while," I whisper. "I don't want to be alone right now," I quickly add before I can stop myself. I don't know what's possessing me to say these things to my captor — if it's the drugs that Jax has given me or something else, but I can't seem to stop them from pouring out. "I'm scared," I confess to him, my voice wobbly with emotion.

Lucien closes his eyes for a moment and then nods once. Pulling away from my grasp, he walks to the other side of the bed and climbs in, still wearing his signature suit. Keeping some distance from me, he lies down, interlacing his fingers across his stomach.

After a few deep, even breaths, Lucien turns his head towards me. Our eyes lock, and I stare at him, studying his handsome face. He seems tense, stressed out maybe. His eyes are bloodshot as if he hasn't slept much in the past day or so. I don't even know how long I've been in his room or how long it's been since...everything happened.

I blink once, twice...and by the third time, my eyelids are too heavy for me to open them again.

"Sleep now, Adeline," I hear him whisper. "I'll keep you safe."

And under his protective, vigilant gaze, I'm finally able to fall back asleep.

CHAPTER 6

ADELINE

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up slowly, still groggy from exhaustion and pain medication that Jackson's been feeding to me sporadically.

Late last night, when Jax came to check on me and help me to the bathroom, I noticed that Lucien was still in the bed with me. He was curled up on his side with his back towards me, but at least he stayed. He didn't leave the moment I fell asleep like I thought for sure he would.

Luc had been snoring softly, exhausted and sleeping like a baby, as Jax brought me back to bed, gave me pills and a glass of water to swallow them down. Jax's steel-gray eyes kept darting from me and back to Lucien with a look of disbelief on his face.

After I took my medicine, I simply shrugged, silently telling him that I couldn't believe Lucien was actually sleeping in the same bed as me either.

After my midnight pill popping fest, I fell back into a deep sleep once more.

Now, when I open my eyes and glance over, I notice that the bed is empty. My hand slides over to where Lucien had slept, but the sheets are

cold. He's been gone a while.

A creaking sound catches my attention, and my eyes move to the antique armoire on the other side of the room. With his back towards me, Lucien is standing in front of the two open doors. His hair is damp, fresh from the shower, and he's only wearing a pair of black dress pants.

The light coming in from the windows highlights the numerous and scattered scars on his beautiful, muscular back. I've never seen them before...only felt them. I knew they were bad. But seeing them with my own eyes is a whole different story.

The scars may have healed over time, but only on the surface. I'm worried about the dark and horrible memories that most likely lie beneath each and every one of them. They're permanent reminders that someone he trusted hurt him.

And I desperately want to know who did this to him.

Lucien reaches into the armoire and retrieves a crisp, pressed white dress shirt. He slips the material over his shoulders, effectively hiding his scars and the truth about his past underneath a layer of cotton and polyester blend.

I surreptitiously watch him as he buttons the shirt and cuffs, running his hands down the sleeves and his chest several times to make sure there are

no creases and that everything is in place.

He leaves the top few buttons undone and goes sans tie and suit jacket as he closes the doors and turns. He stops when his dark eyes meet mine. His thick brows knit together as he utters, "You're awake."

I feel guilty for having observed him like some kind of beautiful animal locked in a cage. "Good morning to you too," I quip.

Needing to break out of his stare, I glance around the opulent room where I was brought when I must have been unconscious. Seeing it in the light for the first time, I take in the dark woods and masculine quality of the furnishings.

My hazy mind finally clears as it dawns on me just where I am. "This is...this is your room?" I ask.

His features soften slightly as he gives me a nod.

"You brought me to *your* room?" I ask in disbelief. I was probably covered in dirt and who knows what else when they brought me here. He let me sleep in his bed and dirty up his sheets?

But why?

"I'm responsible for you," Lucien says, eerily answering the question in my head. "And for what happened," he adds in a dark whisper.

Does he blame himself for what happened to me?

Unfortunately, whenever I'm around Lucien, I always end up with more questions than answers.

As I try to sit up, I grit my teeth from the pain running through my body. I need something for the pain. And, luckily, Jax left a bottle of meds on the nightstand.

Lucien sees me eyeing up the bottle and says, "I'll be right back with a glass of water."

A few minutes later, Luc returns and watches over me as I take the medicine.

I down the glass of water all in one clip, trying to quench an undeniable thirst. Jax had told me the pills would dry me out. He wasn't kidding.

When I polish off the glass, Lucien takes it from me and sets it down on the nightstand.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, and his apprehensive tone makes it sound like a loaded question.

"I'm okay," I answer as honestly as I can, and even I don't know if I'm meaning mentally or physically.

I'll heal physically over time with some rest, but the assault definitely left me with some mental scars that will never heal. The fear I still feel is so strong it's tangible.

Looking down at the shirt I was wearing when Rafael attacked me, I see it's covered in dirt...and blood.

Gulping, I tear my eyes away from the blatant reminder. "I just...I really want to take a shower," I tell him, trying to force the tremor out of my voice, but failing miserably.

He stares at me for a long time, his eyes watching me warily. Then he nods again and gently pulls back the covers before stepping back and giving me space.

Slowly, I sit up, but the pounding in my head is already throbbing from the change in position. I swing my legs down over the side of the bed. The room starts to spin, and I clutch onto the sheets, balling the cool material into my fists.

My feet haven't even touched the ground yet, and I realize I'm in a precarious situation. I'll never make it to the bathroom on my own.

Closing my eyes, my jaw clenches shut and I cringe through the pain and discomfort. "Maybe you should get Jax to help me shower," I suggest.

When Lucien doesn't respond or leave to go get Jax, I slowly open my eyes and peek up at him. His brows are pinched together in frustration, and for a moment I think I've angered him in some way.

Then, his dark eyes pierce mine. "I'm not letting Jax undress you...and touch you...and..." His voice trails off as his hands clench at his sides.

And it's then that I realize Lucien isn't angry with me.

He's jealous.

Before I can even comprehend Lucien's reaction, he's reaching for me and scooping me into his arms. I yelp from the sudden movement, but am thankful that the room decided not to turn upside down.

Lucien stares down at me. "You good?" he asks softly.

I give him a small nod of assurance and rest my head against his warm chest. His heart is beating so damn fast against my ear, it sounds like a fast and steady drum.

The walk to the en-suite is short, and Lucien carefully sets me down near the double sink to lean against. The shower is encased with glass doors and has two oversized showerheads in the ceiling and numerous jets encased in the tiled wall. There are built-in shelves and a matching tiled bench.

His bathroom looks like something straight out of a magazine.

"You know your bathroom is bigger than most people's apartments in New York City. And the showerheads look like they're made for elephants. Which I'm pretty sure you could definitely fit one in here...or maybe even two," I tell him with a grin.

The corner of his mouth upturns at my remark, and I'm happy that I almost got a smile out of him.

Turning towards the sink with the intention of finding some toothpaste, I catch my reflection in the mirror. I gasp in horror at the girl standing there before me. Bruised and battered with tired, hollow eyes...it doesn't even look like me.

Tears instantly fill my eyes before Lucien is grabbing my arms and turning me away from the shocking image. "Don't," he whispers. "It may look bad now...but you'll heal. You just need time," he vehemently assures me, and I can hear the empathy in his voice as if he's been through this somehow or maybe experienced it with someone else.

I nod, sniffling and wiping away a stray tear gliding down my cheek. "I just...I just wanted to brush my teeth," I tell him weakly. "Even if you just have some toothpaste..." I start to say, but Lucien is already opening a drawer filled with brand new, packaged toothbrushes all in the same color and style.

"Take your pick," he tells me. "There's blue or...the same shade of blue." He clears his throat and looks at me apprehensively.

I stare at him. Did he just attempt to make some semblance of a joke? I grin at him and watch as his expression softens. "Thank you," I say before grabbing one.

After he hands me an unopened tube of toothpaste, I set out to quickly brush and rinse my teeth all while avoiding my reflection in the mirror.

After I'm done, I turn slowly and smile up at Lucien. "I feel a little better already," I remark.

"Good," he says sincerely. There's an expression on his face that I've never seen before and can't quite decipher.

While he goes to the huge walk-in tiled shower and turns on the water, I start to get undressed. I stumble a few times, cursing at the dizziness that seems to keep hitting me, but I manage to remove all my clothes.

Lucien steps out, and his dark eyes greedily scan my naked body, sending licks of fire all over my skin.

When his gaze reaches my neck, however, his entire demeanor changes. I can practically see the cogs inside of his mercurial brain turning and the anger coming off of him in waves.

"Lucien," I whisper, my voice shaking.

His eyes snap up to meet mine, and some of his anger begins to melt away. Without saying a word, he stalks over to me and helps me to the shower, holding the door open for me as I walk inside on my own.

I hold onto the tiled wall and make my way to the gentle mist that's raining down from the large showerhead above. Lucien must have put it on a low setting just for me, and I'm again amazed by his thoughtfulness.

Standing under the spray, I'm barely able to suppress the moan that comes from my lips. The water feels so good on my tender skin, and I just want to wash the memories of that horrible event away.

I hear the shower door open and turn my head, gasping when I see Lucien's naked form coming towards me. Silently, my eyes follow his every move as he removes a few items from the built-in shelves.

"W-what are you doing?" I ask him hesitantly.

"Helping you," he states matter-of-factly.

With methodical precision, he soaps up a white washcloth before pressing it against my bare shoulder. My eyes drift close as he very carefully begins to wash my back. I lean my forehead against the tile, relishing in the feeling of the washcloth, the clean scent of the soap and the steam from the shower surrounding us.

There are a million things on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't seem to get my mouth to cooperate. I want to tell Lucien thank you for saving me, thank you for taking care of me, thank you for...killing for me.

I shiver at the last thought, and Lucien is quick to ask, "Water not hot enough?"

I shake my head, unable to even speak in fear of telling him something I'll regret. I'm not quite sure where Lucien and I stand at this moment. Is he taking care of me so that I get better quicker and he can send me away?

He saw what Rafael was doing to me. Even though he didn't manage to do...*everything*...am I damaged goods to Lucien now?

I notice how he keeps the washcloth between my body and his hand, his skin never actually touching mine.

Maybe he sees me as dirty now.

Tainted.

When he moves me around to face him, I search his eyes for any signs of desire or heat that I'm used to seeing in them.

But there's nothing there. Even the heavy cock between his muscular legs remains flaccid.

He simply continues washing me in a way that a caretaker would wash a patient...mechanical and detached.

When Lucien's hand stops suddenly at my inner thighs, I glance down and gasp when I see the scratch marks left behind by Rafael's filthy hands. A tremor courses through me when I realize how close he was to raping me...maybe even killing me.

And now I'm seeing what Lucien is undoubtedly seeing when he looks at me — a used up, dirty thing and not the perfect and pure woman I once was.

The washcloth falls from Lucien's hand and slaps against the wet, tiled floor as he steps back suddenly. "Fuck," he growls, squeezing his eyes shut with his white teeth gritted and bared in fury.

"You don't have to do this, Lucien," I tell him quickly, tears blurring my vision.

"Yes, I do," he snaps angrily. "I want to take care of you, Adeline," he says, softer this time.

"Why?" I ask, unable to stop the question from blurting out of my mouth.

"Because I know what you're going through, and I...I never had anyone there to take care of me," he whispers without meeting my eyes.

My breath hitches at his confession. Lucien said so much in those two small sentences, and I can feel an ache growing inside my chest for him. I think about his horrible scars and what he must have gone through as a small child to receive each and every one of them.

My throat burns as I try to keep the tears at bay, but it's futile, and soon they're overflowing, sliding down my cheeks in small rivulets. "I'm sorry," I say, my voice breaking.

Lucien's eyes blaze and zero in on me as they scan my face. With brows furrowed, he takes a step towards me and cups my face in his hands.

I gasp at his sudden touch.

"What are you sorry for?" he demands.

I'm not sure what he wants to hear right now, so I just go with what I'm feeling right now. "I'm sorry...for everything. I'm sorry for what happened to you in the past. I'm sorry for trying to leave. And I'm sorry that I'm not...clean for you anymore." I squeeze my eyes shut, effectively blocking out his devastatingly handsome face. Shuddering, I choke out on a sob, "I...I feel so dirty."

His hands grip my face a little tighter, forcing my eyes to pop open. "You're not dirty," he tells me angrily. "It's not your fault what happened to you, Adeline." He pushes me up against the hard, unforgiving tile before

saying, "You could never be anything less than perfect to me. Don't you get that? You're the purest and most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my entire fucking life."

Before I can respond to him or even comprehend what he just said to me, his lips smash against mine in a bruising, possessive kiss. His tongue parts my lips, and he dominates my mouth, claiming every inch of me.

I keep my palms pressed against the tiles, afraid of touching him and breaking the spell he has us both under.

He groans, and I swallow it down, wanting more and more of him and never wanting to stop.

But all too quickly, he's pulling away. He releases a shuddering breath as his dark eyes pierce mine. "I won't let anyone hurt you ever again," he promises vehemently, and I believe him with my heart and soul.

I watch as he retrieves a fresh, white washcloth from the shelf and applies a copious amount of soap until it's a sudsy lather in his large hands. Then he meticulously washes me from head to toe, allowing his fingers and hands to periodically skate over my bare skin this time.

It feels so good that I just close my eyes and allow him to make me feel clean again.

I know I should hate Lucien for what he's done and the fact that he keeps me here as his prisoner. But the truth of the matter is I don't hate Lucien. In fact, I could never hate him.

Because I think I'm slowly starting to fall in love with him.

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CHAPTER 7

LUCIEN

AFTER OUR SHOWER together, I tucked Adeline into my bed where Maria had just finished putting on clean sheets. And then I left her under the care of Jax, who was more than happy to check up on her and see how she was feeling.

I should be jealous by his overzealous nature with Adeline as of late, but my thoughts are too fixated on the words she said in the shower.

She feels dirty because of things that happened that were beyond her control. Because of something *I* didn't prevent. Because of something *I* ultimately caused by keeping her here on this island.

Making my way down the steps and to the east wing of the mansion, I enter the gym and flick a switch. A moment later, the numerous overhead fluorescent lights click on, buzzing softly and illuminating the large room with state-of-the-art gym equipment and an indoor pool visible in the next room through a wall of glass.

I inhale deeply, the strong scent of disinfectant filling my lungs. Maria keeps this room immaculately hygienic, and that's what makes it one of my

favorite rooms in the mansion.

A battered punching bag hangs from the ceiling in the center of the room, and I don't even wrap my hands before I start wailing on it.

My fists rain blow after blow onto the beat-up leather until my knuckles are bruised and eventually cracked and bleeding.

But I don't stop.

I *can't* stop.

I'm taking all of my anger and frustration out on this bag, and it's the safest way for me to get all of it out of my system.

I blame myself for what happened to Adeline. And all I can think about is how I wish I could have stopped Rafael in some way or changed the course of events.

If I could go back and do everything differently from the start, I would.

But it's too late.

It's too fucking late.

After another twenty minutes or so, I finally tire myself out to the point of almost complete exhaustion. Wrapping my hands with a couple of small towels, I leave the gym and go straight to my office.

I've been so preoccupied with Adeline that I haven't even stepped foot in here since she was attacked.

I dump the bloody towels in the trash before I pour myself a glass of whiskey. And then another. And then another until I feel somewhat back to my normal, miserable self.

I've never been one to often indulge in alcohol, but lately I've been turning to the bottle to help soothe my dark soul. I'm trying to numb everything that's going on with me internally, and I know it's not good...but I just can't seem to fucking stop myself.

When I go to pour another drink to numb my mind, it's only then that I realize I've used the same glass for every drink I've poured. Frowning, I stare down at the dirty glass that has my fingerprints and saliva and dust and dirt and inconceivable little particles that were floating in the air that probably fell into the liquid.

Gagging, I take the drink into the adjacent bathroom and pour the expensive whiskey down the drain before dumping the glass in the trashcan.

Going back into my office, I grab a fresh cup from the cupboard, which is stocked full of different sized glassware wrapped in cellophane, and pour a new drink. As I grip the glass in my hand and stare at it, I realize I'm

slowly changing, evolving somehow. I didn't even think twice before about using the same glass before more than once.

Adeline is changing me.

Little by little she's managed to do what even the most trained psychiatrists haven't been able to. Instead of obsessing about germs and disorder, my focus has been intently drawn to her. I think about her constantly. And I guess, in a way, my brain doesn't have room for much else because she completely and utterly consumes me.

I look around my office and notice that some of my post-it notes are out of place, my keyboard is askew and a drink that is at least a week old is sitting by the computer mouse. The last time I was in here, I was in such a rush to find her that I just left everything as it was.

Sitting my new drink down by the old one, my hands twitch at my sides, and I can feel a shiver running up my spine.

I don't allow chaos in my world. Only control.

And right now I'm feeling very out of control.

Everything that happened to Adeline was out of my control. And now even my office, which should be a sanctuary for me, is in disarray.

With one fell swoop, I empty the entirety of my desk onto the floor, needing to start over, needing it to be organized and clean again.

Everything crashes to the floor, and then I'm suddenly on my knees, gripping my notes into my hands and ripping them to shreds.

There are broken shards of glass everywhere, and I can only watch in horror as the liquids soak into the cracks between the hardwood and into the fibers of the expensive rugs. Instantly, I know that no matter how many times or well I clean I'll never be able to reach the recesses that they've gone.

And when I slink back in horror at the mess I have created, I cry out like a wounded animal, slamming my fists to the floor...and I lose my fucking mind.

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CHAPTER 8

ADELINE

JAX COMES AND goes throughout the day since Lucien seems to have done a disappearing act after my shower.

Jax has been taking good care of me, bringing me meals, medicine, tending to me and even bringing me some books to read from the library. So it's not like I have any reason to complain. It's just that...I miss Lucien.

As much as I hated it here at first and hated him, the island and Lucien have grown on me. I know he has a lot of issues he needs to work out, and I'm hoping that I can soon get him to open up to me. I want to know about his past, what made him the way he is. There has to be a reason behind it all. But I fear that if he does open up and I find out the reason behind all of his madness...I may *never* want to leave.

I miss my father and Giovanni, but I don't miss much else of my prior life.

However, the thought of going back to my old life and starting things up again with Giovanni scares me more than anything. Gio might not even want me now since I gave my virginity to another man.

And if I have to stay with my father, things will return to the way they were. I don't want to be locked up anymore, and I know that sounds ridiculous since I'm being kept on this island against my will, but at least I feel like I could have a life here, a real chance at...something more.

Back home my day consisted of a rigorous and monotonous schedule of studying and music lessons and dance classes and a bunch of other things I had no interest in at all but was required to do.

Here I'm able to do things that I like now. Lucien hasn't locked me in my room for weeks. And now that I'm in his bed...I don't think he'll resort back to that again. At least I'm not forced to sit down at a piano and play *Bach* in perfect tempo until it feels like my fingers are bleeding.

Every day at home I was expected to be perfect in every way every hour of the day. I thought that was normal for all young, unmarried women. I used to think my life was pretty great growing up, but now I'm starting to think that it was all just an illusion.

Since leaving home, I'm beginning to realize that my life was far from normal. I never had any real friends or any real purpose in life except for what I was told to do. My future was to wed and have babies to carry on the family name. My husband, whoever my father chose, would take our last name.

But I don't want to take over the family business. I don't want my children growing up in a house that they can't leave without a million bodyguards. And I certainly don't want my kids having the same fate as my sisters.

A shudder runs down my spine when I think of the package I almost opened one day. I found out later that my sister's hand had been in that box. They were sending her back to my father piece by piece until he paid a ransom for her release.

My father never did pay the money.

He refused to back down to anyone...even for his own children. He told me to never show weakness even in the face of severe adversity.

No. I refuse to live in a world like that.

And even if I don't stay here with Lucien for very much longer because he doesn't want me anymore, I want to go somewhere else. I want to *be* someone else.

* * * * *

I'M FEELING A lot better by the time night rolls around. And I'm sitting up in bed reading when Lucien finally comes walking in. He doesn't look at me. Instead, he sits down on the edge of the bed and puts his face in his hands.

"Lucien?" I whisper, but he doesn't respond. He doesn't move other than his chest heaving in panting breaths as if he ran here from somewhere.

Closing my book and placing it on the nightstand, I timidly crawl over to him. His elbows are on his knees, his face is buried in his hands, and his fingers are locked in a death grip in his hair. That's when I see the cuts, bruises and blood covering his knuckles.

"What happened?" I ask him, gently placing my hand on his shoulder. He flinches from the contact, so I pull my hand back quickly, not wanting to hurt him anymore than he's already obviously hurting. "What happened to your hands?" I whisper, concerned.

"I can't...I can't..." he repeats over and over again, whimpering like a lost, little boy, and it makes my heart ache for him.

I can smell the alcohol permeating from his lips, and I realize he's drunk on top of whatever else is going on in that eccentric brain of his. "What's wrong, Lucien? Please. Let me help you."

He's always so in control and careful with every movement and action that he performs. I've never seen him so vulnerable before.

And it's scaring the hell out of me.

He seems withdrawn into himself, almost like blocking out the world might be some type of coping mechanism for him. Maybe he doesn't even

know I'm here right now, and I don't know how to break him of this wicked spell he has himself under.

Standing, I go to the bathroom and retrieve a first aid kit that I know is under the sink. I set the kit on the bed and drop to my knees on the floor beside Lucien. He's still muttering nonsensical words and rocking gently back and forth with his hands fisted in his hair.

He's having some kind of a mental breakdown, and I can't think of anything else in this moment except for the fact that I want to help him just as he helped me after I was attacked. He took such good care of me and was so gentle. And now I want to return the favor.

Gently, I touch his wrist, and he recoils as if I just burnt him. "Lucien," I say softly. "Please. Let me clean your knuckles." I run my fingers soothingly up and down his muscular forearm. His muscles are corded with tension, but they slowly begin to relax as I caress him.

I gently pry his left hand away from his hair and pull it down to rest on his knee. He keeps the right one locked with a fistful of hair and his eyes clenched shut. As gently as I can, I clean away the blood and swab at the deep cuts with an antiseptic. He releases shuddering breaths as I tend to him, and I can't help but think back to what he said in the shower. He mentioned something about never having anyone take care of him.

I'm not even sure what he meant by that since I know almost nothing about Lucien's childhood...or much about his adulthood, to be honest. I know he had a terrible past based on what little Jax has alluded to and the fact that his back is covered with scars, but I don't know who hurt him or how long ago it happened...or how long it went on for.

Did he have a family? A mother who read him bedtime stories? A father he played baseball in the backyard with?

Or is his past on the other end of the spectrum with no mother, no father...no one who loved him?

As I wrap his hand with gauze, I ask, "When you told me earlier that you never had anyone take care of you...what did you mean by that?"

He shakes his head; still gripping his hair with so much force I'm afraid he'll tear it out at the root. Gently, I pry his right hand away and lower it to his knee. When he eventually opens his eyes and meets my stare, I can almost feel the pain radiating from them.

"My mother..." he starts, but then clamps his mouth shut before shaking his head and closing his eyes. He cringes as if he's in physical pain from the mention of his mom.

I cup his cheek with my hand and lovingly stroke his skin and stubble with my thumb. I expect him to balk or pull away from my touch, but he

doesn't. Maybe the alcohol is dulling his aversion to my touch. I'm not sure, but I like feeling his smooth, warm skin under my fingertips.

"Please, Luc. Tell me about your mother. I want to know. I want to know everything about you," I confess.

His eyes slowly open at my words, and his brows knit together in confusion. His dark gaze searches my face as if trying to figure out if I'm lying. When I ask him again, he finally lets out an exasperated sigh.

He stares at me for a long time without speaking, and I'm beginning to think he won't say anything at all. I break our connection and finish wrapping his hand. Then I turn my attention to his right hand, which seems to be worse off than the left. As I'm gently wiping away the blood so that I can assess the damage, Lucien finally speaks.

"My childhood was terrible. My mother...my mother was a horrible, despicable human being. She would lure me to her with kindness and then beat me until I could barely walk."

I gasp at his words, my hands stilling on top of his. My eyes slowly rise to meet his, but he blinks, shakes his head and looks away. I realize he'll only keep talking if I'm not looking at him, pitying him, feeling sorry for him.

Clearing my throat, I continue working on his hand, prying my gaze from his face. After a while, he continues.

"She had a new man in her life every day of the week it seemed. Some of them weren't too bad, and some of them seemed like they were the devil himself. Getting kicked and beaten was the normal everyday life for me from the time I was born until almost a teenager. What I wasn't prepared for was when they started touching me..." His voice trails off suddenly, and he swallows so hard I can hear it in the deafening silence of the room. "My mother didn't stop them, any of them. I was just a toy for them...and her. She pawned me off to a neighbor a lot in exchange for drug money." I watch as his left hand clenches into a fist on his powerful thigh. "I was just a toy to her, something to barter with. And to *them*, all of them...I was a toy to beat around, to play with...to fuck." His right hand squeezes mine suddenly as if he needs the support, and I squeeze right back, letting him know I'm here for him. "I was just a little boy," he murmurs so sadly that it causes my eyes to well up with tears.

I focus on cleaning his cuts, but my vision is so blurry that I can barely see. Still, I keep my eyes down, wanting him to tell me more, to tell me *everything*.

"I lived in filth, complete and utter disorder, sleeping on a mattress on the floor infested with cockroaches and fleas. I was in diapers for much

longer than a normal child would be because my mother never took the time to potty train me. Sometimes she wouldn't change my diapers for a week. I just laid around in my own fucking filth." His hands clench and unclench while he continues. "And when I got a little older, she rarely fed me. She was only worrying about pimping me out for her sacred drugs."

I can hear the anger in his voice, and I'm beginning to understand him more clearly now. Growing up in a grimy environment while surrounded by so much chaos is the reason why he needs everything to be clean.

And the reason why he needs to be in control at all times is because he was never in control of his life growing up.

He was innocent. He never had a choice in anything that was done to him. The words he said to me in the shower earlier this morning make sense to me now.

"It's not your fault what happened to you, Adeline."

It's as if I was looking at a puzzle with half of the pieces missing. But now that he filled in the blanks...I can see the whole picture much more clearly now. I understand why he is the way he is. And I'm heartbroken and devastated over it.

"My uncle saved me when I was twelve years old. William came to visit my mother, who was his sister, after they had not been in touch for

years. When he walked into that trailer and saw me, he couldn't believe his eyes. I was emaciated; looked like I was seven, eight years old tops. I couldn't speak or make eye contact. My uncle took me away from there... gave me a *home*, a real home. He raised me, made me better, made me... normal." He shakes his head and releases a sigh and a dark chuckle. "Well, as normal as he could make me," he adds solemnly. "William was rich. And when he died, he left Jax and I a lot of money, which in turn helped me to start my own companies. My uncle and Jax were the only true family I ever had. William was genuinely kind and never expected anything in return."

Tears stream down my face as I finish wrapping his right hand with gauze. Unable to stand it any longer, I meet Lucien's gaze. The fear and trepidation I see in his eyes that I might somehow think less of him now break me, and a sob rips out of my chest. Slowly, I stand and climb into his lap, my knees resting on either side of his thighs on the mattress.

I cradle his handsome face in my hands, and I force him to meet my stare. "You didn't deserve that life, Lucien. You didn't deserve to be treated that way." When I see a look of doubt...mixed with *guilt* on his face, it makes me angry. "No, Lucien. No. You were just a little boy. It wasn't your fault. You didn't deserve it. Any of it." A torrent of tears cascade down my face, and he watches them fall.

Suddenly, his hands come up and grip my waist. "I'm hurting you just like they hurt me, aren't I? You shouldn't be here. I should have let you go. I should have..." His words come out hurried and anxious.

"You're not hurting me, Lucien," I tell him quickly. When I first got plucked out of what I thought was a perfect life, yes, I hated Lucien and I hated what he had done. But now...things are so different between us, and I wouldn't change a thing. I stare into his eyes as I say, "I don't want to leave." My breath hitches in the back of my throat as I whisper my biggest fear out loud, "Please don't send me away."

"I don't want you to leave," he breathes. "But I'm afraid I'll never want to let you go, Adeline." He studies me, waiting for my reaction.

"Then don't," I whisper.

Seemingly satisfied, he wraps his arms around me and cradles me against his chest. We stay like that for a long time until he finally pulls back and says, "We should get some rest."

I give him a small nod. We climb under the blankets with a few inches separating us. Even though I'd love to be in his arms right now, I'm not willing to push him any further tonight. He opened up to me and exposed his very soul to me. I couldn't ask for anything more than he's not willing to give.

And as I fall asleep with his watchful gaze being the last thing I see...I know that I've fallen dangerously head over heels in love with my captor.

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CHAPTER 9

LUCIEN

IT TAKES ABOUT a week for Adeline to recover from her ordeal. To everyone else, she appears to be back to her normal self. But I can see right through her. There is an infinitesimal change in her that no one but me would notice since I've studied her so meticulously over the past few months.

She's scared.

The bastard who hurt her caused a deep-rooted fear to implant itself inside her bones. She's afraid of every single staff member, even the women, but especially the men.

However, even more surprising...she's not afraid of *me*.

After the night when she took care of me, dressed my wounds and allowed me to open up to her, I haven't left her side. I've spent the past week nursing her back to health and taking care of her every need. We've grown closer than I ever imagined possible. And for the first time in my life, I've slept in the same bed with a woman.

At first, every time I tried to leave, Adeline would either wake up or begin to have terrible nightmares. Even in her sleep, it was as if she could sense that I was leaving.

I'm her protector.

I've never had to protect anyone before, and it makes me feel powerful. It makes me feel...*wanted*.

I always thought of the ideal couple as being two halves of a whole with the man willing to do anything for his woman and vice versa.

Are we a couple? I can't even begin to describe the kind of fucked up relationship we obviously have, but something has changed. I can't quite put my finger on it, but Adeline is...different now around me.

The bruises on her arms and neck are fading, and I couldn't be happier. Yesterday, she asked for makeup, which I hastily provided after an overnighted shipment from the mainland. I let her order whatever she wanted, and it seemed to make her happy when one of my staff delivered the package this morning.

When I walk into my bedroom around five o'clock in the evening, I notice the bed is empty. I've become so accustomed to seeing Adeline in bed that panic begins to consume me. Did she move back to her room?

Did she leave me again?

She's taken over my bedroom this past week, not wanting to leave my side. At first, I was very uncomfortable to the whole thing, but I've since grown very fond of having her in my bed. In fact, the thought of not having her here with me every night now sickens me.

Cursing in frustration, I take out my phone so that I can track her watch. I had fixed it a few days after the attack, and she's been wearing it ever since. Before I can open the app, her angelic voice calls me from the adjoining bathroom.

"Lucien? I'm in here."

I walk briskly towards the door, and my footsteps falter when I see her. Adeline is carefully applying some type of concealer on her neck. The bruising is almost undetectable, but I watch as she winces in pain from applying pressure to her sore skin.

I stand in the doorway, waiting for her to finish. And when she turns to me, I can see that she's done up her entire face complete with blush, mascara, eyeshadow and whatever else women put on their faces.

She looks...breathtaking. She's gorgeous just being her natural self, but the makeup really enhances the green of her eyes, and I just can't seem to stop staring at her...with my mouth hanging wide open.

She giggles at my reaction, and it throws me off even more. I've never heard her giggle before, and I love the sound she made. I suddenly want to hear it over and over again.

I clamp my jaw shut and grin at her. "You look beautiful, Adeline."

A slight blush tints her cheeks as she smiles shyly, and it's so endearing that I almost feel like we've entered another world...a world in which we're just a regular couple and I hadn't plucked her out of her life in order to have her in mine.

"I have a surprise for you," I tell her.

"A surprise?"

Nodding, I say, "Get dressed and meet me in the foyer whenever you're ready."

"Okay," she says eagerly, and I can't help but be captivated by the excitement in her eyes. "What should I wear?"

"A dress." I would love to see her in something beautiful that shows off her gorgeous body.

"Okay. I'll see you downstairs soon then," she says with a smile.

I leave her to go get the final touches done. If anyone would have told me years ago...hell, even weeks ago that I would be trying to woo one of

the girls I purchased, I would have laughed in their fucking face.

But here I am...trying to sweep Adeline off of her feet and straight into my arms.

Maybe even into my heart.

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CHAPTER 10

ADELINE

I MOVE MY hands down over the form-fitting, emerald green dress, and it feels like butterflies are taking flight in my stomach.

I don't know why I'm so nervous. Perhaps it's the fact that Lucien has never surprised me before...or maybe because seeing him standing in the doorway earlier looking debonair in a three-piece suit set my nerves on fire.

He hasn't touched me in over a week, and I'm beginning to wonder if we'll ever reach the place we were before I tried leaving.

I know the bruises on my face and neck bother him tremendously. When he doesn't know I'm watching, I can see him staring at them with a discernable look of guilt on his face. So that's why I ordered the makeup — to cover up the evidence of that day and try to move past it.

I check my smoky makeup in the mirror one last time and smile at how different I look compared to this past week where I've been lounging in bed with a rat's nest in my hair and bags under my eyes.

Hoping to blow Lucien away tonight, I leave the bedroom and walk barefoot down the stairs to the foyer. Jax is walking through the room and

glances at me. Then he does a double take and stops suddenly before nearly running into the wall.

"Wow, Adeline," he gasps.

Smiling, I step down into the foyer and ask him, "Think Lucien will like it?"

I can see a hint of disappointment in his eyes, but I try not to dwell on it. Jax has been taking such good care of me, but I hope that his feelings for me are strictly on a more doctor and patient basis...even though he's technically not a doctor. Things are complicated enough with Lucien without adding Jax in the mix.

He schools his features quickly, though, and tells me, "He would be crazy not to."

"Thanks, Jax."

"How are you feeling?" he asks, his brows knitted together.

He's been weaning me off the pain pills, and I didn't even need to take one the past couple of days. My throat is still very sore, but I'm healing... inside and out. "I feel great today."

"Good, good. Let me know if you need anything," he says with a big grin.

"I will," I respond, flashing him a smile before he leaves the room.

Breathing in a deep breath and exhaling, I go to the front door where a guard is waiting. He tips his head as he opens the door for me.

Stepping outside, I inhale the fresh, tropical air. I haven't been outside in what feels like forever.

Glancing around for Lucien and not spotting him, I tiptoe to the edge of the front porch.

And that's when I see it.

Gasping, I take in the scene just several yards away. There is a gazebo by the butterfly garden, and everything is covered in tiny, twinkling fairy lights. It looks like a page ripped right out of some kind of fairytale.

And then I see my dark knight is standing in front of the gazebo, waiting for me.

Not wanting to waste another moment, I pick up the hem of my dress and walk across the lawn. The cool grass feels divine on my bare feet. I haven't walked in the grass like this since I was a little girl, and I vow to go barefoot outside more often.

I step up to the newly-constructed gazebo, and it smells like fresh wood. "Did you just have this put up today?" I ask.

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"It's amazing. And all the lights..." I turn around, taking everything in and how much work he went through to make this a special night for us. Meeting his gaze once more, I tell him, "This is amazing. Thank you, Lucien."

My compliment affects him, and he smiles a panty-wetting smile. His dark eyes light up when he smiles, and I'm instantly lost in them.

He outstretches his hand, and I take it. He leads me to one side of a small, round table and pulls my chair out. Once I'm seated, he pushes the chair in so that I'm at a comfortable distance.

The aroma of the food smells divine, and I'm excited to see what's under the silver dome lids on the table. Once Lucien is seated, he removes his cover, and so do I.

A delicious meal of sea bass, buttered asparagus and mashed potatoes is revealed, and my mouth waters at the sight. "Oh, this looks delicious," I tell him.

He seems pleased by my reaction. "I was hoping you would like it."

Retrieving my silverware from the fancy, folded linen napkin, I dig in, moaning when the fish practically melts in my mouth.

I glance over to Lucien to see how he's enjoying his meal but realize he hasn't started yet. He's too busy unwrapping his new silverware from special packaging. And as I stare at his side of the table versus mine, I notice more differences.

His glass is wrapped in some type of cellophane beside a new, unopened bottle of wine whereas I have two glasses filled with water and wine already. His napkin is wrapped in plastic as well.

Everything he's using is new and untouched. However, now that I have an understanding of why he is the way he is...I completely understand his need for perfection and purity.

Just the fact that he's eating outside with me tonight is a big step and something he probably hasn't done in years.

Baby steps, I tell myself. If it's the last thing I do on this earth, I want to help Lucien heal from all of his wounds...inside and out.

We eat our meal in companionable silence, sometimes commenting on the weather or bringing up something funny Jackson had said. It's clear to me when Lucien talks about his cousin that he's really fond of Jax. I'm pretty fond of him too.

After dinner, Lucien tentatively suggests we walk on the beach. Before he has a chance to change his mind, I jump at the chance to sink my feet

into the sand.

Walking side by side, we stroll along the length of the beach before coming to a stop. With hardly a cloud in sight in the dark sky, the full moon above reflects off the water, and it's a spectacular sight. "Wow," I gasp. Looking up, I stare at the stars twinkling in the vast darkness. "It's beautiful here," I say.

"Yes, it is," he says softly.

I shudder from the chill of the air blowing off the water. My dress is sleeveless, and I didn't account for spending this much time outside.

"Cold?" he questions.

Nodding, I watch in awe as he strips out of his suit jacket and drapes it around my shoulders. I wrap it around me tighter, welcoming its warmth. It smells like Lucien, and I can't help but nuzzle my nose into the material, deeply breathing in his scent.

When I look up at Lucien, who's staring at me with an odd look and a raised brow, I realize I was caught in the act of sniffing his jacket. "Did you just...?" he starts to ask, but doesn't finish.

"You always smell so good," I whisper. I take another whiff of the jacket, not even caring this time. "Your jacket smells like you."

"Ah," he mutters in understanding. He grabs the arms of the jacket and pulls me closer. I snuggle my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat against my ear. It feels so good to be in his arms, and I wish he could be this affectionate all the time.

And then I hear the distinct sound of him sniffing the top of my head. My face breaks out into a big grin as I ask in a mimicking tone, "Did you just...?"

He chuckles deeply, his chest rumbling against my cheek. "I guess you're not the only who likes to smell beautiful things."

I pull back and cock a brow. "Beautiful? I don't remember using that word to describe you," I joke.

"You don't think I'm beautiful?" he asks, pretending to be offended.

"Devastatingly handsome maybe," I quip.

"Devastatingly handsome," he says, moving his mouth around as if he's tasting the words. "Yeah, I can definitely see that," he says with a grin.

I've never seen this playful side of Lucien...and I love it. And that sexy grin of his melts my heart and gives me the courage for what I'm about to do next.

Wrapping my hands around the back of his neck, I pull his mouth down to mine. He's tense at first, but all too soon he's kissing me back.

I'm determined to explore what is happening between us. And if he doesn't want me or thinks I'm damaged goods now...I need to know that too.

But the reaction I begin to get from him doesn't tell me those things at all. He pulls me flush against his body, his hands molding to my backside as he presses his growing erection into my stomach.

I gasp, and he uses it as an invitation as his tongue invades my mouth. He kisses me like he's been starving for me for years, and I allow him to consume me. I want him to own me...inside and out.

His large hands hold me possessively to him as he takes what he wants. And when he breaks the kiss and stares down at me, I can see the fire igniting in his gaze.

"Adeline, I want you," he says, his voice hoarse and strained.

"Let's go to your room," I suggest.

Nodding, he takes my hand in his and leads me away from the beach and back to the manor. I can barely keep up with his long strides, and my feet keep getting tripped up on my dress.

When I almost fall, he stops and looks down at me. Growling, he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder as if I weigh nothing. Carrying me in a fireman's hold, I giggle the whole way to the mansion.

Never in a million years would I have pictured getting Mr. Control Freak so worked up that he's willing to pick me up and carry me back to his room like a caveman.

He stalks into the house and carries me up the stairs without even breaking a sweat. We pass by Jax in the hallway. "What —?" he starts to inquire, but Lucien simply says, "Don't ask."

Jax stares after us, and I give him a shrug with a grin on my face. Shaking his head, Jax smiles before walking away.

When we reach Lucien's bedroom, he kicks the door shut and unceremoniously dumps me on the bed. I bounce on the soft mattress and can't help the laugh that escapes me.

But my laugh slowly dies in my throat as I watch Lucien pulling loose his tie with his dexterous fingers. He has a look on his face like he could just eat me up. And I'm surprised by how much I want that right now.

Swallowing hard, I slip out of his jacket and toss it to the edge of the bed. Standing, I turn my back to him and ask, "Can you unzip me?"

I hear what sounds like a muted groan coming from him before he walks over to me. The sound of the zipper going down is almost deafening, and it feels like my heart is going to beat out of my chest as his hands slip

under the material and skate across my skin. He slowly peels my dress away, and it falls to the floor, puddling at my feet.

Turning me suddenly, he places one arm around my waist, pulling me impossibly close. The other hand goes to my hair where he tightens his fist around my locks. He stares at me with a pained look on his face. "What are you doing to me?" he asks heatedly. "I lose myself when I'm around you," he confesses.

Feeling bold, I tell him, "Maybe that's a good thing sometimes."

He pushes me towards the bed; and when my knees hit, I fall backwards. Grabbing my legs, he spreads them roughly as his eyes rake down my naked form. "Fuck, you're beautiful," he growls.

I watch as he unbuttons his white shirt and strips out of his pants and boxers. My greedy gaze peruses his muscular physique. He looks like he was carved out of stone to mirror some Greek god, and it has my entire body buzzing with pent-up desire.

Reaching into the nightstand, he withdraws a condom and sheaths his rock hard length. Gripping himself by the root with his right hand and locking his left hand on my thigh, he rubs the tip against my clit, causing me to moan loudly.

"I can't go slow," he hisses out in confession. "I want you too damn much right now."

"I don't want slow," I tell him even though the words make my heartbeat double in speed.

He takes a step back, and his fingers dip inside of me, testing me. "Fuck, you're soaked," he says through gritted teeth.

I want to tell him it's because he's been teasing me, albeit unknowingly, all evening. I wanted him the moment I saw him standing by the gazebo. And knowing that he did all of that planning and preparation for me made me want him even more.

"Fuck me, Lucien," I gasp, not wanting to wait another second without him inside of me.

He growls at my words, and I don't have to wait long before he positions himself at my entrance and enters me, not stopping until he's fully seated inside of me.

I gasp at the intrusion as my walls try to accommodate his length. "Oh, shit," I pant.

He only gives me a moment to recover, however, before he withdraws almost the entire way before sliding home again. And the feeling is incredible. My eyes roll back in my head as I scream out his name.

He grabs my legs and pins them against his chest, locking my ankles together with one of his large hands while the other reaches for my breasts, tugging on my hardened nipples. The sensation is driving me closer and closer to the edge. And before I can even stop myself, I'm tumbling over.

"Lucien!" I cry, his name a soft plea on my lips, as my inner walls spasm around his cock.

He slows down his thrusts, but barely gives me time to recover before picking up the pace again and brutally pistonning his hips into me. "Again," he demands. "Come for me again. I want to hear you fucking scream, Adeline."

As if on command, my body betrays me as I soar off the precipice once again. A scream rips out of my throat as he fucks me harder, faster.

"Yes. That's it," he drawls out. "You're mine."

"I'm yours," I gasp.

My words seem to be his undoing, because his thrusts falter and then he's joining me in bliss. He grinds out my name from his beautiful mouth as he pumps into me three more times before stilling. The look of ecstasy and overwhelming serenity on his face takes my breath away.

Our panting breaths fill the silence of the room as we stare at each other. Something passes between us, and I couldn't describe it even if I

wanted to.

After several minutes, Lucien suggests, "Let's take a shower."

I'm quiet as he helps me up and leads me to the en suite. And under the spray of the water, we lose ourselves quickly in one another again...and again...and again. It's as if he can't get enough of me now after pushing me away for so long.

And I'm afraid I'll never be able to get enough of him...even if that means being his prisoner forever.

CHAPTER 11

LUCIEN

THE NEXT COUPLE of weeks fly by, and I can feel myself changing. *For her.*

Adeline makes me want to be a better man, and it doesn't bother me as much as I thought it would. Change, when it comes to anything in my life, never really appealed to me. In fact, it downright scares me at times.

I like to be surrounded by familiar things and people. I rarely change my routines. It's just another thing that makes me feel like I'm in control of myself and my world.

And that calms me, keeps me sane.

But I noticed in the passing days that my showers have grown shorter since the thought of being away from Adeline for more than a few minutes is becoming almost unbearable.

She is my drug. My whole fucking world right now. My obsession with her has replaced most of my other preoccupations.

And even though I was worried I was coming on too strong, it doesn't seem like Adeline minds my attention at all. Truthfully, I think she craves

me just as much as I crave her. However, I've only allowed her to see the surface of my true fixation. Like an iceberg floating in the Arctic Ocean, my obsession that lies underneath the water's surface is vast and unsurmountable.

I'm never going to let her go. And no matter how many times I tell her that, she doesn't appear frightened. I just hope she realizes that when I say those words to her, I mean that I want to keep her forever...even if she eventually decides she doesn't want to stay.

There aren't enough psychiatrists in the world to psychoanalyze that bullshit, so I don't even try to do it myself.

I just know that I'll do anything to keep her.

After a surprisingly short shower, at least by my standards, I go to the library where I know Adeline will be. She spends most of her time either in the library or the flower garden out back that I had planted for her. She's also taken a liking to the gazebo I had built for her, and I often catch her sitting under the twinkling lights reading or just gazing up at the stars.

As soon as I open the door of the library, her soft, melodic voice carries across the library as I enter. Wearing earbuds from her newly acquired *iPod shuffle* clipped to her shirt, Adeline dances through the library, completely oblivious that I'm watching her.

I allow the door to close quietly behind me, and I sit down on a nearby leather chair to enjoy the show.

She's wearing yoga pants, and there's a slim gap visible between her luscious thighs as she moves. The dark material is pulled tightly against her plush, little ass, and I hold back the groan threatening to release from my throat.

I watch as she puts books away, softly singing and gyrating her hips in a seductive dance that makes my cock twitch in my pants. My hand moves down to my hard length pressing painfully against my zipper. I stroke myself through the material a few times, biting back another groan.

"Fuck," I hiss through gritted teeth.

Slowly, I stand and stalk towards her like an animal on the prowl, unbuttoning and stripping out of my dark suit jacket and my long-sleeve, white button-up shirt on the way. Her back is still to me, her melodious voice drawing me in. She's oblivious that I'm coming for her, oblivious to the things I want to do to her right now, and that thought makes me rock fucking hard.

I feel like at any moment I could spontaneously combust; I want her so badly. Fuck, this girl is gonna be the death of me. She calls to me like one

of the Sirens from Greek mythology, and I would gladly crash into a thousand jagged rocks for just a single touch from her.

Adeline turns to grab a book, and that's when she spots me out of the corner of her eye. She jumps and a half-hearted scream partially escapes her lips before she realizes it's just me.

The recognition and dissipation of fear in her eyes does something to me then. *She trusts me.* But over and above that, she sees me as her protector...perhaps maybe even something *more*.

I gently pull the earbuds from her ears and unclip the iPod from her tight, little shirt, which is emphasizing the rise and fall of her luscious tits as erratic pants escape her full lips.

"Lucien," she says in a breathy whisper. "You scared me. I didn't even know you were..."

Her voice trails off as my fingertips graze the soft material of her shirt. Without speaking a word, my hand travels down her flat stomach and finds her mound through the thin material of her pants. I can feel the heat coming from her core, and it turns me the fuck on.

She releases a shuddering breath as I stroke her through the fabric. I just had her last night, but I'm quickly learning that I'll never get my fill of

her. And by the way her moans are bouncing off the library walls, I don't think Adeline has gotten quite enough of me yet either.

My lips find hers, swallowing a moan as I plunge my tongue into her mouth and tangle my free hand in her hair, holding her tightly in place and possessing her in every way possible. I can feel her pussy growing wet, soaking the material and my fingertips.

"Fuck, Adeline," I growl against her mouth. I pull back to stare into her eyes. "Don't you see what you're doing to me?"

Adeline gives me a worried and confused look for a moment, but her expression soon turns to surprise when I reach down and grip the crotch of her pants. With one quick tear, I split the seams, growling like a fucking animal.

She makes me feel reckless. She makes me feel crazy sometimes. But most of all, she makes me *feel*.

I stare down at the hole I created and realize she's not wearing anything under the yoga pants. "No panties," I hiss, my eyes meeting hers. "Such a bad girl," I tell her with a smirk. She sinks her perfect, white teeth into her plump lower lip, making my dick jump at the sight.

"I need to be inside of you. Now," I growl. Not wanting to wait another second without feeling her tight pussy grasping my hard cock, I

quickly unzip my pants, pull them down over my hips and slip out my aching cock. "This is going to be quick...and hard," I warn her.

"That's exactly what I want," is her response, and it's music to my fucking ears.

My hands grip her ass, and I haul her petite body up in my arms with ease. She wraps her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck. Without hesitating, I line up my cock and force her down on my length, impaling her.

Adeline's cries echo in the vast room, and it's like a fucking symphony with notes only I can hear. I force myself to still and allow her a moment to adjust, because I'm already too far gone to think about anything else but fucking her in this moment.

I move us up against one of the bookshelves, and pull out slowly, thrusting shallowly into her tight, little pussy and allowing her wetness to coat the length of my cock.

She feels so damn good, and I feel like I'm not going to last more than a few seconds. That's when I realize why it feels so different this time — I'm in her bare for the first time. I was so consumed with lust that I didn't even think about putting a condom on.

Adeline must be able to sense my apprehension, because she asks, "Lucien, what's wrong?"

I pull back to look in her eyes, those emerald orbs that I could stare into forever. "Nothing," I whisper to her. *Nothing at all.*

I watch her beautiful face morph into pure ecstasy as I begin to thrust in and out of her, her soft, wet cunt gripping me so tightly. Her sexy moans fill my ears, and it drives me mad with the overpowering desire to take her, to fucking make her mine.

Slapping my right hand against the wall of books behind her, I rut into her over and over, wringing out every cry and groan and orgasm that I can get out of her sexy, lithe body.

On her third orgasm, she's trembling against me, her grip on me loosening as she struggles to keep up her strength. But I'm not done with her yet.

Holding her trembling body against me, I step out of my pants, which had pooled around my ankles, and move us to a leather sofa where I gently lay her down. With her legs in the air and her ankles at my ears, I fuck her slow and deep. At this angle, I'm able to reach every inch of her, and I fucking love it.

Adeline shakes her head back and forth, moaning nonsensical things as another orgasm racks her body, making her legs quiver in my grip.

"More," I demand from her as my hips piston against her. The sound of my balls slapping against her wet pussy and our ragged breaths are the only noises filling up the quiet library now.

I'm fucking her like an animal, our lovemaking like some kind of fucked-up ritual bringing us closer than ever before.

I pick up my pace, and I can sense when Adeline is going to have another orgasm by the way she tenses and her tight, little cunt starts gripping me harder and harder.

"Lucien!" she cries out as the pleasure hits her. *Hard.*

"Fuck yeah," I growl at the sound of my name flying past her lips over and over again.

I stare down at our joined union, my thick cock filling her tight, wet pussy. And that's what sends me over the edge. In that moment I know I should pull out, but I can't seem to force my cock to listen to me.

With a groan that sounds like a fucking roar, I grip the back of the leather sofa with my right hand as the most powerful orgasm I've ever had erupts through me, my seed filling her to the brim as I pump in and out of her one...two...three more times.

Panting and completely out of breath, I collapse into Adeline's arms, keeping most of my weight off of her with my trembling forearms. Our bodies are sticky and covered in a sheen of sweat as we lay there together, our thundering heartbeats racing against one another.

Adeline's hands run their way over my back, skating over my scars gently and then through my damp hair as she whispers sweet nothings in my ear.

I stare down at this mythical, beautiful creature with hooded emerald eyes and a sly smile of satisfaction on her lovely face.

And it's right in that exact moment that I fall so fucking hard for Adeline that it physically hurts.

CHAPTER 12

ADELINE

WELL, WHEN I had planned to spend my day in the library putting books back into their proper places, I'd never expected Lucien to come in and give me five mind-blowing orgasms.

Not that I'm complaining or anything.

As he lies with me and our breathing starts to slow, I can't help but think about how much Lucien has changed over the past several months. He would have never laid here with me before. He would have never let me stroke his back like I'm doing now, my fingertips skating over the scars that he hides away from everyone except for me. And he most certainly wouldn't have let me run my hands through his formerly perfectly-styled hair.

He's changed...for the better. And I couldn't be happier.

After a long while of lying in each other's arms, Lucien eventually gets up. The moment he pulls out of me, I sense something is different. I glance down at his softening cock glistening with his release. "Oh, shit," I whisper in alarm.

His eyes meet mine, but he doesn't seem as freaked out by it as I do.

But why? If Lucien was going to freak out about anything...it would most certainly be this! "You didn't...you didn't put a condom on," I tell him even though it's obvious.

His gaze drifts down my body, and he stares at my most intimate area. "I've never done that before," he whispers, and I'm not even sure if he's talking to me or just thinking out loud.

I brace myself, expecting him to go berserk, but he does the exact opposite. Ever so gently, his fingertips part my lips, and he watches his seed flow out of me and spill onto the leather sofa. And instead of losing it or freaking out, he...smiles. *He actually fucking smiles.*

"That's so fucking hot," he whispers in reverence.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Lucien?" I ask him, teasingly, but I can hear the tremor and unease in my voice.

His dark eyes meet mine, and his smile falters. I fear I've pushed him too far, but then he surprises me once more by leaning down and placing a soft, sensual kiss on my lips. He lingers there for a few moments, our tongues tangling together — testing, teasing, tasting.

When we part, I'm panting again. Lucien knows my body better than I do, and he can turn me on with the snap of his fingers. I don't think he even

realizes how easy it is for him, because in a strange way, because of his past, he doesn't think he's good enough or worthy enough.

"Mine," he says possessively before nibbling on my bottom lip.

Is that what this was all about? Marking me? If Lucien hasn't realized he owns me body and soul yet, then I don't know how else to convince him.

However, we haven't really discussed our future and definitely nothing about marriage or...starting a family.

I've never really had what are considered normal periods mostly due to all the dancing and exercising I was always participating in. So I don't know if I can even get pregnant.

Not wanting to linger on the subject since there's nothing I can do about it now, I suggest to Lucien, "Let's take a shower together."

He grins at me with that relaxed, boyish grin that makes my heart skip a beat. Without another word, he helps me up and starts to redress. After I get dressed, I carefully clean up my mess on the sofa with some tissues and throw them in the wastebasket before we leave. I make a mental note to come back with some Lysol wipes later to thoroughly clean up just in case this new and disturbingly easygoing Lucien is just temporary.

When Lucien pushes the door open to leave the library, he stops suddenly. Jax is leaning up against the nearby wall, looking like the cat that

just swallowed the canary.

I can immediately feel the blush creeping up my chest. How much did he hear just now?

"Voyeur," Lucien mutters to his cousin as he grabs my hand and pulls me towards the stairs.

Jax simply answers him with a wink and then a sheepish grin at me.

As Lucien leads me to his bedroom, I ask him, "What was that about?"

Lucien rolls his eyes and shakes his head as we walk into the bathroom. "Jackson gets his kicks over watching and listening to other couples...you know...fuck."

My eyes widen at his words. "So you think he...heard us?"

"I have no doubt," Lucien says as he begins to strip out of his clothes once again.

I bite my lip as I think about Jackson hearing my cries as Lucien fucked me into oblivion.

Then I feel Lucien's fingers on my chin, tipping my face up, so that I meet his gaze. "Does that turn you on, Adeline?" he asks, and I can't tell whether he's amused or upset by the idea.

"Maybe...a little," I whisper, feeling completely and utterly embarrassed at my confession.

"Then that makes you an exhibitionist I suppose," he says matter-of-factly. And then with an evil grin, he adds, "Maybe we'll give Jax a little show sometime."

I stare after him as he turns on the water and steps into the shower. *Is he serious?*

First, Lucien isn't freaking out over fucking me without a condom. And now his possessive jealousy isn't overriding his brain when it comes to Jax.

What universe did I wake up in this morning?

Shaking my head, I quickly strip out of my clothes, my ruined yoga pants with a big hole in the crotch. Oh, god, I wonder if Jackson saw my... Ugh, I decide not to even think about it.

I step into the large shower beside Lucien, the warm water spraying from numerous jets feeling so good on my sore arms and legs. "I don't know if I'd like to give him a show. It's just that it was kind of hot knowing he was listening...when I didn't know he was there. But it's not like I would ever sleep with him or anything, you know..." I stop when I realize I'm rambling.

Lucien stares at me and grins. He's been smiling a lot lately, and it makes my heart so damn happy. "Don't worry, baby," he says, using his newest nickname for me that makes me melt right on the spot. "I won't ever share you with anyone else." His teeth nip my bottom lip as he growls, "You're mine. All mine."

The rest of the shower is spent with Lucien seeing how many orgasms he can draw out of me.

And the answer is seven.

Lucky number seven.

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CHAPTER 13

LUCIEN

THAT NIGHT I'M lying in bed next to Adeline. She's already asleep on the other side of the mattress, resting peacefully on her stomach with her hands curled under her chest and her pretty face turned towards me.

I watch her sleep...her eyelids fluttering softly...her deep even breaths causing her back to rise and fall.

She's devastatingly beautiful, and I still can't believe I was lucky enough to have her walk into my life. It's almost as if she's some kind of serendipitous gift, something perfect to reward me for surviving the first half of my life, the light at the end of a very dark tunnel that was my youth.

And if fate truly led me to her, then I would gladly suffer through everything again just to be here with her now.

Gently, I brush my fingertips over her soft cheek, grasping a stray, dark lock and tucking it behind her delicate ear. The fact that I can touch her now without panicking is amazing. I never thought there would be a cure for me.

But Adeline is my cure.

I believe that to be true.

I become so fixated on her when she's near that nothing else can permeate my thoughts. There's only her.

Hesitantly, I move closer to Adeline. I never wanted this type of intimacy with anyone before. But when it comes to her, it's like I can never be close enough. I want to crawl inside of her and live forever.

I want to make her mine...because I'm already hers.

As if sensing my nearness, Adeline snuggles up against me, laying her head on my chest as I wrap my arm around her, protecting her. Keeping her safe with me. *Always*.

My lips kiss her crown, and I memorize every hair on her head until my eyelids begin to grow heavy.

As I begin to drift asleep, I can sense the nightmare coming before I can stop it.

It's the smell that always hits me first...the overwhelming stench of cigarettes, booze, chemicals, cat piss and burnt toast...

It's early when I wake up to the smell of burnt toast.

My stomach clenches with both hunger and nausea at the same time.

Mama's only nice before something terrible happens.

And if she's making me something to eat for breakfast, then it's probably gonna be a bad day.

I stand up from my small, dirty mattress on the floor and get dressed for school. I just started sixth grade this year, and so far it's going okay. I just wish my mama would let me go more.

Today's Thursday, which means it's pizza day. My belly growls loudly at the thought of food, and I grimace in pain when my stomach cramps up from being empty for so long.

Mama didn't make dinner last night, not that it was out of the ordinary for her, and my search for food in the cupboards left me empty-handed.

After shooing away Lucy, a black cat with yellow eyes, off of my book bag, I slip the straps around my shoulders and walk out of my room, pushing past the shower curtain serving as a makeshift door. It's almost time for the bus, and I don't wanna be late.

The acrid smell of burnt toast grows stronger as I trudge through the cluttered living room, littered with beer cans and boxes of junk that Mama buys for next to nothing from yard sales and auctions.

We live in an old, single-wide trailer, and there's not much room for even the two of us, let alone Mama's numerous boyfriends and friends that come over all the time to party and crash on the ratty couch or recliner.

Her current boyfriend must still be in her room sleeping off his hangover from drinking all night. At least all he does is drink and occasionally hit or kick me. Her prior boyfriends were much, much worse.

A shudder passes through my body as I think about the things they've done to me...and the things my mama let them do to me.

I walk into the small adjoining kitchen and watch Mama standing over the toaster with a cigarette precariously dangling from two fingertips. Almost the whole cig is ash, waiting to fall at any second as Mama stares off into the distance as if she's in a trance. She probably has no idea I'm even here, and I can't help but always wonder if that makes it easier for her.

To pretend like I'm not here. To pretend that I don't exist.

Dark smoke rises from the toaster, which Mama found in a neighbor's trashcan a long time ago. It always burns the bread almost to the point of no recognition, but she usually scrapes the charred parts off in the sink before giving it to me. Sometimes I have to do it myself if she's too far gone after having taken her medicine.

The toast suddenly pops up, causing Mama to jolt and snap out of her trance. The long ash from her cigarette falls to the filthy kitchen floor. With a frown, she smashes the butt into a nearby ashtray, and then places the toast on a dirty plate from the sink before handing it to me.

I sit down on a rusted and squeaky metal folding chair in front of a small wooden table. Mama's hands are trembling as she lights up another cigarette, so I figure she must be out of her medicine again. She always gets the shakes when she's out of her medicine.

Mama didn't even bother to scrape off the burnt parts this time, but my empty stomach growls loudly for food. I only manage to sneak food here and there whenever I can get it or when Mama lets me go to school, and I feel like I'm always starving.

Other boys my age are all much bigger than me, and I'm always asked how old I am. I guess I look much younger than eleven because I'm so small.

I manage to swallow down several bites of dry, scorched bread and tell Mama, "Almost time for the bus."

"You're not going to school today, baby," she tells me while running a hand through her greasy, matted, blonde hair.

A sick feeling instantly sours my stomach, and I push the plate away from me. She must really need her medicine bad. And when she gets desperate like that...really, really bad things always happen to me.

"I need you to go next door to Mr. Merton's place and do a couple chores for him, okay, baby?"

I freeze, my blood instantly turning to ice in my veins, and now I'm the one who's shaking. "N-n-n-o, M-Mama. I c-c-can't," I stammer, while tears are already collecting in my eyes.

"You will do as Mama says now," she tells me sternly. "Mama needs money for her medicine. He said he only needs you to do a few things for him this morning, and then he'll give you the money."

I think about the past couple of times I went to the next door neighbor's house. Mr. Merton touched me. And he made me touch him.

He hurt me.

Shaking my head, I get out of my seat. If I can just make it outside and get onto the bus, Mama will have to come up with the money herself. I know some other kids who have fathers and mothers who work. I don't know why Mama can't find a job to afford her medicine.

Mama wraps her thin, bony fingers around my shoulders and shakes me. Hard. "Lucien, I need you to be Mama's little helper today. Okay? Can you do that for your mama?"

I want to tell her no. I want to tell her again about all the evil things Mr. Merton makes me do for the money, but the words just won't come out.

Besides, Mama already knows what happens over there. After the first time it happened, I told her he touched me. But Mama told me it was because I was bad and that I deserved it.

Mama tells me I'm bad all the time even when I try not to be. But even when I'm good, nothing good happens to me.

Maybe I'm always bad and just don't realize it.

She slowly takes off my book bag as I start to cry. "Now, now, don't cry. You'll be back home before you know it. And when I go to get my medicine, I'll buy you a Snickers from the gas station up the road. How does that sound?"

I nod even though I want to scream at her and tell her all the horrible things swirling inside my head. I hate her. I hate my mother. But I can't say the words out loud or even more bad things will probably happen to me.

"Such a good boy. That's why Mama loves you so much."

I cringe at her words. Mama only loves me when bad things are about to happen. I associate love with horrible things now because of her.

She gives me a rough push towards the front door, and I almost stumble. "Go on now. He's waiting for you," she snaps, her voice stern.

I slip on my old, scuffed tennis shoes that are too tight for my feet. And then I run out of the trailer and down the porch steps, stopping at the bottom to upchuck the burnt toast. I dry-heave for a few moments, tears streaming down my face.

I hear the bus pulling up at the end of the trailer court lane, and I numbly watch as all the kids from the neighboring trailers get on it.

Wiping the spit from my mouth on my sleeve, I glance back at our trailer. I want to run and get on the bus...but I can't leave. I just can't. Mama needs her medicine. And if I don't get her the money for her medicine, I'll get punished. And sometimes her punishments are even worse than what happens next door.

Sometimes.

Besides, she took my book bag with all my stuff. And my teacher, Mrs. Conner, always gets mad when I forget my books and homework.

Releasing a quiet sob, I watch the bus pull away, wishing that I was on it and on my way to school instead of having to get money for Mama.

Balling my right hand into a fist, I lash out and strike the side of the trailer. Pain wracks my hand as my knuckles land against the unforgiving aluminum siding. Clutching my bloody, bruised knuckles against my chest, my entire body shakes with pent-up anger.

It's not fair that other kids have mothers who cook and clean and tuck them in at night and that they have fathers who play ball and read them bedtime stories.

Why didn't I get to have parents who do things like that? Parents who love me? What did I do to deserve a life like this?

I must be rotten inside, just like Mama says. She's told me a lot of times that I was a mistake; that I wasn't supposed to be born.

Maybe she's right. And now I'm being punished for it.

Reluctantly, I force my feet to move to the rundown trailer next-door. I climb the rickety stairs of the porch and slowly push through the front door, which is ajar.

Mr. Merton is waiting for me in the living room when I walk in. He's old and fat, but he always gives me something to eat...after the bad things

happen.

A cruel smile is on his face as he leads me back to his bedroom. He slams the door shut and locks it, making me shudder in terror.

"Take off your clothes and get on the bed, boy," he instructs.

I stare at him in confusion. Usually I just have to strip and touch myself while he touches himself. Sometimes he touches me to show me what to do or what he likes...but he never asked me to get on the bed before.

"W-what?" I ask.

"Are you deaf, boy?" he asks, knocking me on the side of my head with his fat fist. "I said take off your clothes and get on the bed."

Not wanting to anger him any more than I already have, I quickly take off my t-shirt and shorts. I wish Mama would buy me some new underwear. Maybe I wouldn't have to be totally naked, and maybe Mr. Merton would let me keep them on at least.

I stand by the edge of the bed, eyeing the dirty, discolored mattress. There are no sheets; just a greasy pillow that looks stained with sweat.

"Get. On. The. Bed." He says each word separately as if I'm stupid and can't understand him.

I'm not stupid. Mrs. Connor told me I'm one of the brightest boys she's ever met. It's just that Mama doesn't let me go to school enough, so I'm always behind. I'm always paying the price because she needs her stupid medicine.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts when Mr. Merton roughly grabs my arm and forces me onto the bed. I crawl to the middle, covering myself as best I can with my hands. I watch as he undresses, not wanting to look, but needing to know what his next move is.

He's fat, and his large rolls move and shake as he walks over to the bed and lies down beside me.

I'm figuring this will be like all the other times, and that he won't actually touch me or hurt me.

I keep telling myself that over and over in my head as if somehow they'll come true.

But that time was different with Mr. Merton, because he didn't just make me cry...

He made me scream.

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CHAPTER 14

ADELINE

I'M RIPPED OUT of a deep sleep by the sound of someone screaming. It takes a moment to find the switch to the lamp next to me. And by the time the light illuminates the room, Lucien's cries for help have intensified.

It's not the first time he's awoken me from a bad dream he'd had since I moved into his room, but he's never reacted this profoundly before. His tortured cries freeze the blood running through my veins, and I can feel the tears gathering in my eyes as he murmurs, "Please, no. Don't touch me. Please. *It hurts!*"

I've only garnered a little information about Lucien's past from what he's shared with me, but I know that he suffered immensely as a child, much more than he'll probably ever admit to me...or anyone.

If the nightmares are any indication of what he went through, I'm surprised he even made it through his childhood alive.

I know I probably shouldn't wake him, but his cries are too much to bear. I can't watch him suffer through that real-life nightmare again. I grab

one of his arms thrashing in the air. "Lucien!" I cry, hoping that my voice will break through the spell he's under.

He's fighting me now, and his arm wrenches out of my grip. He's stuck in the nightmare, not realizing that I'm trying to help him, not harm him.

His head shakes back and forth quickly as he whispers in a small, shattered voice, "No, no, no," over and over again, breaking my heart all over again.

Feeling like I have no other choice, I straddle him on the bed and grab his arms, pinning them down on the mattress. "Lucien!" I shout.

His eyes snap open, and the next thing I know, my world is turned upside down and I'm pinned underneath him. His ragged, rapid breaths are the only sounds in the room as he stares down at me with a blank expression on his face.

"It's me," I tell him. "It's me, Lucien. You're safe." I twist my right hand out of his tight grip and place my palm against his cheek. "You're safe," I adamantly tell him again. He's drenched in sweat, and I can practically hear his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest. "I'm here, Luc. I'm here."

Eventually, his eyes focus on me, and I can see the confusion and then the shame appear on his handsome face. He suddenly shoves away from

me and sits on the edge of the bed, facing away from me. "I...I'm...I'm sorry Adeline," he says between pants, sucking in shuddering breaths as his muscular back shudders. "I...I didn't hurt you...did I?"

"No," I tell him. I might have a bruise or two from his strong grip, but nothing to worry him about now. Besides, I wouldn't blame him for something completely out of his control.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he chants repeatedly, hanging his head in shame. Abruptly, he stands and paces the floor beside the bed. "Maybe we should move you back into your own room. It's not safe with you here with me. Not safe. Too dangerous," he mutters rapidly.

I sit up on my knees and grab his hand, pulling him on top of me once more. I put my hands on either side of his face and force him to meet my gaze. "You're not getting rid of me that easily," I tell him with a grin, trying to lighten the mood. Leaning up, I kiss his soft lips.

But he doesn't kiss me back.

When I lean back on the pillow, I can see the tormented expression on his face. He's still thinking about what happened in the dream. He's still thinking about who hurt him.

"I'm sorry that I'm so fucked up," he whispers, squeezing his eyes shut and grimacing as if he's in pain.

Gently, I push him to lie down beside me. At first, he gives me a worried look, probably thinking that I'm pushing him away and that I'm going to leave.

But then I slowly strip out of my pajama top and shorts, and his eyes widen in surprise. "Let's replace the bad with something good," I suggest to him as I straddle his muscular legs. I reach into his boxers and pull out his heavy, flaccid cock. Gently, I begin to run my fingertips over his soft skin, and it begins to harden from my touch. He lets out a low moan and stares at me with trepidation.

"I want to make you forget, Lucien," I tell him. "So if you ever think about that bad memory again, you have something new, something better to think about."

He groans as I begin to stroke him. With my free hand resting on his muscular chest, I can feel the moment he starts to relax. He's letting go... and he's letting me in.

We can face his demons together, and I will slay every one with my own bare hands if I have to.

His hand moves to my clit, stroking me lightly with his fingers to get me ready for him. And when I'm practically a panting and quivering mess, I hover over him and grab his thick member, lining it up with my entrance.

Our eyes meet, and Lucien gives me no warning before he thrusts up inside of me. It's such a good hurt, and I bite my lip to keep from crying out.

His hips piston up and down, thrusting his thick cock in and out of me while his fingertips brush against my sensitive, little nub, strumming me like a finely tuned instrument only he knows how to play.

I come undone time after time again, but he doesn't stop. He never stops. And I meet him thrust for thrust, pushing myself down as he drives his hips up to meet me.

Lucien groans louder than I've ever heard him, and it turns me on. I lean down and sink my teeth into his lower lip like he has done to me so many times before, and he lets out a whimper and moan.

He pulls back and gazes up at me with a heated gaze as he stills his hips. "Ride my fucking cock," he demands with a sharp slap to my ass.

I place my palms against his hard, chiseled abs, and I ride him, slow at first before speeding up and then slowing down once more.

He groans almost in agony, but he doesn't try to take control of the pace. He's letting me be the one in power now. And considering Lucien never relinquishes control over *anything*, this is a huge step for him...and for both of us.

His thumbs brush over my pebbled nipples before he begins to knead my breasts in his large hands and then tug and pinch my nipples. Hard.

I'm gasping in need as I impale myself over and over again on his hard length, my body slamming down against his muscular thighs.

"I'm gonna..." I start, but I can't even finish before I'm crying out in ecstasy.

"Yes," he hisses. "Come for me, Adeline. Come all over my fucking cock."

I ride out wave after wave until I finally collapse forward against his chest. Not skipping a beat, Lucien grabs my ass possessively and begins to thrust in and out of me faster and faster, dragging out my orgasm to new unprecedeted heights.

I moan his name loudly, clutching him to me, never wanting to let him go. "I love you," I whisper in his ear. "I love you, Lucien."

His thrusts falter for a moment, but he continues to fuck me. His hands grasp my face, and he forces me to look at him. "Say it again," he growls.

"I love you, I love you, I love you!" I cry out.

"Fuck, Adeline." He pumps into me a few more times before he shouts his release, spilling deep inside of me, as we both collapse in exhaustion.

I curl up against his chest and listen to his thundering heartbeat. I didn't intend to tell Lucien how I really feel about him, but the moment just seemed right. I know he didn't say it back, but I truly didn't expect him to.

After a few moments, I glance up at him. My mouth meets his in a scorching kiss.

Then he suddenly pulls away, his dark eyes piercing mine under furrowed brows. "You're mine, Adeline. And I'm never letting you go," he says with stern possessiveness that makes me shiver.

It's not the three words I wanted to hear, but it might be as close as I'll ever get. In his own way, Lucien just confessed his true feelings for me in those two sentences.

"Ditto," I breathe against his lips.

CHAPTER 15

LUCIEN

SHE LOVES ME.

Adeline fucking loves me.

The thought is so unfathomable that part of me thinks that maybe I dreamt the whole thing several nights ago. That maybe my nightmare had turned into the most delirious hallucination where the girl of my dreams confessed her love for me.

It's right out of one of those romantic-comedy movies that Adeline keeps forcing me and Jackson to watch. At first, I hated the lovey-dovey shit, but I've grown to look forward to our movie nights together.

She's changing me.

And I'm not strong enough to resist her any longer.

On one such movie night, Jackson is lounging on a couch adjacent to the one Adeline and I are on in the large den. The room is equipped with two leather recliner sofas, state-of-the-art equipment with surround sound speakers located throughout the room, and a collection of movies that I had special ordered to suit Adeline's tastes, much to Jackson's dismay.

I sit with my back pushed up against the arm of the couch and my long legs stretched out in front of me, watching Adeline's tight, round ass bobbing in the air as she bends over to place a disc into the DVD player.

Adeline picked the movie, just like always. And even though Jackson and I both moan and groan about her choices, secretly I think we both enjoy these movie nights with Adeline just as much as she does.

A grin is on her face as she walks towards me, and I can't help but smile. She's always making me smile. I open my arms up for her as she sits down between my legs.

And as my girl curls up against me with her back to my chest and her head tucked under my chin, I can't help but long for her even when she's right next to me...even when she's in my arms.

I never want to let her go, and I can't help but wonder is that what love is? Is this what it feels like to be in love?

I have no idea since I've never felt this way before about anyone...and, truthfully, never even thought I would ever feel this way.

However, I don't think I could ever say the words out loud even if that's truly how I felt. Too many bad memories are tied up, mixed in and jumbled with those words...and I just can't shake them.

Sometimes I just wish I was fucking normal. It makes me so angry that I can't give Adeline everything that she desires and *deserves*.

When she looks up at me with that beautiful face that I can't stop looking at and those emerald orbs that I dream about, I lean down and press my mouth against hers in a fevered kiss.

If I can't speak the words out loud as to how I feel about her, the least I can do is show her. She deserves that much at the very least.

I pull her up towards me, wanting her closer. Then I trail my fingertips down her neck and brush them over her pebbled nipple pressed against the material of her thin t-shirt. She's not wearing a bra, and she knows how fucking hot that makes me. It makes me wonder if she's not wearing any panties either, and I can't fucking wait to find out.

Movie forgotten, my fingers find their way under the band of her soft, navy shorts. And when I brush against her bare pussy, I groan out loud. "Naughty girl," I whisper into her ear.

She giggles softly and gives me a grin that has my heart skipping a beat. Her legs stretch out on the couch and slowly part, giving me access as I finger her. Two and then three fingers sink into her wet heat as I rub my palm against her clit.

Her breathing suddenly picks up, and I tilt her face back to me and capture her lips with mine. I force my tongue into her mouth, devouring her as I bring her closer and closer to orgasm.

I swallow her moans as she squirms under me. I'm fingering her fast, wanting a quick orgasm out of her. Her fingernails playfully bite into my arm, but she doesn't push me away. No. My girl holds me in place and pulls me closer, wanting me to make her come just as much as I want her to.

Adeline has become insatiable for me just as much as I have been for her. We could fuck all day and all night and never get enough of each other. I could easily spend the rest of my life in bed with her, never leaving other than to maybe eat and shower.

My obsession hasn't cooled one bit over the past several months, and I know I'll never grow tired of her.

As her delicious tightness starts to grip my fingers, I release her mouth to hear her sweet moans. Her body trembles against me as she rides out wave after wave. Her wetness floods my fingers, and I fucking love every second of it.

She comes down from her high and smiles up at me.

"Fuck that was hot," Jackson groans, breaking me out of the spell Adeline has me under.

I stare down at Adeline, afraid of her reaction that we both forgot we had an audience. Her eyes widen before she begins to laugh, and I love that fucking sound. I chuckle and give her a quick kiss before sitting up and tucking her under my arm once more.

I glare at Jackson, who's sitting at a nearby couch with a guilty grin on his face.

I shake my head at him and turn my attention back to the movie. But even when I try to concentrate on the screen, I just can't. I wrap my arm around Adeline and pull her closer to me. She can never be close enough, and I can never hold her tightly enough. I'm so afraid of losing her that it keeps me up at night.

I don't know why, but I have a feeling that someday someone will try to take her from me. I pray that they know I'll go to the end of the fucking earth for this girl and never underestimate the lengths that I'll take to get her back.

Sighing contentedly, Adeline nonchalantly stretches and brushes her hand over my hard cock in my pants. She looks up and gives me a naughty grin that lets me know she knew exactly what she was doing.

My sweet girl wants more? I'll give her more.

Jackson's going to get one hell of a show tonight.

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CHAPTER 16

ADELINE

IT'S EARLY IN the morning when I wake up. My hands move on their own accord, searching for the warm body always by my side, but they come up empty.

When I open my eyes, I discover Lucien is gone, but that he left me a note on his pillow.

I stare at his flawless handwriting and smile. His penmanship is neat and controlled, just like him.

I hated to leave this morning when you looked so peaceful and beautiful, but I have a business meeting to attend off the island.

Be back soon.

Luc

I clutch the small piece of paper to my chest. In the entire time I've been here, Lucien's never left the island. And the thought of him not being here makes me suddenly feel jittery.

I've come to think of Luc as much more than my friend and my lover. He's my protector. He keeps me safe. Always.

I place the note on the stand beside me and crawl out of bed. I need to occupy my time until he comes back. If I keep myself busy, then I won't be able to think about what could happen when he's away.

The painful memories of the assault come flooding back to me when I'm in the shower, and I'm almost paralyzed with fear.

I hadn't realized how safe I actually felt when Lucien's around...and how vulnerable I would feel when he wasn't.

Even after I'm dressed and walking around the mansion, I feel anxious and uneasy.

Our daily routine has become wake up, shower, get dressed and go down for breakfast, so I'm hoping that sticking to that routine will help me feel better. But as I creep down the stairs, the anxiety I've been feeling all morning only intensifies.

Like always, a spread of breakfast foods are laid out in the dining hall, but the thought of food suddenly makes me queasy.

Running to the nearest bathroom adjacent to the hall, I barely make it to the toilet before I begin throwing up stomach acid and dry heave until there's nothing left in me.

Groaning, I stay on my knees for a while, gripping the toilet seat for dear life.

Out of the corner of my eye, a shadowy figure appears in the doorway. Yelping, I jump, smacking my head on the corner of the porcelain sink.

I curse loudly, rubbing the sore spot on the side of my skull.

"Oh, shit! Sorry, Addy!" Jax says, rushing into the bathroom. "Are you okay?"

I glare up at him and nod. "Yeah. No thanks to you!" I accuse.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Jax whispers, holding back a chuckle.

I'm the first to crack a smile, and then Jax begins to laugh out loud at my expense.

Pulling myself up to the sink, I wash my mouth out with water and take a few, big gulps, suddenly feeling thirsty. After I wash and dry my hands, I feel a little better, but the queasiness isn't totally gone.

I hold my hand over my stomach, and Jax looks worried. "Maria's cooking that bad this morning?" Jax attempts to joke.

"Actually I didn't even eat yet." He looks at me strangely, but I brush past him and make my way to the dining hall with him close on my heels.

"I don't know what's wrong. I just..." I can feel my cheeks start to heat and my lungs starting to seize with the overwhelming sense of panic.

"Addy, what is it?"

I whirl around to face him and stop in the middle of the room. The smell of food almost makes me gag, and I clutch my stomach. "When's Lucien coming back?" I blurt out.

"Oh, that's what this is about? He left early this morning and said he would be back as soon as he could." He cocks a brow. "Why? What's going on?"

"I just feel...safer when he's around," I confess as a heated blush creeps up my neck. I don't know why I feel so embarrassed about admitting that, but I do.

Lucien and I have been on cruise control, autopilot or whatever the hell you want to call it for a while now. We've just been going with the flow of things, trying to figure everything out as it comes.

But we haven't put a label on us.

If there even is an *us*.

I have no idea how Lucien truly feels about me. But if he feels even a minuscule amount of what I feel for him...

Jackson's hand on my shoulder brings me out of my daydream. "How about you and me hang out today?" he suggests.

"Really?" I ask, sounding way too eager. Knocking my enthusiasm down a notch, I quickly recover and say, "Well, okay, sure...if you really want to."

He gives me a smirk and says, "Feel up to eating?"

I eye the food on the table and swallow hard. "I'm not sure. Maybe just some toast."

"Then we shall feast on toast," Jax tells me theatrically with a wink.

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CHAPTER 17

LUCIEN

BY WAY OF a very light jet, we reach the Sicilian coast after about an hour in the air. Add in another half-hour or so of driving, and we finally arrive at a small restaurant in Syracuse. I choose a secluded table on the second-story terrace overlooking the sea and mainland, waiting for the man I'm meeting.

My driver, who is also serving as my pilot and bodyguard for the day, is somewhere close by, but remains unseen by even myself. There's a reason that Jackson and I call him *Wraith*. He's like a fucking ghost, managing to blend in with his surroundings so well that it's easy to forget he's even there.

I stare at the linen napkin-wrapped silverware and two glasses of water that the waiter just filled and cringe. Even though I always meet Mr. Wepner at a restaurant, he's the only one out of the two of us who ever eats or drinks.

Sighing, I check my watch. I'm early, of course, but I can't wait for this meeting to be over. I haven't left the island since Adeline arrived, and I feel

anxious about the whole damn thing.

I had to force myself to leave my sleeping beauty. She looked so damn peaceful and angelic this morning that I almost cancelled my meeting.

That girl does something to me that I can't explain. It's like I can't get enough of her. Even when she's right beside me, I miss her.

And now that we're separated by land and sea at the moment, I crave her with an intensity I never felt before in my entire life.

Some people would call it love. Some would call it obsession.

I have no label to put on what I feel for her, because no words would ever be able to describe how deep my feelings go or how she makes me feel.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I'm quick to retrieve it. I left specific instructions to Jax to inform me of anything that happens and to keep me updated on Adeline.

Even though I wanted more of a minute-by-minute breakdown of her day today and her whereabouts, Jax clearly thought I would be okay with only updating me now.

I enter the lock code on my phone and frown. My eyes scan over the text from Jax, and I hold back a growl.

Adeline isn't coping well with your absence, but don't worry. I'm taking good care of her. ;)

Leave it to Jax to instantly piss me off with just a couple of sentences and a fucking winking emoji.

"Jax and his damn emojis," I grumble under my breath. I swear he overuses them more than a teenage girl.

Moving my fingers across the keyboard, I type out a quick and angry response that I'll be home as soon as I can and to keep her safe...while keeping his hands to himself if he still wants to have hands when I return.

The last thing I need during this meeting is to not have my head in the right space. And I'm already feeling the distraction just from that text, wondering what's going on with Adeline and why she's upset.

And it's that very distraction that has me not noticing the man coming towards me.

"Hello, Mr. Wolf," says a voice, breaking me out of my reverie.

My frown deepens as I stare up at the man standing a few inches from my table. I'm mad at myself that I didn't even hear or see him approach.

It's not even safe for me to be seen in public, let alone letting my guard down and allowing people to sneak up on me.

At this moment I'm glad this is a planned meeting, because, fuck, I could be dead by now.

And who would take care of Adeline then?

Pushing that thought, and any thoughts about Adeline really, to the side, I stand and greet Mr. Wepner with a nod.

We've met several times before this day, but always on his turf — U.S. soil. This is the first time that I've asked him to travel to see me. And even though I feel uneasy about meeting so close to the island I'm currently residing on, I didn't want to take any more time from Adeline than what was absolutely necessary.

Henry Wepner is tall with gray hair and matching eyes. He's wearing a casual suit, no tie with the top two buttons of his dress shirt undone. He looks like a regular tourist or someone here on business.

When he holds out his hand, I stare at it, not returning the gesture and keeping my hands safe in my pockets.

After a few seconds of letting his hand hang in the air, he withdraws it and nervously chuckles. "That's right. I always forget. You don't do handshakes."

I flash him a smirk as we both have a seat.

"You know, I had a friend like you back in college," he remarks.

I want to roll my eyes, but I suppress the urge. I've had many people tell me about a friend who cleans a little too much or an uncle who has to have his pens lined up on his desk just so...but none of them have ever compared to me or my eccentricities.

Consider me a unique, little fucking snowflake.

Wepner is quick to grab the menu on the table. His gray eyes scan and squint, trying to decipher the Italian.

I'm not sure if the man across from me speaks any other languages. I only know him on a business level and a need-to-know basis.

I first got in contact with Wepner over a decade ago when he was just starting fresh in the FBI. He was younger then and eager to get any leads on any cases he could get his hands on, wanting promotions and bragging rights.

I happily supplied him with information on criminals, and he happily brought them down. One by one.

We have a common goal him and I — make the bad people pay for their crimes.

And what do I get out of our little arrangement? With all of my hard work in presenting criminals to him on a silver fucking platter, he turns the

other way on my methods of doing so...and all my other non-law-abiding methods of how I make my own fortune.

With the crimes I've committed to get the information that I've given him and to live the lifestyle I currently do, Wepner could easily have me arrested and locked up for the rest of my life.

So our relationship has been tit-for-tat, so to speak, over the last several years.

I also sell codes and computer software to the government, codes that even their greatest hackers can't come up with. They've tried to recruit the best of the best over the years, but none of them have compared to me.

And in exchange for the government not bringing me in and locking me up...or forcing me to do their dirty work in-house, I provide them with all the information they need to take the biggest fish in the underbelly of the world out.

Agent Wepner continues to scan his menu as he asks, "So why did you want this meeting here instead of in the States?"

"Don't tell me you don't enjoy billing the government for an all-expense paid trip to Sicily."

He chuckles, nods and takes a sip of his water that's been sitting at this table for exactly twenty-three minutes. "Sure, sure. But just so you know,

you're paying for my lunch."

"Like always," I remark, grinding my teeth as I stare at the glass of water in front of me. I haven't even attempted to touch the liquid that must be pooling with all sorts of germs and dead skin cells, fibers and maybe even hair.

Just the thought makes my stomach roll, but I force myself to focus on something else while simultaneously fighting the urge to start counting something, anything to get rid of the dark thoughts clouding my mind.

Fuck, I need to just breathe.

And so I do. I take a calming breath, and then I take another. I think about Adeline, her beautiful face and instead fixate on when I will get to see her again.

It's an instant calming sensation that washes over me, and I'm truly beginning to believe that she is the cure for all that ails me.

The man across from me doesn't seem to notice my mini mental breakdown, as he's too busy looking at the menu, no doubt looking for the most expensive thing he can order.

Clearing my throat, I tell him the name that has been rolling around on my tongue for weeks now. "Salvatore Valenti."

Wepner's brows shoot up as he looks at me over top of the tri-fold, laminated menu. "I'm listening," he says cautiously.

"I have enough information to bring down his entire empire including his right-hand man —."

I don't even get to finish my thought before Wepner whispers, "Giovanni Morello."

The waiter appears then, and we both fall silent. Wepner orders the swordfish with a blood orange and fennel salad.

When the waiter looks to me, I tell him in Italian that I'm not hungry, but I will take a bottle of his most expensive wine. That seems to please the young man, and he smiles before taking the menus off the table and leaving to go downstairs to put the order in.

"So you bring down powerful crime syndicates *and* speak Italian. Is there anything you can't do?" Wepner asks with a hint of sarcasm.

"Shake a man's hand apparently," I tell him with a slight grin, which causes the agent to belt out a hearty, deep laugh.

"I think that's the first time you've ever told me something funny...or ever smiled, for that matter." His fingertip and thumb caresses his chin as he studies me for a moment with narrowed eyes. "There's only one explanation for that," he states. "Do you have a new lady in your life?"

I school my features, but keep the smirk on my face. "Women are trouble," I tell him nonchalantly, neither answering nor denying his question.

"You got that right!" he says, letting out another chuckle.

The less Agent Wepner knows about me, the better. And I'll never tell him I have the daughter of the man I'm planning on destroying.

A few moments later, the waiter returns with the wine and pours two glasses. I stare at the glass in front of me and grimace. A few thousand dollars down the tube, and I can't even take one sip.

But I enjoy watching Wepner gulp the expensive liquid down with no problem whatsoever. "I'm not much of a connoisseur or anything. But I know when something's good, and that's damn good wine," he remarks.

After draining the glass, he sets it down and asks, "Why now?"

I raise a brow, silently asking him to explain.

"You know we've been after Valenti for quite some time, but you were never willing to give me the information before. So...why now?"

His question is, of course, valid and reasonable, but I have no interest in telling him the truth. The truth involves Adeline and keeping her safe; however, she's innocent and doesn't belong in the middle of this. So

instead, I answer him by saying, "I was trying to collect as much as I could." Then I add, "And now I'm done."

He slowly nods in understanding, but I'm not sure if he actually believes me. Either way, it's not like he can doubt me on anything really. Hell, Wepner doesn't even know my real name. That's why he refers to me as Mr. Wolf.

The Big Bad Wolf.

That is my code name on the dark web. It's also the name I use for all my business transactions, legal and otherwise. I use the alias because Mr. Wolf doesn't exist. And neither do I technically. Years ago, I eradicated any existence of Lucien Morrow when I hired one of the greatest hackers alive.

Lucien Morrow was a scared, little boy, the victim of abuse. I refused to be a victim after my uncle saved me from my own personal hell.

And after my hacker friend and I were done eliminating my former self, I hired him to teach me everything he knew. We spent many days, weeks, months working on code after code, hack after hack until I learned every possible thing he could instill upon me. And then, once the student eventually became the teacher, we parted ways.

Eventually, I wanted a new identity, one that I could be proud to be associated with. My uncle's last name was the only clear choice, and so I

became Lucien Sterling, for all intents and purposes, to my closest friends and allies, which happen to be very few and far between.

Reaching down to the briefcase in my lap, I snap open the latches and retrieve a thick set of folders. I set them on the table between us and close the briefcase.

Wepner pulls his eyeglasses from his shirt pocket and slips them on his face before he grabs the first folder and flips through the pages. A low whistle escapes his lips as his eyes greedily peruse the file. "You know, even my best agents don't compile data like you. It really is a work of art." He gathers another folder and then another, looking through the evidence that took me a lot of time to gather. "You ever think of working for the good guys?" he asks, eying me over the rim of his glasses.

"Then who would you get all your information from?" I ask him with a small smile.

He snorts. "You got me there. I definitely need someone on the outside looking in like you, Mr. Wolf."

The waiter brings the salad and the swordfish just then, and Wepner sets the folders aside and tucks his glasses back into his pocket.

When we're alone again, I stand and grip the briefcase in my hand. "Well, I really must be going, Agent Wepner. I'll settle the bill downstairs

on my way out. Enjoy your meal."

"One more thing before you go..." he says, causing me to pause by the table and meet his stare. "Word on the street is that Valenti's youngest daughter, Adeline, is missing," he tells me slowly, letting the words and their meaning hang in the air for a few moments.

I give him a small smile and tell him, "Now, I wouldn't know anything about that," before walking away.

CHAPTER 18

ADELINE

"HOW CAN YOU like oldies *and* rap music? They're, like, *complete opposites!*" Jax says, throwing his hand in the air exasperatedly, as he scrolls through my iPod playlist on the computer.

We're currently hanging out in Lucien's office, a place in the mansion that I have never had the privilege of being in before. The fact that Jax had to punch in a key code, which he kept hidden from me, before we entered leads me to believe that I'm probably not supposed to even be in here.

But being in Lucien's office surrounded by his personal things that he considers important enough to keep under lock and key makes me feel better and closer to him somehow.

I give Jax a shrug. "I like almost every genre of music. Well, except country."

"Now, that is a damn shame," he says, shaking his head. "There are some really good country songs out there." Grinning as he continues to scroll through my playlist, he points out, "*Hypnotize* by The Notorious B.I.G. is right above The Four Seasons' *Sherry*." His eyes grow wide as he

exclaims, "Oh, my god! And here is Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* just thrown right into the mix."

I playfully punch him in the arm. "Hey, stop making fun of me!"

He looks at me with a serious expression and says, "I can't help it. This is the most absurd playlist I've ever seen in my life."

I bust out laughing, and then he cracks a grin. "You are an enigma, Adeline. Now I know why Lucien is so intrigued by you." He caresses his jaw with his finger and thumb as if in deep thought before he mutters, "It definitely can't be because of your taste in music."

The smile on my face slowly fades as I think about Lucien and how he's not here right now and hasn't been here for the past several hours. Just when Jax had distracted me enough to keep Lucien from my mind, my overwhelming thoughts of panic start rushing back.

"Do you...do you think he'll be back soon?" I ask quietly.

"What? Am I not entertaining enough for you?" he asks, gently knocking his shoulder into mine.

I smirk. "Oh, you're definitely entertaining enough. I just...I..." I stop talking, because how can I even admit my true feelings right now to Jax when I'm not even sure if Lucien feels the same way about me?

"What the fuck?" Jax mutters under his breath, grabbing my attention. I watch him minimize the iTunes window and maximize the security camera feed on the widescreen computer monitor. The camera angle shows the foyer of the mansion where two women are scuffling. "Is that...?" He leans closer and says, "Shit! That's Maria!" He stands up quickly and tells me, "Stay put. I'll be *right back!*" he says, emphasizing the last two words.

I watch him leave and hear the lock clicking in place with a beep behind him. I'm alone in the office. I'm alone in *Lucien's* office.

Using my time alone to my advantage, I look around the large room. It's masculine and clean with a woodsy, citrusy scent that reminds me of Luc. The chairs are all leather and dark. In fact, the whole room is dark with wood paneling and hardwood floors. And bright, natural light is streaming in from the large windows surrounded by expensive draperies.

My eyes flit back to the monitor where I see Jax breaking up the brawl between the two women. He's talking to the woman, who I don't recognize; and it looks like it's going to be a long conversation.

I glance at the other camera feeds, which are smaller squares on the right, and gasp when I see one labeled "Number Seven's Room". I instantly recognize the bedroom as being the one I originally stayed in when I first came to the island.

There are several camera angles in the small square that I'm sure can be maximized, but I don't dare click on them. Besides, I've seen enough to know that Lucien was spying on me, observing my every move.

No wonder I always had the feeling of being watched when I first arrived.

It's because I was.

Standing quickly, I begin to pace the length of the room. I'm not really nervous or upset...just anxious. I don't know how I truly feel about having been spied on by Lucien this whole time, but maybe I should be more concerned about the fact that it's not freaking me out as much as it probably should. All the weirdness with Lucien has somehow become the norm, and I guess I've come to expect the unexpected when it comes to him.

And in all honesty, if he hadn't been watching me and keeping tabs on me, he never would have saved me that day when Rafael led me away from the mansion.

Closing my eyes, I feel the queasy feeling in my stomach again, and I force myself to block the bad thoughts out. I refuse to think about it or what happened to me. I refuse to give that horrible *monster* and his terrible actions a single ounce of power over me.

Taking a deep and calming breath, I walk towards the windows to see if I can spot any movement on the airplane runway in the distance. On my way across the room, a bright colored post-it note stuck to the corner of a tall, black file cabinet catches my eye.

The writing is definitely Lucien's, and the words he wrote on the note have my heart skipping a few beats.

Eliminate Salvatore Valenti and Giovanni Morello

I stare at the note for a long time before I jerk open the top drawer. I know I shouldn't be snooping, but obviously Lucien has been keeping several things from me.

So it's only fair, right?

That's what I tell myself as I search through the files. When I find nothing truly interesting other than notes about my father's business that I mostly already knew about, I close the drawer.

After checking the security cam feed one more time and seeing Jackson still talking to the unruly woman near the front of the house, I grab the handle to the second drawer and open it.

There are several manila folders all labeled by numbers — Number One through Number Seven. I remember Lucien calling me by Number

Seven the night we got into a huge fight. That coupled with the fact that the camera feed was labeled Number Seven's Room has my curiosity piqued.

My fingers skim along the files until I reach the one labeled Number Seven. Carefully, I pull it out and take it back to my chair. Flipping open the cover, I stare at the first piece of paper and shudder. All of my personal information is contained on the stark, white sheet in perfectly printed type. My name, my height and weight, birth date, eye color, hair color, clothing sizes, shoe size and so much more.

A photo of me is paper clipped to the top right corner, and a shudder runs through me as I stare at my prone form lying unconscious on the bed that was in my room when I first arrived. I'm covered in cuts and scrapes and dirt and wearing a thin, white nightgown. Lucien must have taken the picture when he was in the room alone with me before I woke up.

I had no idea...

Shaking my head, I flip to the next page. It's a string of email correspondence. I go to the first one and read it silently.

Big Bad Wolf,

I have what you want, but it's going to cost you. One-hundred percent pure, virgin, 5'4", around 125 pounds, beautiful with dark hair, as you requested.

You will receive the goods once I receive the cash.

And I expect her to be released once you get what you paid for.

Signed,

Supplier

I gasp, my hands shaking as I read the words over and over again. This is an email from the man who sold me to Lucien.

It's simply signed *Supplier*. But who could that be? Who was close enough to my father to get to me, to plan this all out?

I read further, and I see where Lucien asks him to attach a picture. Hurriedly, I flip to the next page. In my haste, a photo flies out of the file and cascades to the floor by my feet.

My eyes go as wide as saucers as I stare at my face in the picture against the dark hardwood.

I look happy as I smile up at the camera. My long, dark hair is tousled from the wind as I sit with my feet in the sand at the beach.

I remember the exact moment when that picture was taken...and there is only one person who could have taken it.

And that means I know exactly who sold me.

A man who my father trusted more than anyone in the world.

A man who I trusted to keep me safe and to...love me.

"Giovanni," I gasp in horror.

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CHAPTER 19

LUCIEN

THE PLANE RIDE home seemed to take forever; and by the time we land, I'm practically going crazy with the need to get home and see Adeline.

"Hurry!" I tell Wraith once I'm inside the car. It's a short drive from the runway to the mansion, but I want to make sure he knows to be quick about it.

"Yes, sir," Wraith says in a Russian-accented voice, his blue eyes meeting mine only once in the rearview mirror before turning his attention to the task at hand.

My fingertips anxiously drum along the leather seat until the moment the car stops and we're in the driveway. Climbing out before Wraith can even attempt to open my door for me, I rush up the cement stairs and into the front door.

Immediately, my eyes assess the scene before me, and I frown when I realize this is going to be a distraction that's going to keep me from seeing Adeline.

Maria stands off to the side, clearly pissed off and a little disheveled, while Jackson and an older woman mouth battle in the foyer. The woman's hands are flailing all over the place. She's crying and on the verge of being hysterical, and I only catch bits and pieces of what she's screaming in Spanish.

Her husband is dead.

"What the fuck is going on?" I roar, my booming voice echoing off the walls and causing everyone to fall silent and turn to me.

Jax frowns and says, "This is the gardener's wife."

The gardener. The man I killed with my own bare fucking hands.

I grit my teeth, not wanting to be reminded of taking a life, but I know deep down it had to be done.

Rafael took what's mine.

And he hurt Adeline.

His wife should be grateful that I gave her husband a merciful death instead of all the horrible, disturbing things I thought of in my head later on that I wanted to do to Rafael to make him suffer and prolong his agony.

"She wants to go back home to her family," Jax further explains.

I think about her request. I killed her husband, after all. It's not like I could sleep at night knowing that I had one vengeful employee who might try to enact her revenge on me...or what's mine.

"Give her a severance and send her packing then," I tell him simply before turning on my heel and walking away.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Jackson hisses as he follows close behind me. "She could cause problems later on," he says quietly.

I stop walking and turn to him. "Then give her just enough to live on."

Jackson seems unsure, but he nods in agreement. "Fine. I'll send her back to the mainland tomorrow." He spouts off some Spanish to the woman, and she's escorted outside by Wraith.

The woman goes without so much of a peep, of course. Wraith can be quite intimidating just in stature alone since he tops out at six feet, five inches and has more muscle mass than most professional wrestlers.

"I need to get back to Adeline," I tell Jackson in a rush. Every second away from her feels like fucking torture, and I don't even want to analyze the reasons behind that. I just need to see her. "Where is she?"

"Oh, shit," Jax hisses. "I left her in...your office."

I narrow my eyes at him. "You *what*?"

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CHAPTER 20

ADELINE

THE DOOR TO the office bursts open. I jump, startled and still shaking from everything I've uncovered since Jax left me alone.

I look up to see Luc and Jax standing in the doorway with apprehensive expressions on their faces. The moment my gaze locks with Lucien's, I run to him and straight into his open arms.

I grasp onto him tightly, sobbing. His strong arms wrap around me, and he shushes me, stroking my hair. "I'm here," he whispers against my ear. "I'm here."

I learned a lot while he was gone. I learned that he was protecting me from the truth. He knew the entire time that Giovanni was the one who sold me, but he didn't tell me because he knew I would have been devastated. Even though it would have made Lucien's life a hell of a lot easier, he was protecting my feelings.

Who would have thought that Gio could do something like that to me — his boss's daughter and the woman he was supposed to marry?

But now that I know the truth, it only reaffirms my feelings for Lucien. He's always protecting me and putting me first. Lucien would never hurt me. He could have returned me to my father and Gio and, thus, putting me back in harm's way. But he didn't. He didn't send me away.

He has saved me time and time again and proven his love for me even if he'll never say the words out loud. But none of that matters, because I love him. I love him more than anything in this world.

"I know about the emails...about Giovanni," I confess.

He grimaces at Gio's name coming from my lips. "Adeline..." he starts, but I don't let him finish.

Reaching up, I sink my fingers into Lucien's hair and tug his mouth towards mine. His lips meet mine in a bruising kiss. I know he's probably furious at me for being in his office and looking through his files, but I don't care.

None of that matters in this moment. It's only him and me right now.

And I want him.

Now.

I never wanted him more than I do in this exact moment.

Pulling back for a moment, I meet his dark eyes and whisper, "I need you."

With a deep growl that reverberates through me to my very core, he claims my mouth again, kissing me with a fury and frenzy I've never experienced before. Our tongues battle with one another, trying to gain control, and he ultimately wins, thrusting his into my mouth and devouring me in an all-consuming kiss that makes my knees weak.

"You realize he was only gone for, like, six hours, right?" Jax says from the doorway.

"Fuck off, Jax," Lucien hisses, and I snicker when he slams the door in Jackson's stunned face.

Not wasting any time, Luc practically drags me over to the leather sofa in the back of the room. We both make quick work of our clothes, pulling and twisting and tearing until we're both completely naked.

He pushes me down on the sofa and hovers over me. "Fuck, Adeline," he hisses. "You drive me crazy...or *crazier*, I should say," he says with a sad smile.

His head turns as he eyes the scattered clothes strewn throughout the room, and I can practically hear the wheels in his anomalous mind turning. I place my palms on his face and force his attention back to me. "No

thinking. Just do what feels right. Do what feels good," I tell him, reaching down to stroke his thick length that's nestled against my thigh.

"Fuck," he growls, his eyes closing as he gives into the sensation of my hand around him. When he opens his eyes, he looks forlorn like he has a million things he wants to tell me, but can't. "I missed you," he quietly confesses.

I know it's crazy since he was only gone half a day, but I missed him so bad it made me physically ill all morning. "I missed you too," I tell him. "So, so much, Luc."

His lips crash down on mine again as his fingers find my sensitive nub, softly strumming against my clit and making me whimper against his ferocious mouth.

"I need you, Lucien. Now," I whisper, headily.

He retrieves a condom from his pants pocket and sheaths his generous cock. Lining his thick head up against my core, he thrusts inside of me in one, slick thrust causing me to gasp and then cry out. He doesn't even give me time to recover before his hips begin to piston, pumping his hard length in and out of me over and over again, causing my cries to crescendo to a high pitch.

He feels so good; I feel like I could pass out from the pleasure. Even though we just had sex last night, it feels like it's been years. And I know in that moment that I'll never get enough of Lucien. I'll never get my fill of him. I'll always want more and more and more.

Pulling him down to me, I lock my lips on his as he fucks with abandon. My walls clamp around his cock as the first orgasm rips through me with no warning. I pull away from his lips to scream his name, and this seems to only spur him on more.

He ruts into me like a wild animal, releasing shuddering breaths near my ear before sinking his teeth into my neck. I cry out as I feel his teeth and tongue and mouth biting and licking and sucking on my sensitive skin.

When he leans back to admire his handiwork and the mark he no doubt left behind, he growls, "*Mine.*"

He marked me. Even if it's only temporary. But I realize I want him to mark me forever. I want him to make me his.

"I'm yours," I gasp as he continues to fuck me with long, hard, deep strokes that have me crying out over and over as wave after wave of pleasure floods over me.

His gaze locks onto mine as his thrusts begin to slow. The pleasure on his face and the love in his eyes is almost too much to bear. "I love you,

Lucien," I whisper to him.

His lips claim mine as he shudders through his release. And then he holds me gently while whispering sweet sentiments in my ear.

The three words I want to hear aren't amongst them, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter he may never repeat them back to me. The only thing that matters is that we're together.

And nothing will ever tear us apart.

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CHAPTER 21

GIOVANNI

IT'S LATE ON a Friday night when Salvatore Valenti holds a meeting with all of his closest allies, me included. We're all crammed into his large office, which now seems as small as a fucking closet with all the men present. Sal's still hunting for his youngest daughter day and night and almost as hard as I have been.

No matter what I do, I cannot find her.

And it's fucking frustrating the hell outta me.

I know it's my head if Adeline is not found, although it probably still won't end well for me even if she is found. Because if anyone ever spills the truth to Sal, I'm dead either way. He won't even hesitate to gut me like a fucking fish for going behind his back and selling his youngest daughter to some fucking deviant, who has refused to return her to me.

But until I get Adeline back here safe and sound, there is no fucking way Sal can find out what I've done. He can never know the truth, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep him in the dark for as long as possible.

One of the guards stationed outside of the room comes rushing in during the middle of Sal's speech about money and whatever other mumbo-jumbo he was spouting off. I had been distracted, only half listening, but this intrusion definitely catches my attention.

All eyes are on the man at the door. I recognize him as Paulie Russo. "Boss, there's a woman here who says she has information on your daughter," he tells Salvatore, and my fucking stomach drops to the goddamn floor.

My fingernails bite into the Italian leather of the chair I'm sitting in, and my eyes dart to my boss. Sal looks anxious as he asks, "Adeline?"

Paulie shrugs, "I'm not sure. She's talking a bunch of gibberish, but I understood one word — *hija*, which means daughter in Spanish."

"Well, bring her in, you dumb fuck," Salvatore spits out.

An older woman with greying hair and big, brown eyes enters the room behind Paulie. She's wringing her hands in front of her as she begins spouting off Spanish so quickly no one can even catch a word she's saying.

"Oh, for Christ's sakes!" Sal yells. "Which one of you fucks in here knows what the hell she's saying?"

Matteo Dellucci speaks up, "If she slows down a little, I might be able to understand her."

Sal gives him a nod. "By all means," he says sarcastically, waving his hand towards the woman.

If Salvatore Valenti is anything, he's definitely not a patient man. I can practically see the steam coming out of his ears while Matteo tries to communicate with the woman.

"She's saying that her husband was killed by the man who has your daughter," Matteo translates.

Salvatore straightens his spine and grabs a photo frame from his desk. The frame contains a photograph of all of his daughters, when they were all still alive, that is. Then he stalks towards the woman. "Which one? Point her out," he demands.

The woman looks at the picture and points. I can't see shit from where I'm standing, but judging by Sal's reaction, the woman pointed out Adeline.

Sal grabs the woman by the arm and hauls her in close to him. "Where?! Where is she?!" he practically screams, spittle flying out of his mouth and landing on the poor woman's face.

"Por favor! Por favor!" she cries, her face contorting in pain as Sal tightens his hold on her.

Sal eventually releases his grip and points to Matteo. "You lock this broad in the cellar with a goddamn map, and don't you let her leave until

she gives you the exact fucking location where my daughter is," he orders, his voice low and rough.

Matteo drags the now confused and hysterical woman from the room with two other guys following closely behind.

Sal meets my gaze and gives me a single nod. "We're gonna find her now." He grinds his fat fist into his palm and smiles a sinister grin. He's like a fucking shark who just found blood in the water. And nothing will stop him at this point from finding the source so that he can unleash a brutal attack. "And when we find out who did this, I'll let you do the honors, Gio," he tells me.

He's giving me a gift — letting me kill the man who is responsible for kidnapping his daughter even though the honor should really go to him.

If Sal only knew...I'd have to kill myself.

CHAPTER 22

LUCIEN

IT'S BEEN A week since Adeline found out about the cameras in her old room. Frankly, she garnered a lot of information that day in my office.

She knows about her file and the emails and the fact that Giovanni is the one that sold her and that I kept that from her too.

She knows everything.

And yet she's not angry. Even more importantly, she still loves me.

In a way, I'm glad Jackson let her into my office. A huge weight feels like it has been lifted now that Adeline and I have no secrets between us.

And it seems as if our relationship has taken another dramatic shift. Even though I still can't say those three magical words, I treat her like a magnificent treasure. I treat her like my one and only.

We eat our meals together, sleep together every night and practically spend every waking moment together.

I can't get enough of her, and I know that I never will. Adeline came into my world like a tornado, shredding through the tough, exterior shell

that was keeping me locked away from the outside world. She ripped open my chest and squeezed that cold, black muscle, until it started beating again, bringing me back to life.

And my heart beats for her and her alone.

Adeline woke me up and did the impossible — she freed me. And I want to make her mine.

Forever.

"You're meeting the jeweler at five o'clock," I tell Jax for the tenth time today.

"Yes, yes. For fuck's sake, Luc, we've gone over this a million fucking times this week."

I pace my office, my fingers raking through my hair and pulling at the ends. I've never been so out of my element before, so fucking nervous, so fucking...petrified.

And when I glance up at Jax, he's lounging in one of the armchairs, completely relaxed with a smirk on his face. I stop pacing and glare at him. "What?" I snap.

"You. You just look so..." He taps his chin as if deep in thought. "Normal," he says finally.

"Normal? This is *normal*?" I exclaim, throwing my hands up in the air, completely exasperated.

"Yes," he says with a nod. "Guys are always this nervous before they pop the question."

I scrub a hand down my face. "What if she doesn't say yes?"

"She will," Jax says, so sure of himself. If only I could have an ounce of his optimism right now.

"But what if she *doesn't*?" I insist with my hands spread out before me.

"Then she *doesn't*," he says with a nonchalant shrug. "But you don't need to worry about that, because she's definitely going to say yes." He winks at me, and I want to tear out his fucking throat at his cocky, casual attitude.

"How do you know?" I don't understand why, but I need his reassurance on this.

He gives me a serious, level look before he simply says, "I just know. Trust me on this one, Luc."

I sigh loudly and shake my head. "Here are the directions," I tell him before handing him the paperwork. It's going to take a couple hours by plane and a few more hours by car to reach his destination. "Have you decided if you're going to stay the night or not?"

He shrugs again. "I don't know. It's been a long time since I've tasted the local cuisine," he says while wriggling his eyebrows suggestively.

I roll my eyes. "Just wear protection. Lord knows the world doesn't need any little Jacksons running around."

He chuckles and claps me on the back. I'm quick to notice that I don't even flinch at his touch.

Then he tells me, "I'm heading out." He tucks the papers under his arm. "Gonna prep the plane and do an engine check."

"Take Wraith with you," I suggest.

"No. He should be here on the island. Where he belongs," Jax says with a serious tone. "Besides, that fucker gives me the creeps," he tells me with a dramatic shudder.

Now it's my turn to laugh. "He's just good at his job."

"Being a creepy motherfucker? Job well done," Jax says with a smirk. He turns and walks towards the door. "Text me if you need me," he calls over his shoulder.

I watch Jackson leave, and then I collapse into my chair. Putting my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands, I stay in that position for a long time thinking about what's going to be happening soon enough.

I'm going to propose to Adeline.

I haven't even thought about how I'm going to do it yet, but I figured I'll take her to Italy or Greece and do it the proper way. There's no way in hell I'm just going to ask her over dinner here at the mansion or anywhere on this island, in fact.

I want it to be somewhere romantic; somewhere she'll remember for the rest of her life...a life that will hopefully have me by her side.

A knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts, and I check the security feed on my monitor. Adeline stands just outside, and I'm quick to open the door for her.

"Hey," I say with a smile on my face. I always seem to be smiling around her. It just comes naturally now.

"Hey you." She leans up on her tiptoes and places a chaste kiss on my mouth before settling back down to the floor. "Where's Jax going? All he would tell me is that he's on a secret mission. Whatever that means," she says with a grin.

Damn it, Jax, I curse him internally. It's almost as if he gets a kick out of making this even harder on me. Hell, he probably does, knowing him. "He's going to the mainland for something or other. He'll be back late tonight or early tomorrow. You never know with him." My words come

out sort of in a rush, but I hope they're believable enough. Clearing my throat, I place my hands on Adeline's hips and stare into her gorgeous green eyes. "How are you feeling?" I ask. It's almost ten in the morning, and she's just now out of bed, fresh from a shower. For the past week or so, she's been under the weather, and she's been more tired than usual.

I know I should get Jax to check her out and maybe run some tests, but I'm too damn stubborn and, more than anything, too fucking jealous to let him lay a finger on her.

However, Adeline has been suffering with some kind of sickness. So I need to push my jealousy aside and let Jax examine her the moment he returns...with me in the same room...and right next to her...watching his every move.

"I'm feeling a little bit better than yesterday. I don't know if I have a stomach bug or if maybe I just need to get used to the fancy, Mediterranean dishes Maria has been cooking up."

I grumble under my breath. I told Maria to stop showcasing her talents on Adeline's poor stomach. She's definitely toned down the meals as of late since Adeline can barely tolerate bland foods let alone the spicy creations Maria is always concocting.

"Yeah, well, she's not going to try her cooking skills out on you ever again. She knows now just to stick to the basics," I say. Then, grumbling, I reluctantly tell her, "I'll get Jax to check on you when he gets back in case it's some type of virus." I lean down and place a kiss on the top of Adeline's head, inhaling her peach-scented hair. Fuck, she always smells so damn good.

I'm glad I spent so much money on all her flower and fruit-scented shampoos and lotions. It was totally worth it. Her diverse scents drive me crazy...and make me instantly hard as a fucking rock.

Adeline squirms against me, no doubt feeling the sudden hardness against her belly. Looking up at me, she grins and asks, "You really want Jax examining me?" She places her hands over mine and moves them up and down the length of her sexy body. "Putting his hands...all over me?" Then, she looks up at me innocently and flutters her long, dark lashes.

However, she's anything but innocent in this moment.

It's been days since I've been inside of her, and it feels like a fucking eternity. I've been trying to give her the space and time she needs until she feels better, but, fuck, if she's going to tease me like this, she obviously is ready for me too.

"Do you want his hands on you?" I ask her, curious for her answer. I would never share her, not even with Jax, but I wonder if she wants that. I don't think I could ever deny her anything...except for that. Just the thought of someone else touching what's mine enrages me.

Her eyes widen when I release a deep growl. "No," she whispers quickly. "There's only one man I want to touch me. The only man who knows just where to touch me," she purrs like a seductive, little kitten.

My hard-on strains against my pants, and it takes every ounce of my willpower not to tear off her clothes and fuck her against the hardwood floor right fucking now.

"Fuck, Adeline," I curse, squeezing my eyes shut. "You're in no condition for the things I want to do to you right now."

Her hand cups my hard length through my pants, and my eyes snap open and find hers. "Do I have to show you how much I want you?"

This is a new and different side of Adeline. And I fucking like it.

Nodding, I sink my teeth into my lower lip as I watch her drop to her knees. I bite back a groan as she undoes my belt, unzips my pants and takes out my cock that feels like it's made of solid steel at the moment.

The instant her tongue touches the tip, I'm a fucking goner. Shoving my hands into her hair, I force her to take more of me into her warm, wet

mouth.

It feels so good that I'm lost in sensation as she sucks me like a little whore. "Fuck," I growl, grasping her head and fucking her mouth while her fingertips dig into my ass cheeks. I want this to last forever, but it's just too damn good.

And before I can stop or hold off any longer, I'm coming down her fucking throat and yelling obscenities at the top of my fucking lungs.

It takes me a while to come down from the high of the powerful orgasm. My fingertips are still speared through her hair. And I gently caress her face as her little, pink tongue flicks out and licks another drop of essence from the tip of my cock, making me shudder and groan.

"Fuck, Adeline," I moan. Hooking my hands under her armpits, I pull her straight up and into my arms. Her legs hook around my waist, locking her ankles around my back, and I claim her mouth. Hard.

I kiss her like I'll never be able to get enough of her. And that's because it's the truth.

The more I have her...the more I want her over and over and over again.

Carefully, since my pants are down around my shins, I carry her to the couch and unceremoniously drop her onto the soft leather.

"You really shouldn't have done that, Adeline," I warn her with a deep, stern tone. "I haven't had you in three fucking days," I hiss, standing over her and looking down at my beauty. "And now I'm going to make up for the time we lost."

Dropping to my knees beside the sofa, I pull her legs open and stare at her shaved, pink pussy. "I'm not going to stop even if you beg," I tell her.

And as I lick, bite and fuck her into orgasm after orgasm, I keep my word.

I don't stop...even when she begs me to.

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CHAPTER 23

LUCIEN

ADELINE LIES ON the couch, sleeping soundly and dead to the world. I can still hear her pleas begging me to stop as I brought her on the precipice of orgasm after orgasm.

Soon after every time she begged me to stop, she would be begging me to continue...begging me for more. I lost track of how many times she came apart in my arms, but it was quite a sight to behold.

She's been sleeping for a while, and I'm enjoying just watching her, completely satiated and at peace.

I could have taken her for the entire night, but I know she's still weak from being sick. I've made up my mind that Jax will check on her upon his return, and then I can put my mind at ease knowing that she's okay.

If anything ever happened to her...fuck, I don't know what I would do. The thought of it terrifies me to no end.

Shaking the terrible idea from my head, I dial Jax's cell phone number. He had sent me several texts earlier...with a million emojis, of course...

letting me know that he was going to spend the night in the city after picking up Adeline's engagement ring.

Jax answers on the fourth ring. "Have I ever told you that you use more emojis than a fucking teenager?" I growl into the phone while rolling my eyes.

"Well, hello to you too, Luc," he says sarcastically. "And for the record, the poop emoji is freaking hilarious. I don't care what you say."

"Just tell me you got the ring and you're keeping it safe," I whisper, not wanting my sleeping beauty to somehow over hear our conversation.

"Yes, I have it. And it's perfect." After a pause, he tells me, "Adeline's gonna absolutely love it."

I sigh in relief, and it feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. "Thank fuck," I breathe. I was worried about not seeing it in person and not picking it up personally...but I hadn't wanted to leave Adeline alone again, considering what happened last time. She feels safe when I'm around, and so I don't want to cause her any undue stress.

"How's the city?"

"Booooring," Jax drawls out.

I can hear some noise in the background, a door opening perhaps and then the sounds of the city in the background. He must be out on a

balcony. "Are you coming home tomorrow?" I ask him, but he doesn't answer.

I press the phone harder against my ear, worried. But then I hear something...something familiar...a woman...moaning.

"Are you watching porn?" I hiss in partial curiosity but mostly disgust at the thought of him watching it while being on the phone with me.

"Uh, I think my night just got a whole hell of a lot more interesting," he tells me quickly. "Hey, I gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow."

He ends the call abruptly, and I roll my eyes again. He probably spotted a couple on the street having sex or something. That would explain the woman's moans I heard.

Leave it to Jax to take his voyeurism skills with him on his mini vacation.

Pocketing my phone, I walk over to Adeline and scoop her into my arms. I carry her to my bed. Where she belongs.

And then we fall asleep with her wrapped in my arms.

But even with her safe and secure in my grasp, I still have a nightmare that night about losing her...

I wake up in the middle of the night covered in sweat and reaching for her in the darkness. My hands find her warm body and pull her close to mine.

"I'm never letting you go," I tell her vehemently.

"Ditto," she whispers sleepily against my chest.

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CHAPTER 24

LUCIEN

THE NEXT DAY I'm sitting in the library with my laptop resting on my legs while Adeline sleeps serenely a few feet away in a comfortable chaise lounge in the corner of the room. She was reading for a while, but subsequently fell asleep with the book in her lap.

She's understandably exhausted from our fuck fest yesterday; and she's, unfortunately, still feeling under the weather. I text Jax to let him know I want him home soon so he can check on her, but he's been ignoring my calls and texts all morning.

I'm beginning to wonder if he didn't participate in his own fuck fest yesterday...with the woman I heard moaning in the background of our phone conversation last night.

It's not like him to not answer my calls or respond to my texts. That combined with the nightmare I had last night about losing Adeline has me on edge.

But having her close to me now, sleeping peacefully while I attempt to get work done on my laptop has me feeling a tiny bit at ease.

After rewriting the same damn code ten times from my lack of concentration, I decide to get in a quick workout while she sleeps. So I go to my room and change into a pair of charcoal-gray, fleece workout pants and a navy blue, long-sleeve compression shirt. Then I head down to the gym and hit the treadmill first, trying to chase away my worry and tension.

With Nothing More's *Go to War* pumping through the surround sound speakers, my legs move vigorously as I run. I can't shake this terrible feeling that something bad happened or is going to happen. And the more I think about it, the faster and harder I run.

It reminds me of a time when I was younger. Whenever my mother was sweet or made me something to eat...something horrible always followed.

Maybe I'm just stuck in that mindset and nothing will actually happen...but why isn't Jackson checking his fucking phone?

I've just grown so accustomed to him being around that the thought of him suddenly not being here never really crossed my mind. He's the only family I have left. But if I'm being truly honest with myself, he's more than just family. He's my best friend, my confidant...and I love him like a brother.

It's hard to admit my feelings for anyone, especially when it comes to Adeline, but I need to realize that life is too short to live with regrets. And I would definitely regret if the two most important people in my life didn't know that I cherished them and loved them.

I definitely need to pull my head out of my fucking ass and confess my feelings for Adeline.

She's told me several times that she loves me...and I haven't even uttered some semblance of a comparable response to her declarations. She has no idea that I'd do anything for her, slay any demon to get to her...even die for her.

Once Jackson returns with the ring, I'm going to take Adeline on a trip far from here and propose to her. I will finally make her *mine*. For eternity.

Panting, I hit the stop button and jump off the treadmill. I grab my phone with the intent to check to see if Jackson called or sent me a text during my workout, but stop dead in my tracks and almost drop the phone from my hands.

Several notifications are on my screen and continue to pop up by the second.

My blood runs cold as I scan the automatic alarm messages. They all lead to one thing and one thing only — the island has been breached.

The sensors and cameras around the island picked up suspicious activity, and I was too fucking stuck in my head that I didn't even hear the first alarm. The first alarm would have called for a protocol to be put in place to eliminate the threat...but, fuck, I'm not in my office or even near my laptop.

In a panic, I sent out an SOS text to Jax and Wraith. Jax is definitely not home yet, and Wraith...fuck, he could be anywhere on the island or not. I have no fucking clue on his whereabouts, and now I regret not keeping better track of him.

I pull up an outside security camera feed and inhale sharply when I see gunned men dressed all in black storming the mansion.

Adeline.

My only thought right now is that I need to get to her. I'll protect her with my last dying breath. They'll have to get through me first to get to her.

I take two steps before the tinted windows of the gym explode. I'm knocked to the ground from the sheer force of it as glass scatters down around me.

A loud crack sounds in the room, and I watch as the glass wall leading to the pool room shatters and comes crashing to the floor.

Scrambling to my feet, I turn just in time to see the devil himself walking through the empty steel frames of the gym with a smirk on his face.

Giovanni.

He's decked out in black and armed with a Glock at his side. Several men follow behind him, and I stand my ground, not even a bit interested in surrendering. My only focus right now is to get to Adeline, and my mind is on a one-track mission.

I retreat a few steps with the intent to get to the library, but Giovanni raises his gun and shakes his head slowly, tutting. "You're not going anywhere, *Big Bad Wolf*," he sneers. "Where is she?"

I remain silent. I can only pray that Adeline heard the noise, woke up and hid somewhere in the library. Maybe they'll never find her...

But my optimism turns to complete shit when I hear her screams from somewhere in the mansion.

Giovanni's smirk morphs into a huge grin on his face. "Never mind," he says, tucking his gun into his waistband. Speaking into a walkie-talkie, he tells whoever's on the other end, "Bring her to the gym."

The fact that his men would know the layout of my house so well surprises me. Did someone from the inside betray me?

My hands curl into fists when I think back to the gardener's wife. She's the most likely suspect in all of this. She would know this place practically inside and out...and she would have been seeking revenge on me for killing her husband.

Fuck. I should have killed that bitch when I had the chance.

I should have done a lot of things differently. If I wasn't so caught up in trying to be happy and *normal*, Giovanni would be dead right now...and all of his men. They would have never gotten within a hundred yards of this fucking place.

Trembling with anger, my heart seems to cease beating when a tall man in a black ski mask drags Adeline into the gym. She struggles against the man, but his grip on her is ruthless.

It's not until my girl kicks his shin with all her might that he finally relinquishes his hold on her. She comes running into my arms, and I hold her so tightly I worry that she won't be able to breathe.

"I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry," I tell her over and over again, my voice breaking.

She looks up into my eyes, and I can see the sheer terror behind her tears. "I love you," she sobs.

A slow clap from behind us draws our attention. Giovanni glares at us with a crooked, evil smile. "So *Little Red Riding Hood* fell for the Big Bad Wolf after all. Is that how the story goes?" He stops clapping and pulls his Glock out of his waistband. "I don't care for happy endings, though." His hazel eyes snap to Adeline, and he calls her like a dog, patting his thigh. "Come here. Come here, girl."

Adeline's grip around me tightens, and I hold her, not willing to let her go. I close my eyes for a moment and relish in the feeling of her in my arms one last time. I know what has to be done even though it goes against every fiber of my being right now.

"You're just making it worse on yourself, Adeline," Gio taunts.

She's trembling against me now, and I wish I could take all of her fear and sadness and absorb it so she didn't have to experience them anymore. "Go," I whisper to her, my voice hoarse.

She looks up at me with a horrified expression. "No," she hisses. "I'm not leaving you," she tells me. "I won't leave you," she cries.

"You have to," I tell her. There's nothing I can do to protect her now, and it fucking guts me. I don't have my gun. I don't have my computer. I don't have Jax or Wraith, and all of my guards are probably dead right now.

We're completely and utterly fucked, and there's not a goddamn thing I can do about that fact. The only thing I can do right now is make sure that she gets out of this alive.

If Giovanni was planning on killing Adeline, he would have done so by now. Clearly, Salvatore wants his daughter back alive. And knowing that she'll be safe makes my grip loosen when one of the men grabs her and pulls her from me.

"No!" she screams as she fights the man.

Ragged breaths exhale from my seizing lungs as I clench my hands to my sides and glare at Giovanni. He's still smiling; and I make a vow right there and then that if I make it out of this alive, I will personally slice that smug look off his fucking face.

I hate the fact that Wepner didn't bring down the empire quickly enough. He had the fucking paperwork, all the fucking evidence, all the fucking power to do so. But the government follows strict rules, unfortunately, to make sure they can try and convict these fuckers. He probably needed warrants and all that good shit.

But he, in turn, cost me so much by going by the book.

Giovanni grabs Adeline with his free hand, twists her in his grip and holds the gun to her temple. "Stop struggling, Adeline," he snaps at her,

and it has me taking a menacing step towards them. His gaze locks on me, and he clicks his tongue in disapproval. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," he warns.

Adeline covers her eyes with her hands, sobbing loudly. I watch her powerlessly...feeling weak and so fucking stupid that I didn't see this all coming. I should have listened to my gut and protected her. I failed her... again. I'll never be able to forgive myself.

Giovanni pulls her tighter against him and points his gun towards me. "Don't cover your eyes now, sweetheart. You're gonna wanna see this," he says through gritted teeth.

The moment her eyes meet mine, I have no time to react before the gun is going off. It echoes off the gym walls, sounding much louder. And then a searing pain travels through me as the bullet rips through the meat of my outer thigh.

"Fuck!" I roar, grabbing at the wound.

"Lucien!" Adeline screams, fighting against Gio, but he only holds her that much tighter.

Grinding my teeth together, I remain standing and glare at him defiantly. He's not going to knock me down that fucking easily. I will not fall to my knees for this asshole.

I stand tall, proud and keep my eyes trained on Adeline. I can feel the blood oozing from my wound, but I've had years of conditioning to learn to block out the bad things in my life. I can barely feel the pain. Hell, I've been through worse.

"So brave," Gio mocks. "We'll see how brave you are soon enough, Wolf." He pushes Adeline out of his grip towards two men, who put their greedy hands all over her as she kicks and screams.

My head pounds with a ferocious migraine as I squeeze my fists at my sides. If only I could get my hands on these fuckers. I would kill each and every one of them; tearing their limbs out with my bare fucking hands and making them suffer ten-fold.

Giovanni takes several steps towards me, motioning with his gun to make me step backwards over the jagged broken windows leading to the pool room. Once I'm near the edge of the pool, he asks me, "Can wolves swim?" He points his gun at my chest this time and smirks. "Let's find out."

My eyes instantly find Adeline's, and I begin to utter the words I wanted to tell her for so long but never could before. "Adeline, I -."

But I never get to finish.

I hear the gunshot and feel the pain ripping through my upper chest.
And then I'm falling, falling backwards into the watery grave below me.

I struggle, trying to swim to the surface of the crimson-tinged water,
but I never make it...

And the last thing on my mind is that I never told Adeline how much I
love her...and I'll never get the chance now...

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CHAPTER 25

ADELINE

"SHE'S IN SHOCK," the doctor with salt-and-pepper hair and kind blue eyes tells my father. "I can run some tests; make sure she wasn't drugged with anything."

"Yes, yes, test her. Whatever you need to do," my father grumbles.

I sit on the windowsill of my old room in my father's house. I stare out the glass at the massive backyard, locked up in the same prison as I was almost my entire life. But it seems so much worse than a prison now.

It seems like a tomb, slowly suffocating me with every second I stay here.

We've been back in the United States for less than forty-eight hours, and I haven't uttered a single word to anyone. I can still remember my father shaking me when the plane landed, asking me why I wasn't talking, asking what the hell was wrong with me.

He has no idea what he's done. By saving my life, the only man I've ever loved is now dead.

And I never even got to say goodbye...or tell him I love him one last time.

Lucien died alone, suffering a horrible death, and the thought of that is almost too much to bear.

My biggest fear is not knowing what will happen to Lucien's body. Will Jax bury him? Will there be a grave somewhere I could visit someday?

And the most depressing thing is that I don't even know where the island is. I was in hysterics after they dragged me onto an awaiting helicopter and then onto a plane that I couldn't even keep track of everything going on around me.

The thought of never being able to visit the island again opens up a brand new wound inside of my chest, and I release a shuddering breath.

Even though I feel like I could cry for a thousand years, my tears dried up hours ago. And I don't even have the strength to conjure up any more. I'm emotionally and physically exhausted.

I can't eat...I can't sleep...and it even hurts to fucking breathe. They stole everything from me. And every time I close my eyes, I see his body falling into the pool...the water tinged red with his blood...his arms flailing to reach the surface...and then the moment when he stopped struggling...

A ragged gasp escapes my lips as I snap my eyes open. I fear I'll never be able to sleep again without reliving his death in my mind.

Rubbing my naked wrist now, I cringe at not feeling Lucien's bracelet. I was stripped of everything once we had arrived back to my father's home. The bracelet was the only thing I had to remember him, and now it's gone too.

"This may sting," the doctor says, bringing me back to the present, before he puts a needle in my skin.

I don't even flinch. I can't even feel it. I feel nothing now. I'm numb to everything and everyone around me. And I plan on staying that way for a long time...maybe even for the rest of my life.

It's as if the sun has set in my little world. And without Lucien here with me, it won't ever rise again.

"She needs rest," the doctor says after he's finished drawing blood. "I'll come back once I learn the results of the blood work."

"Fine," my father tells him. Once the doctor leaves, he roughly grabs my arms and hauls me up to face him. I stare into his eyes, unblinking, unmoving. "Snap out of this mood you're in, Adeline! Your wedding is in less than a month! And Giovanni isn't going to want to marry some lifeless doll!"

His words take a few moments to fully sink in.

Wedding? Marry Giovanni? My father still expects me to marry that...*monster*?

It's like rubbing salt into the open wound I feel in my chest. I imagined a life with Lucien. I can't even fathom a life with anyone else. Giovanni sold me...and then killed the love of my life.

"Giovanni is the one who sold me!" I scream at my father, my voice raw and hoarse from not talking for so long.

I expect a nuclear reaction from my father from finally learning the truth, but his response shocks me to my very core.

He nods slowly and says, "Yes, I know."

"You...you know?" I ask, stunned.

"He confessed everything to me after he brought you back home safe and sound. He told me he still wants to marry you. Still wants to take over the family business when I'm gone." Deep frown lines settle into his leathery face. "I agreed," he says as if that should make everything better.

I twist my arms out of his grasp and move away from him. "He took everything from me. I will *never* marry him!" I hiss.

My father's hands ball into fists at his sides. "No daughter of mine is going to talk to me like that," he says through clenched teeth as he begins to unbuckle his belt. "I'm going to teach you *respect*...even if I have to beat it into you!"

When the first blow comes, I almost pass out from the pain. But I eventually become numb to the strikes after that.

I had felt like I'd died with Lucien that day...and now I wish I truly had.

CHAPTER 26

ADELINE

MY HANDS GLIDE across the piano keys as I play a song that I had played once for Lucien. It seems so long ago now, but it's been only a matter of weeks.

I close my eyes and imagine Lucien's dark eyes on me. He was always watching me as if I was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He treated me like a treasure, his possession, but I know now that he would never, ever hurt me.

He loved me more than words could describe. Maybe someday he would have been ready to tell me those three little words I so desperately wanted to hear, but now I'll never get the chance to find out.

He's gone.

Lucien is fucking gone...forever.

I drop my chin as a sob rips out of my chest. My fingers falter on the keys, producing a few sour notes.

If my piano teacher were here, he would berate me for not playing perfectly.

But Lucien never cared if I messed up. Even though he demanded perfection of every single thing in his life, he didn't expect it of me. He accepted me and all my flaws, and I don't think I'll ever have that kind of acceptance again.

I hear a key sliding into the lock on the door to my room, and my attention snaps to the other side of the room. My father has been keeping me under lock and key *literally* since I've returned.

Snapping shut the fallboard, I stand and flee to a chair in the opposite corner.

The door opens a few seconds later with the doctor from the other day following closely behind my father, who looks pissed off at the world right now.

That's never a good thing. Especially not for me.

"You wanted to see her," my father spits out. "Now tell me why we couldn't do this in my office downstairs."

There are a few sheets of papers in the doctor's hands, and he's holding them close to his chest, as if guarding the contents. "There is a very delicate matter I need to discuss with Miss Valenti regarding her blood tests," the doctor tells him. And then he glances at me before saying, "Perhaps Adeline and I can discuss this in private."

I furrow my brows at his request. Delicate matter? Did the tests come back positive for something bad? Is there something wrong with me?

A million questions swirl through my brain.

My father clenches his hands into fists at his sides. "Anything you want to say to my daughter you can say in front of me."

"Please, Mr. Valenti, this might be best to —."

My father's hand suddenly shoots out and grabs the smaller man by the collar of his shirt. "Don't tell me what is best for *my* daughter! Now, spit it out what you came here to say, or so help me god I'll kill you and find someone else to read the goddamn results!"

I cower in the chair, curling my knees up to my chest. My father always had a terrible temper, but I was never really bothered by it before. I think I was conditioned to just accept what is. But now I'm suddenly seeing everything through a new set of eyes.

Nothing about this life is normal, and my father is definitely not a good man. He does very, very bad things. But I was so naïve and disillusioned before that I couldn't perceive any of this.

Maybe because I didn't want to.

"Well?" my father demands, shaking him hard.

"She's pregnant!" the doctor chokes out, struggling to breathe.

My father releases his grip, letting the doctor fall to the floor in a heap. Suddenly, he rips the paperwork from the man's hands, and his eyes skim over the words. "Pregnant..." he whispers in a cold, detached voice. "How far along?" he asks, eyeing the doctor once more.

The man coughs, trying to catch his breath before muttering, "Couldn't be sure unless I performed an ultrasound. But an educated guess based on her hCG levels would put her in the early stages, maybe only a few weeks along."

My eyes are as wide as saucers as I watch the exchange between the two of them and the conversation they're having slowly begins to set in.

Pregnant...I'm *pregnant*. I'm carrying Lucien's...baby? The words slowly sink in and tears fill my eyes as I stare down at my flat stomach.

Just when I thought my whole world was falling apart, I'm given this small, little miracle. A part of Lucien that I can hold and take care of...and love with all of my being.

I remember being sick on the island with what I thought was some sort of flu. My periods had never been what would be considered normal ever since they started when I was a teen, so I could never truly rely on that as a telltale sign. Going months without one wasn't uncommon.

But now I know it wasn't the flu or food poisoning or any of the other things I thought I was going through. I was getting morning sickness.

A smile graces my lips as I think about a cute, little, cuddly version of Lucien...a baby with his hair and eyes and a smile that could melt the cold world around me.

I will give this baby the childhood Lucien never had. And I'll make sure that our baby knows how much their father would have loved him or her.

"How soon can you get rid of it?" my father asks, his words slicing right through me and plucking me out of my pleasant reverie only to come crashing back down to earth with a bone-shattering jolt.

The doctor clears his throat and fidgets, his eyes darting everywhere except for landing on me. "Well, there is a clinic nearby that can be very discreet with these types of matters."

"No!" I scream. No longer feeling numb or despondent, I stand and storm towards my father. Poking him in the chest with my finger, I shout at him, "I won't let you do this! I'm keeping this baby!"

My father's face contorts with rage as he wraps his hand around my neck. "We need to get rid of that *thing* growing inside of you before

Giovanni finds out! He'll never want to marry a *whore* with another man's baby in her belly," he hisses in disgust.

When he releases me, I fall to the floor. I hold a hand over my belly protectively and shrink away from my father and his wrath.

As my father and the doctor discuss the details of my abortion, I make a vow to the precious baby growing inside of me that I will protect it with everything I have and all the power I can muster.

Always.

No matter what.

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CHAPTER 27

ADELINE

"WE'RE ALMOST THERE," the driver informs me from the front of the town car.

I cringe at his words and hold back my tears as I stare out the window, watching the city passing by swiftly. I close my eyes and hold a hand over my belly. It's still flat, and I'm sure the baby is only the size of a little sweet pea, but I can imagine my stomach growing bigger and bigger to accommodate our little baby.

Sinking my teeth into my lower lip, I say a silent prayer for Lucien to help me get through today. I need him more than ever, and I hate the fact that he's not here.

I grasp the handle of the duffle bag beside me. My father had pulled me aside this morning, glared at the bag and had asked, "What's that for?"

"The clinic told me to pack some extra clothes...just in case," I had said, my voice small and weak.

He'd nodded once and then said, "The sooner this is over, the better you will feel. I promise you that."

Then he had kissed the top of my head and sent me off with a driver and a bodyguard into the city for my appointment.

An appointment that he made for me and is now forcing me to go to.

The car stops in front of the building, and the bodyguard gets out first. I wait for Marco to open the door, clutching the duffle bag protectively to me as I climb out.

"Murderer!" a voice yells.

"Baby killer!" another shrieks.

I flinch as the words are thrown from either side of the sidewalk. Protesters standing in front of the clinic wave signs and glare at me as Marco ushers me towards the front door.

I want to scream to them that this isn't my choice and that I don't want to murder my baby, but I stay silent, letting the tears streaming down my face tell my side of the story.

"You have a choice!" an older woman with sandy brown hair yells at me. Then she glares at Marco beside me and then back to me, her gaze softening slightly. "Make the right one. Don't let anyone else make it for you," she mutters to me.

After Marco pushes me inside the clinic and the door closes behind us, I can't help the soft sobs coming from me now. Marco pats my shoulder in

comfort, but I shrug him off. I don't need comfort right now.

I need a freaking miracle.

The smell of antiseptic overpowers me, and I feel like I'm going to be sick as we walk to the front desk. The bodyguard gives the receptionist my name, and the young woman with white-blonde hair nods, chewing and smacking her gum without a care in the world.

"Someone will be out in a minute to take her back," she says coolly.

My father paid a large sum of money to do this off the books, no paperwork required and VIP treatment, if you will. He's willing to do anything and pay anything to get this baby out of me. He thinks this will solve every problem. He thinks that not having a reminder of Lucien will make me get over him and move on...right into the arms of Giovanni.

He couldn't be more wrong.

I'll never get over Lucien. I loved him. I still do. And I'll never stop loving him for the rest of my life.

An older nurse with glasses, dark hair and dressed in blue scrubs meets me out front. When the bodyguard tries to follow me past the door, the woman turns to him and asks, "Are you the father or family?"

When Marco says, "Neither," the woman turns to me and says, "Then it's your choice, honey. Do you want him with you in the room?"

My eyes widen as I stare at her. She's giving me a choice? I shake my head quickly, and the nurse scowls at Marco and tells him to go back to the waiting room and that they'll give him periodic updates on my condition.

Marco spouts off some choice Italian curse words to her, but reluctantly leaves to go sit down and wait for me. I watch him pull out a cell phone just before the door closes, and I have no doubt he's calling my father to let him know we've arrived.

I follow the nurse through the hallway, looking left and right at the vacant, sterile rooms. We stop at the end of the hall, and she motions for me to enter a room with an examination table. Then, she hands me a gown, points to the adjoining bathroom and says, "You can change in there. I'll be back with the doctor in just a few minutes."

Swallowing hard, I nod and walk to the bathroom. Locking the door behind me, panicked breaths escape my lungs as I search the room for a way out. My eyes zero in on a window above me. It's high, but I think I can make it.

I tell myself that I *have* to. This is my last and only hope to escape.

Setting my duffle bag down next to me on the floor, I study the window. I see that there's a screen screwed into the frame that will need to

be removed first. Then I should be able to just push the window open and climb out.

Reaching into the duffle bag, I produce the tools I packed just in case I would need them — two screwdrivers, wire nips and a hammer.

I pull a small chair over to the window, and it gives me just the right height I need when I step onto the cushion. I set out to work on the screws. There are four of them, and they're tough to turn at first, but I eventually get two out before I'm disturbed.

"Miss Valenti?" calls the nurse, followed by a soft knock on the door.

"Just a minute!" I call back. "I'm not feeling well!" I add a gagging cough to really sell it, but I don't know if she'll believe me.

I turn my attention back to the task at hand, cursing when the screwdriver slips on the screw and nicks my finger. I take a deep breath and concentrate. I need to hurry, but I also need to be careful.

I manage to get the other two screws out before there's another knock on the door.

"Miss Valenti, this is Dr. Rhodes. The nurse told me you're not feeling well. Perhaps you should let me examine you?"

"Please just give me a minute!" I call out vehemently.

I hear the two of them discussing things behind the door, and I worry that they're going to barge in here before I make my escape. Worse yet, what if they tell Marco what's going on? Then the jig will be up, and I will lose everything.

As quietly as I can, I set the screen aside and raise the glass window. It squeaks a little, but I cough violently to try to cover up any extra noise.

Reaching down, I grab the duffle bag and throw it out the open window first. And then I use all of my strength to haul myself up to the window sill. I can hear the door knob being turned behind me and banging on the door.

"Adeline?" I hear Marco's voice, and it sends icy cold terror straight into my veins. With all of my might, I pull myself up and look out over the edge. The drop is not far, which I'm thankful for.

Twisting my body around and grabbing onto the outside wall for leverage, I manage to climb out the window. I'm hanging onto the ledge with my legs dangling. And then, as easily as I can, I force myself off the side of the building and drop down.

Pain shoots into my right ankle the moment I land, and I bite my lip to keep from crying out. I put all of my weight on my left foot and test my right ankle by rolling it gently. I may have sprained it or even broken it

from the fall, but it will all be worth it if I can get out of here and keep my baby alive.

Holding onto the wall, I reach down and grab the handle of my duffle bag. Then I limp and hop my way towards the back parking lot.

Glancing to the left, I notice one of the protesters, the woman with the sandy blonde hair, walking to her car. Limping towards her, I wave my hands in the air to get her attention. I don't want to attract any unwanted attention, but I need to get the hell out of here. And she may be my only hope at this point.

At first the woman does a double-take, and then she glares at me. "Well, that was pretty quick...for *murder*," she hisses in disgust.

"Please. Help me. I was forced to go in there," I gasp, breathing through the pain and limping closer to her car, hoping that she'll help me escape from my father's guards. "I jumped out of the window before they could do anything," I cry with relief.

Her eyes widen at my words, and then her entire demeanor suddenly changes. "Oh, my god. You poor girl." She glances at my ankle and asks, "Are you hurt?"

"I think I twisted my ankle," I say, grimacing in pain. "Could you take me somewhere? Anywhere?" I beg.

She nods quickly and helps me to the passenger's side of her car.

Opening the door, she ushers me inside before going to the driver's side and hopping in. "Recline your seat, honey," she tells me, and I do as she says. Then she cranks on the ignition of the older Buick and floors it out of the parking lot. "My name's Barbara, by the way."

"Adeline," I reply. When we're a safe distance from the clinic, I straighten the back of my seat a little bit. "Thank you for helping me," I tell her with tears in my eyes. If it wasn't for her, my baby might not be alive right now. I had been planning on running, but I also hadn't planned on hurting myself in the process. "I wouldn't have gotten very far if you hadn't been there at the right place, at the right time."

"It was divine intervention," she says with a smile before bringing the cross connected to a delicate gold chain around her neck up to her mouth to give it a kiss. "I believe that everything happens for a reason. Don't you?" she asks with genuine interest.

"I'm starting to believe that, yes," I tell her with a watery smile of my own.

CHAPTER 28

ADELINE

BARBARA TAKES ME to her home in the outskirts of Brooklyn. It's an older English cottage style house, and there's a lovely scent of apples and cinnamon the moment we enter the front door. The entire place has a homey type feeling that instantly puts me at ease.

After helping me sit on a comfy chair at the round, oak kitchen table in the small dining room, Barbara sets off to the kitchen to make us lunch. When she first mentioned food on the way here, my stomach rumbled so loud it was embarrassing. I honestly can't remember the last time I ate. My father's been keeping me locked up in my room, probably hoping I'll starve to death. *Or hoping something bad will happen to the baby*, I think to myself sadly.

When Barbara sets a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich and a glass of cold water in front of me, I sigh in relief and almost begin to cry at her kindheartedness. "Thank you," I tell her, blinking back my tears.

She sits down and reaches over to pat my hand. "You're welcome, dear."

As we eat, Barbara tells me about her childhood growing up in Brooklyn. She was raised by her mother and father, who are both now deceased. She was married to her high school sweetheart, but her husband also passed recently to cancer. She confesses to me that she just turned fifty-five, and she doesn't feel old enough to be a widow.

And then she tells me about the worst day of her life.

"I was sixteen. I had been walking home from school when it happened." She takes a long sip of coffee before she continues. "He was older, maybe in his forties at the time. A police artist sketch of his face had been all over the news. He'd been kidnapping and raping young girls for a while back then. All the girls in school had been told to use the buddy system, never walk home alone, but I never thought it could happen to me." She shakes her head sadly. "No...you never think anything bad can happen when you're that young." Sighing, she sets down her coffee mug. "Anyway, you can guess what happened next. A few months later I found out I was pregnant."

Tears form in my eyes as I listen to her story. It's hard to imagine a woman this kind ever saw that kind of evil when she was just a girl.

"I was scared to tell anyone, even my parents. But eventually my mom figured it out. Motherly intuition and all that," she tells me with a wink.

"Does your mother know about...?" she asks, her voice trailing off and eyes falling to my flat stomach.

"My mother died shortly after I was born," I tell her on a whisper.

"Oh, dear," she says, her face falling. She pats my hand again in reassurance. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

I give her a small smile. "It's okay. I don't remember her." And then I add, "It's probably better that way."

Barbara clears her throat. "So anyway, my parents took me to the police station to report the crime. I gave such a good description that they actually caught the guy within a week. He had been wearing his work jacket that night, had forgotten to take it off, and I remembered the logo on the chest pocket." She shakes her head as if to clear herself of the terrible memory. "I had a choice to make. Keep the baby or not. And when a baby is forced into a situation the way my rapist had forced me...I felt like I had no other choice. I went to a clinic...just as you did. I went into a room... just as you did. And then I left without going through with it...just like you did."

She stands and goes to a shelf on the wall to gather two picture frames. She sets them down in front of me with a big smile on her face that could light up the whole world. Her finger points to a small boy on the left

picture. "This is James. He came into this world on June 8th, 1978." Then she points to the next photo frame. "And this is a family portrait we had taken before my husband passed."

My eyes widen at the big family full of kids and grandkids. "Wow," I whisper.

"Yeah," she says with a laugh. "Paul, my husband, and I were high school sweethearts. After everything happened...he was there for me. Paul didn't blame me for any of it. And he raised James as his own....along with our other five boys."

"Six boys total?" I ask in surprise. Sounds like my family except my mother gave birth to seven girls.

She nods with a grin on her face. "Yeah, we started early, and we both came from big families, so...it just sort of happened," she says with a shrug. "I ended up with six ornery boys and never did get the girl I always wanted to try to even out the odds of being in a house full of men. Not that Paul and I didn't try...and not that he ever minded all that trying," she says with a chuckle.

I laugh right along with her, and it feels so good to experience some other emotion other than sadness for once.

After a while, our laughter ceases, and Barbara's expression grows serious. "When I saw you walking into the clinic, I knew you felt alone. I knew you felt like you had no one on your side."

I swallow hard at her words and nod.

"I knew exactly how you felt, because at one point I felt the exact same way. And that's why I spend a few days a week standing in front of clinics. Some girls aren't lucky enough to have anyone in their corner. I was fortunate to have a great support system once I asked for help, and it kept me from making the biggest regret of my life." She smiles adoringly down at the photos in her hands. "We all have choices to make on this earth, and sometimes just one person reminding us of that fact and just *being there* for us can change everything."

Barbara sets the photo frames down and takes her seat once again at the table. "Now that I've told you my story, what do you say you tell me yours?"

* * * * *

I TELL BARBARA everything, leaving almost nothing out. She stays quiet through most of the story, sometimes dabbing her eyes with a tissue or shaking her head sadly.

"I knew I couldn't go through with it." I move my hand to my stomach. "This is the only thing I have left of Lucien." Tears fill my eyes, and I can't stop them from spilling over this time. "He would have taken care of us. I know that. He was troubled, but he was getting so much better. *I was making him better.*"

Barbara offers me a tissue, and I take it. "It sounds like you made the right choice leaving your father. But what are you going to do now, dear?"

I stare at the table, tracing the ingrain of the dark wood with my eyes. "I don't know." I glance at my duffle bag by the front door. "Right about now my father is probably figuring out that I stole from him and disappeared." Releasing a shaky breath, I whisper, "They're probably searching for me."

I think back to the hours before he made me go to the clinic. While the house was quiet and my father out for the evening, I snuck into his private office and opened his safe. I had the combination memorized since I had seen him lock and unlock it so many times over the years.

My father trusted me to never betray him. That was a mistake.

His other mistake was making the code easy to remember — my mother's birthday.

What I wasn't expecting to see inside the safe on the top shelf among precious coins and jewelry was...the watch Lucien had given me.

My father had kept it and hadn't destroyed it like I'd assumed. Maybe he was going to try to see if he could track Lucien down somehow with it. Who knows.

Just seeing the rose gold band had given me more strength and confidence than I had had in the previous days. I'd gently tucked the watch into the inside zippered pouch of the duffle before putting stack after stack of hundred dollar bills into the bottom of the bag.

Then, later on, in the safety of my room, I'd piled clothes and other personal items I thought I would need on top of the money. If my father had asked to see inside the bag, I was hoping all he would see was the clothing and believe the lie that I had been rehearsing in my head over and over again. "The clinic told me to pack some extra clothes," I had planned on saying.

That was a tense moment when my father met me at the door before I left...not knowing if he would check the bag or not...if he would believe my lies or not.

He'd questioned the bag, but he believed my lie...wholeheartedly. And why? Because I was his perfect daughter, and I had never given him a

reason not to trust me in the past.

I bet he's regretting not checking my bag now.

Knotting my fingers in my lap, I tell Barbara, "I need to hide. As soon as I can figure out a place to go, I'll get out of your hair and —."

She puts her hand up to stop me. "If I threw a poor pregnant girl out on the street with nowhere to go, I could never live with myself. My mind was made up the moment I helped you into my car, Adeline." She slowly stands. "You can stay here for as long as you like. This neighborhood is quiet, secluded. And there is a doctor right down the street who can look at your ankle. He owes me a favor since I saved his rose bush last year from a bad frost," she adds with a wink.

Her offer is extremely generous, but could I really accept it? This woman doesn't even know me besides the little bits and pieces about my life that I confessed to her. She could be in danger. "I couldn't impose," I tell her hurriedly.

"You're not imposing. I'm insisting," she says, smiling at me.

I smile back at her. "Well...maybe for a few days."

She nods. "It's settled then. A few days." And as she walks into the kitchen, I swear I hear her say, "Maybe a little longer."

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CHAPTER 29

ADELINE

AFTER A FEW days of following the instructions from Dr. Benson, the doctor who lives down the street, my ankle is feeling good enough to walk on with only a slight limp.

Over dinner that night, Barbara asks, "You told me you want to disappear so that your father doesn't find you?" When I nod, she continues. "My son, James, and his family live in a small farming town in Pennsylvania. He owns some rental properties and a small convenience store." She sets her fork down. "I mentioned to him that I might have a friend down on her luck that needs a place to stay and a job."

I wait with baited breath for her to continue. The longer I stay here with Barbara the more I feel like I'm putting her in danger. This woman saved me. And if anything happened to her because of me, I would be devastated.

I'm too close to *home* right now. Pennsylvania isn't that far away, but it should be a hell of a lot easier to disappear in a small town. Maybe if I keep moving around...not staying in one place for too long...

My hand creeps over my belly. Eventually, however, I'll need to settle down somewhere and make a life for our baby. I can't keep running forever.

"James told me he has a small house that they just renovated, and he's been looking for a cashier to work part time at his store," Barbara says, snapping me out of my frantic, jumbled thoughts.

I haven't been able to think straight ever since I left the island. The worst time is at night when the nightmares come. My mind won't stop replaying Lucien's death while I sleep, and I wake up crying and sometimes screaming for a phantom that is never there.

A thankful smile appears on my face. The sooner I can put some distance between my father and me, the better. "That sounds great, Barbara. I can pay rent -" I start, but she doesn't let me finish.

"He said not to worry about rent, dear. Knowing James, he wouldn't accept a dime from someone in need anyway. That boy has a heart of gold and gets more satisfaction of just helping people get on their feet than filling his pockets."

I smile, blinking back tears. Her son definitely inherited his mother's kind soul.

"There's just one catch," Barbara says. When I look up at her, she tells me, "You have to stay in touch and come to visit me now and then. You're like the daughter I never had," she says with a smile, her hazel eyes warm and happy.

I can't stop my own tears from falling, and I give her a few small nods. "I will visit every chance I get," I tell her honestly.

Barbara helped me more than she will ever know. She saved me. But more importantly, she saved my baby.

CHAPTER 30

LUCIEN

I'M DRIFTING IN a foggy abyss with no end in sight...

"Lucien, can you hear me? Luc?"

Someone is calling my name, but I can't seem to open my eyes.

"You would think he would want to wake up after sleeping for so long," the voice says, and I know that it's Jax.

"Maybe he's not ready to wake up," whispers a feminine voice.

My heart beats a little faster, thinking that Adeline is here with me in this dark world. I struggle to open my eyes. I need to see her. I need to make sure she's okay.

"He'll wake up when he's ready," she says again, but this time I can tell it's not my girl. This woman has a Russian accent, and not the melodic voice I have grown accustomed to.

I shake my head, wanting to know where Adeline is. "Ad..." I try to talk, but my tongue feels swollen, and my jaw feels like it's made of cement.

"Wait. He's trying to say something," Jax says. I feel his strong grip on my weightless hand. "Luc, you need to wake up. Do you hear me? Adeline needs you."

Adeline needs me. Adeline needs me. Adeline needs me.

My mind is nothing but a dark fog, and I can't remember anything of what happened before I fell asleep. I don't understand why I can't wake up. Did I drink too much last night?

"Do you think he can hear you?" says a deep voice I recognize as Wraith's.

"I'm going to find out," Jax says determinedly. "Luc...Adeline is gone. She was kidnapped, and I lost track of her. I need you to wake up and help me find her."

Adeline is gone?

She was kidnapped...

Struggling to move, I manage to pry one eyelid open enough to allow a searing light inside, causing me to grunt and close it again.

"Turn off the lights," Jax tells someone. Then he squeezes my hand and says, "Luc, please wake the fuck up." After a deep sigh, he confesses, "I need you. I can't do this without you." And then he adds, "Adeline needs you."

Adeline needs me.

A guttural moan escapes my chapped lips and raw throat as I force my body to obey my brain. *Wake the fuck up!* I scream internally at myself.

It starts off slow with my fingers twitching and then my toes. And then I'm able to squeeze Jax's hand.

"He's waking up," Jax whispers breathlessly.

Every twitch of muscle, every single movement hurts like a son of a bitch, but I keep trying, keep moving. *For her.*

The fog that had overtaken my brain slowly starts to clear away, and forgotten memories come rushing back as if I'm watching a movie on the big screen.

Giovanni and his men overtaking the manor...

A man bringing her into the gym...

Adeline breaking free and me holding her so damn tightly in my arms...

And then Giovanni has her...

He's waving a gun towards me...

BANG!

My entire body convulses on the bed as I relive the gunshot to my thigh.

The fear in Adeline's eyes...

I try to tell her I love her...but...

BANG!

I scream in agony as I remember the bullet ripping right through my fucking chest.

I tried to tell Adeline I loved her, but I couldn't. It was too late. It was too fucking late.

And then I'm falling.

I'm falling...into...darkness...with the water surrounding me and my lungs screaming for oxygen...

"Easy, Luc! Easy!" Jax says from beside me, his powerful hands holding me down against the soft mattress.

Gasping for air, my eyes snap open, and I struggle to breathe.

"It's all right. You're safe now," Jax says hurriedly, gripping my arms tight.

"Adeline!" I croak, my voice sounding gruff and hoarse.

"We're going to find her," he tells me assuredly. "I promise you we'll find her."

I take in the room, realizing that I'm still in the mansion in one of the spare bedrooms that has been stripped and made into a makeshift hospital

room.

The place looks sterile, but I still feel as though my skin is crawling. And when I stare down at the various tubes and other contraptions, which are pumping medicine and other fluids in and out of me, I begin to panic.

My fingers fumble with the IV in my arm, but Jax grasps my hands, stilling me. "Easy, tiger," he chuckles. "You still need this stuff to get back to a hundred percent. And if you pull your IV out, I'll just have to poke you again with a new needle."

I grimace at his words. I was poked and prodded and god only knows what else while I was unconscious.

Horrific images bombard me as I think about falling into the pool after I was shot...the dirty water...the germs seeping into my skin and infecting me...and then people touching me...undressing me...all while I lay unconscious...

My breathing picks up, my heart thumping hard against my ribcage as I accelerate into a full-blown panic attack. The monitors behind me start beeping erratically to convey my elevated blood pressure and erratic heartbeat.

"Luc, calm down!" Jax says quickly. "You're safe now. You're going to be okay."

I snap my eyes shut and think about Adeline. I have to be strong for her. My fucked-up mind won't do us any good if I'm stuck here in this little bubble and not able to find her out in the real world.

It takes me several minutes of Jax calming me down until my breathing eventually returns to normal and I can finally relax back onto the hospital-style bed.

"How...long?" I bite out, my throat feeling like sandpaper.

Jax stares at me evenly before he answers. "You've been out of it for a little over two weeks."

Two weeks?!

His answer floors me. I sit up quickly, and the motion makes my head spin with a bout of dizziness. "Fuck," I grate out, slumping back against the bed.

"It wasn't easy bringing you back. Trust me," Jax says, and I can hear the tremor in his voice he's trying so hard to conceal. "We're just lucky Wraith got to you in time."

My eyes meet the tall, burly Russian in the corner of the room. He stands perfectly still with military precision and regards me with stone-cold blue eyes. "I was on my way back to the island when I received your distress call. I made it just in time to save you. I pulled you out of the pool

and gave you CPR until Jax arrived." He grits his teeth as he bites out, "But I couldn't stop them from taking Adeline."

I glare at him. "You should have gone after her! You should have fucking saved her, not me!" I yell.

"He saved your life, Luc!" Jax voices sternly. "He couldn't fucking save you *and* her. Don't you get that? If he wouldn't have pulled you from the water and stopped you from bleeding out until I could get here, you'd be dead. And you're the only chance we have of finding Adeline. So, I would have lost you *both*," he says, his voice breaking on the last word.

My eyes meet his, and I can see the pain behind those gray orbs.

"Wraith was only doing his job," a small voice says, but it's full of anger.

My gaze falls upon a tall, young, blonde standing near Wraith with her arms folded across her chest, a cocked brow and looking like she's ready to take on the whole world. She gives me an unforgiving and hard glare, and I stare at her, trying to place her. But I can't seem to remember her.

"This is Katerina," Jackson says, answering the question that must be written all over my face.

"Katya," she corrects him, giving him the side eye.

"Katya is my...my girlfriend," he says hesitantly.

"In your dreams," Katya snaps, and Jax grimaces.

"She's clearly not ready to put a label on us yet," he says with a sly grin. "She's just avoiding the inevitable, though." Then he adds, "Besides, I think our couple nickname, Katson, has a certain ring to it."

Katya dramatically rolls her blue eyes to the ceiling, and it makes me smile. Perhaps Jax finally found his match — someone who won't put up with his shit and keep his ass in line.

I like her already.

"He kidnapped me, you know," she reveals with a cocked hip and a snarky attitude.

I raise a brow at Jax, and he simply shrugs his shoulders. "It looks like I have a lot to catch up on," I tell him.

"You have no idea," he says with a shake of his head.

CHAPTER 31

LUCIEN

IT TAKES ME several days of grueling rehabilitation with a therapist, who has taken up temporary residency on the island, until I'm able to walk with only a slight limp with the assistance of a cane.

Jax assures me I'll be able to return to normal — or my version of normal he had quipped — with a lot of therapy and hard work.

But right now I don't give a fuck about my physical condition or returning back to the way I was. The only thing I want right now is Adeline. And every second that passes by where she's not in my arms is another second wasted and spent in agony.

I have my best men out there searching for any possible clues, and I'm paying a lot of money to learn of Adeline's whereabouts. But so far everyone and everything is coming up empty handed.

I don't even know if she's still alive at this point. It's as if she disappeared off the face of the fucking planet.

But I refuse to give up. I will do everything in my power to find her again, no matter what it takes. I won't be able to rest until she's safe and by

my side where she fucking belongs.

It's late one night when Jackson comes into my office to do our daily ritual of cleaning and bandaging my shoulder. He's out of breath and his face is flushed, and I can't help but grin at his appearance. Over the past few days, the romance blossoming between him and Katya has been hilarious and tragic all at the same time.

Jackson pursues, and Katya runs. They really are playing quite the little cat and mouse game, but I'm beginning to think that Katya doesn't quite know all the rules.

She refuses Jax's advances at first...but she always gives in, as if she can't get enough of him.

I haven't been watching much, since voyeurism is more Jax's thing than mine, but I've seen them screwing on almost every surface in this goddamn place on the video feeds.

Maria has been working triple time to clean up after the young couple who can't seem to keep their hands off of each other.

"Trouble in paradise?" I ask Jax with a smirk.

"Fuck. That woman is going to be the death of me, I swear!" Jax exclaims, throwing his hands up in the air exasperatedly. "She's so fucking

infuriating and so stubborn and so...so...damn hot!" he groans, sliding his hands down his face.

I can't help but chuckle. It's good to see Jackson interested in a woman...who isn't involved with someone else. His voyeur ways have kept him from getting close to women, but I don't know if he ever realized that or not.

Jackson didn't have the same tragic upbringing that I did, but he did suffer his own losses. And part of me can't help but wonder if my joining of his small family somehow warped his view of the world. I certainly hope that's not the case, however.

Jax's mother up and left him and his father when he was a little boy, so I'm sure that did a lot of emotional damage to him. I wouldn't know anything about that. Because if my mother would have left when I was a kid, it would have been the best thing that could have ever happened to me.

After washing his hands and gathering the medical supplies he needs from the adjoining bathroom, Jax sits in a chair beside me and gingerly starts to unwrap the bandage around my right shoulder.

Gritting my teeth, I close my eyes and breathe deeply through my nose. It's tender to the touch and hurts like an absolute bitch at times, but I've survived much worse. I can most definitely survive this.

Jax has been playing doctor for the past week, dressing my wounds and pumping me full of painkillers and antibiotics while I've been recuperating and ignoring his requests to take it easy.

"You're going to have one hell of a battle wound to show off to all the ladies," he jokes.

"Sure. Just add it to my collection," I say pensively.

"You're damn lucky, you know. Clean in-and-out wounds. Fractured clavicle and some soft tissue damage in your shoulder...only minor nerve and tissue damage in your thigh. A millimeter to the right or to the left and you wouldn't even be here talking to me right now."

"Remind me to thank Giovanni when I see him for his shooting skills and ability to minimally maim his victims," I say sarcastically.

"I'm serious, Luc," he says angrily. "This could have ended very badly. You were very fucking fortunate," he says.

Our eyes meet for a second, the tension between us pulled tight like a violin string. He breaks the stare first, turning his attention back to my shoulder.

"I'll feel even luckier when I get Adeline back," I tell him, hissing loudly when he cleans out the hole in my upper chest with some type of solution.

"We need to keep this extremely clean. I'm sure you'll have no problem understanding and doing just that."

"Of course," I say with an eye roll. My brain has been so focused on getting Adeline back that I haven't even had time to focus on much else, let alone the pain in my body and what happened to me. I can worry about getting better and healing once I'm sure she's safe and sound.

"How's your thigh doing?"

"Fine," I tell him with a huff. The gunshot wound in my thigh is not nearly as bad except for the nerve damage, and so I've been attending to that myself. There's only so much a man can take when he's in pain and pissed off at the world. And having Jax so close to my junk every day was beginning to grate on my goddamn nerves.

After Jax is done cleaning and bandaging my shoulder, he discards his used supplies and heads to the bathroom to put everything away. "So...any news?" he asks as he walks back into the room and sinks down into a leather chair. He looks positively exhausted, but I'm not even going to venture to ask him why. I can easily guess. Besides, I've already seen the video proof of his restless nights with Katya, unfortunately.

"Nothing," I tell him, and I don't even try to hide the despondent tone of my voice. I'm at my wit's end and on the verge of desperation. A big part

of me wants to go to America to try to find her, but Adeline is one tiny needle in a huge fucking haystack. And I can accomplish more here with my makeshift command center with my computers tracking every piece of information I have and everything my hired men send in.

But as days go by, I grow more and more anxious and depressed and doubt that I'll ever hold her in my arms again.

Growling in frustration, I throw the folder with all of my gathered intel, which amounted to a big pile of nothing, against the wall. The folder explodes, papers scattering and floating to the floor.

I rake in the mess with my eyes, and it puts me even more on edge. My hands ball into fists, and my body trembles with anxiety. "I don't know what else to do, Jax," I tell him, desperation lacing my voice. "I don't know how much longer I can go on without knowing what happened to her, where she is and if she's all right."

"The watch is still a dead end?" he asks.

I nod solemnly. I've tried everything to get every ounce of data out of that damn thing, and all it shows is Adeline returning to New York. And then nothing. She either took it off...or it was taken from her.

Either way, without body heat, the goddamn thing won't continue to run. And I curse myself for designing it that way and for not installing

some kind of emergency battery. It was a simple oversight on my part.

And it might have cost me the love of my life.

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CHAPTER 32

GIOVANNI

THE VALENTI EMPIRE is slowly crumbling, and I am one of the last remaining survivors still standing. However, I haven't been surviving well, let me tell you. I've been cashing in on every favor I've ever been owed just to keep my head above water.

I'm slowly drowning.

Just like that stupid fuck I killed.

And even though The Wolf is dead, I still lost her.

Adeline.

Her name rolls around in my mind like an annoying, little pebble, and I grow angrier by the second.

I lost everything because of her. She disappeared, and my chances at gaining control of the Valenti empire once again are slowly slipping away. I needed to take immediate action after her father ended up behind bars. And every minute she's not by my side is another minute that the mafia family's confidence in me that I have enough power to take over and rule this goddamn city dwindles.

The feds got their hands on damning evidence that came out of the blue, and even Sal's hotshot millionaire lawyers couldn't bail his fat fuckin' ass out of the charges. I'm sure his sentence will be reduced, but Sal's looking at, at the very minimum, ten to fifteen years.

Fuck, he'll probably be dead before he sees the light of day again.

And I refuse to suffer the same fate.

Sal went down and tried to take me and everyone else with him, but I fled, hiding in the dark, dank recesses of NYC to escape any repercussions of my actions.

I lost my condo, my cars...all my fuckin' money.

Seething, I stare out the window, peering through the slats of a dirty mini blind. I'm looking for anybody suspicious, undercover cars...really anything out of the ordinary at this point.

I'm tired of looking over my fuckin' shoulder. I'm tired of feeling like I'm being followed. And I'm so goddamn tired of hiding.

I know that The Wolf is somehow behind all of this. Hell, maybe he had a plan in place in case he died. Insurance, if you will, that if something happened to him, he would burn my whole world down around me.

Vengeance...beyond the grave.

"Ah-ha!" a voice exclaims, causing me to turn my attention from the window and the world outside it to the short, balding, old man sitting at a desk that looks like it's seen better days...in the seventies.

Harvey is an old fuck, but he's cheap, and word on the street is that he's good. I promised him extra money in due time when I can get my hands on it whenever I take over the mafia family once again.

I'm the only one privy to the fact that Salvatore put an exorbitant amount of funds into an offshore account — a special and secret dowry for Adeline for whenever we got married. Once I can get that bitch to sign away her life to me in marriage, the money will be mine. And then I can rule, just as I was always meant to.

Money equals power.

And I will have a hell of a lot of it if I can track her down.

Curious, I peer over Harvey's shoulder and peek at the small, ancient television as some kind of black and white surveillance tape flickers on the screen.

"What the fuck is this?" I grumble. I pay this man more damn money than I currently can afford, and he's been trying to find Adeline for weeks with no fucking leads. He's really starting to piss me off, and I can feel the Glock in my jacket pocket growing heavier by the minute.

It wouldn't take much to put a bullet in this guy's brain and walk the fuck away.

In fact, I can't think of anything I would rather do right now.

When I go to reach for my gun, good old Harvey says, "Just watch and wait."

Squinting at the small screen, I huff my impatience. "It's a fucking parking lot. So what?"

"Patience, patience," Harvey whispers, giddy with excitement, his old, leathery face crinkling with wrinkles.

I roll my eyes and try to rein in my anger. "This better be fuckin' good," I hiss.

After a few seconds, I see some movement in the top left corner of the tape. A duffle bag of some sort falls onto the ground. And then I see a girl crawling out.

But not just any girl.

My girl.

"Holy fuck," I whisper.

"See? I told you I would find her," Harvey gloats.

I grit my teeth and glare at the old man. This is more than he's gotten me in the past couple of weeks, but it still doesn't tell me what happened to Adeline, where she went...and more importantly, where she is now.

As I watch Adeline drop out of the window and twist her ankle, limping afterwards, a sick feeling of satisfaction flows through me. A twisted grin forms on my face. I realize I like seeing her in pain. And this is a new development, seeing as how I was always more of a protective uncle to her in the past.

But no...now I want to see her suffer. I want that little bitch to pay for every penny that has been taken from me.

I would have been free and clear if she wouldn't have run from me. I'd still be living a life of luxury with the promise of a bright future as a mafia boss, king of the whole goddamn New York City fuckin' castle.

With the money and power I need, I will be fucking untouchable. The mob family will protect me, no matter the cost.

And I sure as hell won't be going down like Sal did. He had way more evidence against him than I currently do. Hell, probably most of it is circumstantial anyway. And once I can afford the lawyers I need, I can make everything disappear, if need be.

I'll be free and clear.

Blinking back to the screen, I watch Adeline hobbling and waving her arms. And my grin widens when I see her getting help from a woman.

Bingo.

When they drive away off the screen, I look at Harvey and tell him, "Find out everything you can about that woman. I want to know her fucking name and address by the end of the day."

Harvey flashes me a sly grin. "Sure thing, boss."

My fingertips slowly release the Glock in my pocket. He has no idea how close he came to dying today. But now I'm glad I didn't kill him after all, because this stupid, old man found my girl.

I'm still buzzing with energy, and the urge to hurt and maim is strong and coursing through my veins.

I decide to bide my time and save all of my frustration and anger for Adeline.

When I find that little bitch, I'm going to make her pay.

And then I'm going to make her mine and rule the empire with her by my side, like the fuckin' king and queen of NYC.

CHAPTER 33

ADELINe

I'VE ONLY BEEN in the small town of Cedar Creek, Pennsylvania for a short time, but I'm already in love with the town and the people who reside in it.

Barbara's son, James, and his family have been more than hospitable, putting me up in a small two-story home just down the road from the store that he owns. It's close enough to walk to work, and I've been putting in a significant number of hours at the little convenience store that always seems to be busy.

James told me it's the only store for twenty miles, so everyone in the town goes there for everything they need. He tries to stock all of the essentials and even special requests from the people in town...no matter how bizarre.

James has a way with the town folk. He's personable and always has a smile on his face.

And he was willing to give me a chance, a complete stranger, so that tells me a lot about his character.

He has a kind soul. Just like his mother.

I'm closing up for the night when James comes out of the back storage room. "Have you heard from my mother? I tried calling her yesterday and today, and I've been getting no answer."

I think for a moment to the last time Barbara and I spoke. I suppose it's been a few days as well. "Maybe she finally agreed to go out with Dr. Benson," I offer.

James grins. "You think she finally caved?"

I grin at the memory of Dr. Benson coming to check out my ankle after Barbara first took me to her house. I could practically feel the sexual tension in the room, and I didn't miss the longing glances from both of them.

Barbara had denied it vehemently numerous times; but to quote Shakespeare, *the lady doth protest too much, methinks.*

"Maybe he finally wore her down," I say with a giggle. Dr. Benson had been practically begging for a date for over a year. His wife had passed away suddenly just as Barbara's husband had, and I know they both were lonely. I urged her into at least giving him a chance, so maybe she finally took my advice.

"It's not like her to not check in at least once a day with all of us," he says with a shake of his head, his playful tone gone now and replaced with worry.

I nibble on my thumbnail, growing anxious. Maybe it's just nothing... or maybe it's...

No. My father is in jail, and the rest of his goons are following close behind him. I haven't seen anything online or in the paper about the feds arresting Giovanni yet, but I know it's only a matter of time.

"I'll try calling her tonight," I tell him.

He nods and then says, "Head on home. I'll lock up."

I can see the wrinkle in his brow. He's worried about his mom. And now I'm worried too. "Okay, boss," I tell him with a forced smile. "See you tomorrow."

I grab my small cross body purse from the hook behind the counter and leave the store. The sidewalk is cracked and raised in some places, and I'm thankful for the sporadic cast iron street lamps that light my way home.

My house is the last one at the end of the street. It's two stories with three bedrooms, a small kitchen, living room, bathroom and front porch. It's more than enough room for me, and I'm just thankful to have a place to call my own.

The porch light glows in the darkness, and the candle lamps in all the windows welcome me home.

I unlock the front door, push my way inside and flick on the foyer light. Closing and locking the door behind me, I sling my purse over a hook near the door and make my way to the kitchen.

There's an older-style rotary phone on the wall, and I pick it up and dial Barbara's number, which I know by heart.

When I get her machine, I leave a message. "Hi, Barbara. It's me," I say into the receiver. I never leave my name...just in case. "James is getting worried that you haven't been calling, and now I'm worried too. Just...call one of us. Okay?" I ask, and I grimace when I hear the tremor in my voice.

Hanging up the phone, I press my forehead against the smooth, black plastic and breathe in deeply. "I hope you're okay," I whisper.

I've grown close with Barbara over the past several weeks. And if anything happens to her, I'll never forgive myself.

I step back and stare at the receiver, urging it to ring. But it never does.

Sighing deeply, I jog up the flight of stairs, strip out of my work clothes and take a long bath. The warm water does little to soothe me, however. I

have a bone-deep chill that I can't seem to get rid of, and I know it's not because of the colder weather sweeping across Pennsylvania.

After I dry off and dress, I have an overwhelming pressure on my chest, and I know it's going to be one of those nights — the kind of night where I can't stop crying, because I miss *him*.

Sometimes I miss him so bad it physically hurts.

Standing in my small closet, I spy the duffle bag I crammed in the top corner shelf. It contains all my money...and the precious gift that Lucien made for me back on the island.

I haven't been able to even look at the watch since my world turned upside-down.

But it doesn't deserve to stay hidden forever.

It should be worn with pride as a constant reminder of someone I loved very deeply and who loved me just as much in return.

Lifting up on my tiptoes, I grab the duffle bag and yank it off the shelf. Placing it on my small twin-sized bed, I unzip the bag and then the small inner pocket.

The moment my fingers touch the familiar rose gold band, I feel my heart stutter in my chest.

I pull the watch out and hold it in the lamplight. Tears fill my eyes and blur the object in my hands.

They say all wounds heal over time, but I don't believe that's true about broken hearts. The cracks and schisms simply harden to a petrified state, but they're always there, and they never fully heal.

I carefully wrap the band around my wrist and do the clasp. But when I turn my wrist over, the screen is dark. I remember Lucien told me it runs on my body heat. And it's sat cold for so long that I wonder if it will even work again.

A tear slips from my cheek and splashes onto the screen, and I quickly wipe it away. Even if it never works again, I vow to never take it off. Just having it around my wrist again makes me feel better.

My hands go to my small belly bump, which has been growing with every passing week. And Laura, James's wife, has been sending over meal after meal, which has been a blessing but also a curse. I feel like I've gained twenty pounds just from her food alone.

If I stay here much longer, I'm going to look like a blimp and like I'm carrying triplets instead of just one, tiny baby.

Curling up on the bed with my hands around my tummy, I close my eyes.

Even though I'll never have a photo of Lucien, I can picture him in my head. I can see his broody, dark eyes and rare smile that used to light up my entire world.

Tears well up in my eyes and run down my temple and the bridge of my nose as I think back to the whirlwind that's been my life the past few months. Lucien would know exactly what to do, and he would protect me. He would protect *us*.

What I wouldn't have given to share just one more moment with him, to tell him I love him just one more time.

But I can't turn back time, and I can't ever get him back.

The most important thing now is to let his memory live on through me. And I won't let our baby grow up without knowing that his or her father was one of the kindest and strongest men I have ever met.

Lucien would have loved our baby with all of his tortured heart.

I long for him. Many nights I wake up in a panic, covered in sweat and screaming his name. That horrible day plagues my nightmares, and it's like I just can't seem to get that gruesome image out of my mind no matter how hard I try.

I squeeze my eyes shut and more tears leak out when I think of Lucien falling backwards into the pool, the water turning red.

Just like in real life, even in my dreams Lucien never surfaces.

A beeping noise breaks me out of my nightmarish reverie. The screen of the watch glows with the word *rebooting* on it.

My tired, blurry eyes stare at the screen as rebooting flashes over and over, lulling me to sleep.

And just before my eyes close for good that night, I see the screen flash to normal and watch as the time and date resets from that fateful day to the present like it's restarting my life.

And maybe that's exactly what I need right now.

A reboot.

And to let go of the past...and let go of *him*.

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CHAPTER 34

ADELINE

THINGS GO FROM bad to worse.

None of James's brothers have heard from Barbara, and everyone is getting worried. The brothers are scattered throughout the United States, and so the youngest, Benjamin, has agreed to go see her today to make sure everything's all right.

It's in the afternoon on Monday when the phone rings in the store. I'm quick to answer it. "Martin's Convenience Store. How may I help you?" I ask in a cheery voice.

"Adeline, this is Benjamin. Is my brother there? I need to speak to him right away."

My blood freezes and turns to ice in my veins, and I know in my heart of hearts that something happened to Barbara. "Is she...did something...is she okay?" I ask, stammering through the question.

"She'll be okay, but something terrible happened." He sighs deeply into the phone. "Please, Adeline. Is James there?"

"Yes, of course," I say, numbly. I take the phone into the back office where I know he'll be. Without a word, I hand him the receiver.

James doesn't even question me, because I know he can tell something's wrong from my expression. "Hello?" he asks. "Ben, what -?" James listens carefully, his eyes growing wide and then narrowing. He begins to pace the small room, clearly trying to make sense of everything that his brother is telling him.

I wring my hands as I wait for answers.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," James tells him before ending the call. He sets the phone down and then presses his palms against his eyes. "My... my mom..."

"What happened?" I ask, needing to know but also terrified for his response.

"Someone broke into my mother's house the other day and beat her. She almost died," he says, choking on his words. "But luckily, Dr. Benson went over to check on her last night. He found her, took her to the hospital. Ben's there with her now." He shakes his head, and then his weary, brown eyes meet mine. "Benjamin said my mother wanted to warn you that you're in danger."

And with those words, my entire world stops once again.

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CHAPTER 35

LUCIEN

MY PHONE BEEPS, slowly bringing me out of a deep and drunken sleep. Groaning, I roll over and check the time. It's three in the morning. The last thing I can remember is drinking a fifth of scotch and then passing out in an intoxicated stupor.

A ragged moan tears from my throat as I mentally beg for the beeping to stop. My head is pounding in time with the incessant electronic sound, and I curse loudly before swiping one, two, three times at the phone with my hand.

The device falls off the nightstand and clatters to the floor, but the relentless beeping doesn't stop.

Fuck.

Crawling to the edge of the bed, I reach for the phone. It takes a few attempts before I'm able to grab it and bring it up to my face with it dangling perilously between my fingertips.

But when I read the screen and realize what the alert is, everything around me ceases to exist.

The GPS tracker on Adeline's watch has been activated.

Suddenly feeling a lot more awake and a hell of a lot sober, I clamber out of bed and jog to my office, forgoing the cane and limping the entire way, but making it in record speed.

My physical therapist would be so damn proud.

Sitting down at the computer, I wake it the fuck up and input my passcode. Muttering under my breath, my fingers move a million miles a minute on the keys as I bring up the watch software program and read over the newest data.

It rebooted its system a couple of hours ago and is currently generating data and GPS coordinates.

The anticipation of finding out where Adeline is threatens to shred my nerves to pieces. I can barely stop myself from hitting the computer to make it go faster, even though I know that won't do a damn thing to help.

The only thing I can do is wait.

I type out a quick text to Jax, not knowing if he's asleep or awake, telling him that I might have a new lead.

It only takes a few minutes before Jax comes barreling into my office, out of breath and looking like he just ran a marathon. He puts his hands on his knees, sucking in air. "What...did...you...find?" he asks between pants.

"She activated the watch. I'm waiting for the data to upload."

He straightens and narrows his eyes at me. "So...nothing?"

I smirk at him and wave my hand towards a seat nearby. "Want to wait with me?"

Groaning in frustration, he goes to a chair and dramatically plops down on it. We wait in silence as I watch the upload bar indicator slowly move centimeter by centimeter on the big screen before me.

"What if it's not her?" Jax asks the question I've been mulling around in my own head.

"Then we'll find out who has the watch and see if they know where she is," I say through clenched teeth. The thought of someone else having the gift I gave her guts me, because it makes me crazy with doubt and worry.

My attention snaps to the screen when a new window automatically opens. Jax moves from the couch to hover over my shoulder as we read through the data together.

"She's in Pennsylvania," he whispers.

I Google the town she's in. It has a population of around 900, a small farming town in the middle of nowhere. It would be easy to stay hidden in a place like that. "Smart girl," I mutter.

"Do you think it's Adeline?"

"It's her," I tell him confidently. It has to be. I've run out of options, and I won't even conceive the possibility of not finding her now. If nothing else, this will give us a better lead than I've had since she first disappeared.

"When are we leaving?" Jax asks, and I look up to see he's anxiously waiting by the door.

"As soon as possible," I confirm.

"I'll tell Wraith to ready the plane," he says anxiously. Then he quietly adds, "For all of us."

"All of us?" I inquire.

He shrugs and shyly looks down to the floor for a moment before saying, "Well, I have to bring Katya along." With a shake of his head, he adds, "I just don't trust her yet not to run, and she's not safe out there on her own."

I nod, completely understanding his situation given what I went through with Adeline. I just worry that Jax is going to get hurt in the end. I'll deal with this Katya problem later, but right now I can only focus on getting to Adeline and making sure she's safe and sound.

"Be careful," I tell him, and he gives me a long stare before nodding several times. He understood the hidden meaning behind my words, and I

hope he takes them to heart.

After Jax leaves, I upload the data onto my laptop and phone and gather everything I will need for the trip, packing only the essentials.

Once I get my girl back, I'm bringing her home.

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CHAPTER 36

ADELINE

JAMES CLOSES THE store with a sign in the window indicating that it will be closed until further notice. And then him, Laura and their two kids pack up and leave for New York.

I told James that I didn't know if I would be here when he returned, and he told me to call as soon as I figured out what I decide to do.

I don't think his mother told him all the details of why I was running and needed a place to hide, but I'm sure James is putting two and two together now because of the obvious coincidences. I think he knows the break-in at his mom's place is somehow connected to me, but he didn't make me feel guilty about it or even accuse me of anything.

He should have, however. Because it's all my fault.

Somehow, someway someone found a connection between Barbara and me and the fact that she helped me escape and hide. I just know it.

But who?

The most likely suspect is Giovanni since my father is currently in prison, but I don't know why Gio would be coming after me. It just doesn't

make sense, unless...he knows something that I don't.

He and my father shared *a lot* of secrets, so I wouldn't put it past him.

Maybe there is something he wants or *needs* from me.

I don't know, but I'm not sticking around to find out. With a protective hand caressing my baby bump, I whisper, "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

I gather the rest of my minimal belongings, stuffing them into the same duffle bag I used the first time I ran.

Checking the time on my watch, it's a little after five. I have a bus to catch at five-thirty, so I'm right on schedule. I'm heading as far out west as I can, and then I'll figure things out from there.

One step at a time, I tell myself.

Sighing, I glance around the room. I didn't get to stay here long, but it felt like I belonged here. It truly did feel like a home. And I'm saddened by the fact that I may never be able to return again.

My eyes flicker over the pile of cash and thank you card I left on the bed for James to find when he comes home. It's the least I could do considering all the help he gave me...and all the trouble I caused him and his family.

I'll make it up to Barbara too as soon as I can; no matter how long it takes.

I still have plenty of money left to tide me over for the next few months, but I'll need to find a place to live and work soon. I want to find somewhere I feel safe, but I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever find it.

Taking one last glance, I step into the hall, shut the door behind me and descend down the steps. The house is shrouded in near darkness except for the kitchen light. I move quickly, double-checking the cabinets and making sure I'm not leaving anything important behind.

I flick off the kitchen light and move through the darkness towards the front door.

"Going somewhere, Princess?" says a deep voice that stops me dead in my tracks and sends a chill up my spine.

The duffle bag slips from my hand and falls to the floor with a loud *thump* in the quiet house.

"W-who —?" I start, but then I can hear footsteps coming towards me, and I take a few steps back.

I turn to run, but the man is too fast. He grabs me from behind, pinning me against his hard chest. "Adeline," he whispers in my ear, and I cringe.

Giovanni!

My mouth opens, and a scream tears from my throat. His hand quickly clamps over my mouth, and I struggle against his hold. That very hand pulled the trigger and took everything away from me.

I clamp my teeth down, biting into his flesh, and he releases me with a curse. Running towards the back door, I make it a few feet before I'm grabbed again.

"Now, now, Princess. Is that anyway to greet me?" He holds me tight against him, constricting me like the snake he is. "I've been looking for you. And trust me when I say, it hasn't been easy for me since everything has gone to shit." Leaning towards my ear, he whispers, "Because of you."

"Good," I seethe, causing a dark chuckle to escape his lips.
"I see The Wolf taught you how to fight. Is that what he liked? Did it get his rocks off?" he hisses.

Just the mention of Lucien has all the fight in me fleeing. "You... You k-killed him," I choke out.

"Yes," he says, slowly releasing me. I move away from him and press against the kitchen cabinets.

Light filters through the kitchen after he flicks on a nearby switch. I squint from the sudden brightness, and then force myself to look at the man

who changed my life forever and took the only good thing in my life away from me.

"Why?" I ask him, and it's a loaded question. I want to know so many things right now. Why he hurt Barbara. Why he's here. Why he's been hunting me down.

"If you're wondering why I'm here, it's because you didn't fulfill your end of the bargain," he tells me simply.

The gears in my head turn, trying to make sense of his statement. "You don't mean..." My eyes snap up to meet his. "You still want me to *marry* you?" I ask as if it's the most absurd thing I've ever heard in my life. And quite frankly, it is after all that's happened between us. "I will *never* marry you, Giovanni."

"I thought maybe you'd say that," he says, sneering. "But I have ways of making you comply to what I want," he threatens.

Tears fill my eyes as I shake my head, but he's right. If he threatens to harm me in any way, I will do anything he says to protect my baby.

He opens his arms and gestures with his hands for me to come to him. When I don't move, he tells me, "You can't escape, Adeline. I have guards surrounding the house. There's nowhere you can go where I won't find you. You have to know that deep down."

His fingers make a come-hither motion once more, and I cringe with how much I detest him. Reluctantly, I step forward and release a sob when he enfolds me in his strong arms.

"That's my girl," he whispers soothingly. "I knew you'd see things my way." Releasing me from his hold and grabbing my hand in a tight grip, he says, "Come on. We have a long ride ahead of us."

CHAPTER 37

LUCIEN

"SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT," I hear Jax announce from his seat across from me on the small private jet.

He's been watching the data on Adeline nonstop ever since we left, even though not much has changed.

I open my laptop and scroll through the program. "It looks exactly the same," I grumble. "She's in the same exact location that she was hours ago."

"Not the GPS. I'm talking about her vitals."

His words send me into panic mode, and I open up another window to check the data. I had been so focused on her location that I didn't even think about checking her vitals. How could I have been so fucking careless?

Cursing, I look at the elevated heart rate. I try to tell myself that it's nothing, but it could be something. Hell, it could be anything.

Until I have Adeline in my arms, I will never be able to rest or relax.

Jax peers up at me, his face etched with worry lines. "Do you think something is happening to her?"

I narrow my eyes at my cousin. Over the past few days, his concern over Adeline together with his infatuation before I was shot are all leading to one conclusion and one conclusion only.

Jackson *loves* Adeline...maybe even as much as I do.

In fact, he might even be in love with her, for all I know.

She's so damn easy to love. How can I even really fucking blame him?

Look how easily I fell for Adeline. My beautiful girl wormed her way into my cold, dead heart, and I think she did the same thing with Jax, perhaps just in a different way.

Maybe I shouldn't have dangled Adeline in front of him like a piece of forbidden fruit. He's obviously been craving a taste of her, but he knows better. He knows I'll never share her.

Clenching my hands into fists, I close my eyes and rein in my anger and temper as it flares deep inside me like a volcano getting ready to erupt. I can't take my frustration out on Jax right now. I need as many allies on my side as I can get. And if he feels that strongly about Adeline, then that means he'll fight twice as hard as everyone else to get her back.

"Jax, she will be okay," I hear Katya whisper soothingly.

I look up just in time to see Katya lean over and place her hand over his. The strong, silent look that the two of them exchange paints a picture that is worth a thousand words.

Jax is clearly falling for Katya, and vice versa. And that instantly calms me somewhat. Katya will be good for Jax. Because he sure as hell isn't laying a finger on *my girl*.

Once I get Adeline back, I'm keeping her. Forever. And she'll never be out of my sight again.

A beeping noise alerts me to a change in GPS coordinates, and my heart thuds loudly in my chest as I check the digital map.

The blip on the radar screen is moving. *Quickly*. She's in a car.

And it's heading towards New York City.

CHAPTER 38

ADELINE

THE BLACK LIMO is speeding towards New York City, and there's nothing I can do to stop my journey back to that dreadful prison.

After wrestling with Giovanni's two hired goons, they shoved me in the back seat with Gio and slammed the door shut, sealing my fate.

I'm pressed against the door, not wanting to even look at the man beside me, let alone touch him or feel his presence while the two men riding in the front are invisible behind a raised black partition.

I'm vibrating with nervous energy. I don't know what's going to happen to me. But more importantly, I want to know what will happen to my baby.

I'm not sure if my father told Giovanni about the baby or not. I'm afraid to even bring it up, because what if he wants me to have an abortion like my father had wanted?

I shiver and wrap my arms around myself.

"Are you cold?" Gio asks, and I can hear what sounds like genuine concern lacing his tone.

Closing my eyes, I shake my head, not wanting to even speak to this man. Knowing Gio, he would pull me close to warm me up, and I can't bear the feeling of his hands on my skin right now...and I never will.

I'm not sure how I'm going to survive this. I'll have to bide my time and plan my escape. And I will escape. There is no doubt about that in my mind. I will fight until I have nothing left to give. I will protect myself and this baby until my last dying breath, if that's what it takes.

Opening a mini built-in cooler, Giovanni withdraws a bottle of water and holds it out towards me in offering. "Thirsty?" he asks.

I lick my lips and stare at the water. My mouth is so dry that it feels like the Sahara desert. Even though I want to refuse anything from him, but I'm too thirsty to say no.

Snatching it out of his hands before he changes his mind, I unscrew the lid and gulp down several big swallows. The cool liquid feels so good on my sore throat, which feels like it's been ripped to shreds from screaming so much.

"Easy," he says, pulling the bottle from my hands and replacing the lid. "You don't want to drink too much too fast. You'll get sick," he chides.

The fact that he's worried about my wellbeing is disconcerting. Maybe he's not planning on killing me after all? But how could I ever trust this...

this *monster*?

"How are you feeling?" he asks me.

When I meet his gaze for the first time since we got in the limo, I can see that he's asking a loaded question. *Does he know about the baby?* I decide to play it safe and answer with a quiet, "I'm fine."

"Adeline, there are some things we need to discuss before we arrive back home."

Home.

New York City will never be my home again.

My home was with Lucien. And Giovanni stole him away from me. He stole my happy ending, my future...everything.

"I'm sure you know your father is in jail. The family is in disarray, and it needs a ruler before things get any more out of control. I plan on taking your father's place. And with you by my side, I will gain back the family's approval and trust."

I glare at him. So he's still going along with the plan that was forged by my father years ago. The plan that I had been willing to go along with too...before...before Lucien, before he opened my eyes to the truth.

"I'm sorry to ruin your plans," I hiss, "but I refuse to stand by your side and help you commit more crime and bring more drugs and sex slaves into the city."

In a motion so fast, I have no time to react, Giovanni grabs my wrist and drags me across the seat and into his arms. My body instantly goes stock still from shock...right before I start to fight him.

I claw at his expensive suit, but his grip is too tight. He twists me like a ragdoll and locks me in place with my back against his chest and my arms crisscrossed in front of me.

Releasing a feral scream, I buck against him, trying to set myself free. I can't stand to be this close to the man who took Lucien from me.

"Calm down, Adeline. It's not good for the baby," he growls against my ear.

I gasp and continue to struggle until I wear myself out. His grip is too strong, and my efforts are proving to be futile. Eventually, my body relaxes slightly, but my guard is still up, my senses on high alert. "You know?" I ask with disbelief.

"Of course I know. How do you think I found you? Surveillance cameras outside of the abortion clinic."

I close my eyes and shudder. That's how he found Barbara.

"Besides, your father always told me everything. When you went missing, I was the first person he came to. Why would he keep something like that from me?" His hot breath skates against my neck, and I shudder in disgust. "You should know that your friend, Barbara, was strong right up until the end. It took a lot for me to break her. She didn't want to give you up." He nuzzles his nose in my hair, and I cry out in agony. "She was a fighter, but she had what I needed. And I was willing to do anything to get it."

Tears fill my eyes when I think of him going to Barbara's house and beating her.

Barbara was innocent. Her only crime was helping and protecting me. I wrestle against him, and this time he lets me go. I retreat to the other side of the bench seat, pressing myself against the doorframe. "I hate you!" I scream at him, a sob tearing from my throat.

"I understand that. But with time, I hope you will love me again, like I know you did once."

Sobbing in my hands, I shake my head in bewilderment. I will never love Giovanni. In fact, I don't know if I'll ever love anyone ever again as much as I loved Lucien.

"When we get back home, things will be hectic at first. But they'll slowly get back to normal. You'll see," he says with an optimism that angers me.

"I'm not having an abortion!" I blurt out heatedly.

"I don't want you to," he says with a blank expression.

My brows furrow at his words. "But...it's not your baby," I say, even though that is obvious since I never slept with Giovanni.

"Doesn't matter. We're the only two who will know that." He flashes me a dark, stern look before adding, "And I plan on keeping it that way."

"I don't understand," I mutter, shaking my head softly.

"That *thing* inside of you right now will be the heir that the Valenti family is expecting." He grins an evil grin that has me trembling. "When I announce your return and our pregnancy, it will give me even more leverage when I take my rightful place as head of the empire, just like your father always wanted."

I cringe in disgust and lean my head against the soft seat. "This can't be happening," I mutter.

He's quiet for a while before he asks, "Why don't you get some sleep? We still have a few hours before we get home."

Closing my eyes, it doesn't take long for exhaustion to cloud over me in a thick fog. I sleep, but it's plagued with nightmares...with a longing for *him*.

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CHAPTER 39

ADELINE

I'M DREAMING A wonderful dream of Lucien. I'm curled up against his chest, and he's murmuring sweet nothings to me, which warm me down to my very soul.

"I missed you," I tell him.

"I missed you too," he whispers.

His hand softly strokes my hair, and I purr, nestling closer to the warmth of his suit jacket. It feels so real. My eyes flutter, but I don't want to wake up. I want this dream to last forever.

"Lucien," I whisper, still in a twilight state between dream and reality.

But I'm instantly snapped out of it when powerful fingers clamp around my jaw, squeezing until I'm whimpering and crying out in pain. My eyes pop open, and I meet the eyes of the devil himself — Giovanni.

"I don't want to hear his name come out of your mouth ever again!" he roars, his voice booming in the back of the limousine. "He's dead. Do you hear me? I killed him, and he's fucking dead. He's never coming back!"

His words are so harsh that they cut straight through me like a sharp butcher knife. I jerk out of his grip and move to the opposite side of the bench seat, quietly sobbing and rubbing my sore jaw, which is no doubt bruised.

I can practically feel Gio seething next to me. I can't believe I curled up to him in my sleep. Shaking my head, I vow to never let my guard down around him ever again.

"We're almost home," Gio says in a much calmer tone, and he actually sounds...happy.

His mood swings remind me of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And that makes him even more dangerous since I never know which personality is going to come out or when.

This is not the same man who took care of me when I was sick as a child, who read me bedtime stories of castles and princesses and knights in faraway lands or the man who taught me how to drive when I grew older and who promised to take care of me always.

I don't know this man. This man is nothing but a stranger.

A few minutes later, the limo is pulling up to an unfamiliar place. There is a large, metal gate with a surrounding fence and even a guard shack.

I peer out the window at the armed guard as he speaks to the driver of the limo. With a nod of his head, the guard presses a button, and the gate begins to open.

Looking out the back window as we drive up what looks like a very long driveway, I watch the gate close behind us, effectively shutting us into this prison.

Every few feet I see guards patrolling the expansive grounds, and my hope of escaping begins to dwindle little by little.

Even if I would make it past the guards, how would I be able to climb a fifty-foot fence?

Wringing my hands in my lap, my heart thumps erratically as the limo stops in a circular driveway and parks near a set of steps leading up to a place I cannot see.

Giovanni steps out of the limo, and I stay seated, breathing deeply in through my nose and out my mouth, trying to calm my frantic heartbeat.

My door suddenly opens, and Gio is there with his hand extended. Ignoring the gesture, I get out by myself, pushing my way past him. But he quickly grabs my arm in a bruising grip and hauls me back towards him. "Don't disobey me, Adeline," he hisses in my ear. "You won't like the fucking consequences."

I glare up at him, wanting him to see my defiance and wanting him to know I'm not the naïve little girl he sold all those months ago.

After several seconds of an intense stare down, Gio relinquishes his glare and forces me to walk beside him towards the staircase.

I gasp at the immense size of the manor we're walking into. The front is like a sea of tinted windows overlooking the vast property. And the opulent foyer we walk into with a grand staircase and glittering chandelier overhead has me turning my head this way and that to take everything in.

"Who owns this place?" I ask Giovanni, curiosity getting the better of me.

"Your father did. He used to entertain his most valued guests here," he tells me. "And now it's ours." His eyes meet mine as he says, "Welcome home."

Home.

There's that word again that leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

People dressed in similar black and white attire appear out of nowhere, and Gio is quick to spout off instructions to them. "And show Adeline to her room, please. She's had a long day, and I'm sure she wants to get some rest."

I glare at him as I'm carted upstairs by two men. They deposit me into a large bedroom on the second floor and lock the door after they leave.

I rush to the window and see that it's sealed shut. Not just that, but the glass is very thick and looks like it's shatterproof...maybe even bulletproof. This place is like a fortress, and I'm just another prisoner...again.

Sulking, I slide down to the floor and curl up into a ball. I don't know what will become of me here, but I don't know if I can survive this without Lucien.

My heart aches for him as I sob against the plush carpet. Just as a fresh wave of tears stream down my face, I notice that my watch is glowing in the darkness.

But instead of the date, time and other usual data...there are four words.

I'm coming for you.

CHAPTER 40

LUCIEN

"DID IT WORK?" Jax asks.

My fingers type furiously on the laptop. Sometimes my own code is just too damn good, and it took forever for me to produce a small message to show up on Adeline's watch.

"I think so," I tell him. I can't be sure, but I'm confident that she'll see the message. Just in case she's surrounded by others, I turn the message off after a few seconds. I just pray that she saw it and knows that I'm coming for her.

We're currently stationed on the outskirts of New York City in an abandoned warehouse. Wraith brought in a handful of his own contacts — several tattooed and mean-looking men with more scars than I fucking have.

And I had to pull some strings with Wepner, but he managed to scrounge up some of his best FBI agents for us to use as backup. No questions asked since Salvatore Valenti and half of the empire is currently behind bars thanks to me.

Giovanni is still out there on the loose, and I have no doubt in my mind that he's the one who kidnapped Adeline.

After searching through properties that the Valenti family has ownership of and using the GPS coordinates on Adeline's watch, we've narrowed it down to one place on our map.

It's not going to be easy to break into, however, because the intel we've gathered so far has informed us that it would be easier to break into Fort Knox.

The property is surrounded by a ten-foot tall fence equipped with motion-detector security cameras every few feet. There is a guard shack outside the entrance, and the front gate can only be unlocked with an electronic keycard.

There's also a panic button inside the shack that the guard can press if he suspects any suspicious activity, locking down the entire place and alerting everyone inside.

Even if we make it past the guards stationed out front and the fence, we need to take down the numerous guards and dogs stationed every several yards throughout the inside perimeter.

The mansion itself is impressive with bulletproof windows that could withstand a firing squad and heavy, steel entrance doors that could

withstand a fucking tank.

With every bit of information I gather, the more unstable I become. I keep forcing myself to not go off the deep end, however, because Adeline needs me too much right now. I have to be strong. For her.

I can break down later. I owe Adeline that much at least for putting her through all of this and everything she's had to endure since she met me.

As I check the data one more time, I hear Jackson and Katya arguing several feet away.

"You're not going!" Jackson declares.

"Oh, so what are you going to do with me then? Tie me up again and force me to stay here?" she snaps.

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm going to do," he says.

She huffs and puts a hand on her cocked hip. "Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? You and your little *kinks*," she hisses.

He throws his hands up in the air exasperatedly. "It's too dangerous for you to go, Katya. We could all die. *I* could die," he tells her adamantly.

I expect Katya to back down then, knowing that Jax is putting his life on the line and not willing to risk hers. But she surprises me by asking, "And

then what would happen to me if you never come back? I'd be left here to starve and die!"

Shaking my head, I try to block out the two as they bicker like an old married couple and focus on the task at hand.

I plan on sending the trained agents and Wraith's men in first. Jax and I will bring up the tail end of the mission, staying out of harm's way and going straight for Adeline once the coast is clear.

Normally, I would want to be out front where all the action is, but I can't fight in the condition I'm currently in, and I'm not willing to put Jax's life in danger. I would never allow it, and I would most certainly sacrifice myself before I let anything happen to him.

The government agents have gathered in a group in the corner of the room, talking in hushed voices while my crew is on the other side of the expansive room. I approach the group of agents and hear one say, "This is going to be fuckin' impossible. A goddamn suicide mission. I certainly didn't sign up for this shit."

Clearing my throat, they all turn to look at me with surprised and then blank looks on their faces. "If you want out now, tell me. Because I assure you, gentlemen, I will move heaven and earth, if I have to, with my own goddamn bare hands to get her back," I say, giving each and every one of

them a searing look. "Don't underestimate my obsession...or my undying love for her."

There is a calm silence that settles over the men, and several nod their head in compliance.

"I have an idea on how we can get in quickly and quietly and without detection," I announce to the entire room.

I hear some disbelieving huffs and murmurs through the warehouse, but I block them out.

What I need to have happen *can* happen. It's just that I hate pulling in favors, especially from the person I'm about to call, but all of the scenarios running through my head all lead back to *him*.

"We're going to hit them and hit them fucking hard." I grin before adding, "The good news is...they won't even see us coming."

CHAPTER 41

ADELINE

I STARE AT the watch as the mysterious message disappears. Could it be a message from Jax...or *Lucien*?

I gasp and hold a hand to my throat as a sob threatens to escape. Just the thought that Lucien could be alive sends a spike of hope coursing through my veins.

But slowly my hope is crushed as I realize...could he really have survived the gunshot wounds *and* drowning?

Lucien is resourceful and strong...but he's not immortal.

Still there's a small chance, and I'm willing to hold onto it as if it's a lifeline. The only other person who would be coming for me is Jax. Jax holds the key to unlocking the million and one questions I have about Lucien...about what happened to him...and if he's still alive.

Clutching the watch against my chest, I force my tears to stop. If Jax is coming to get me, I need to be prepared.

I need to be ready to fight back.

Standing, I go to the door and wriggle the doorknob. The door is still locked, and it doesn't look like there's any other way out of this room.

I decide to try a different tactic. Banging on the door, I begin to scream at the top of my lungs, hoping someone will be able to hear me.

It takes several minutes, but eventually I hear the door being unlocked. I step back as it swings open and reveals Giovanni. "You called, Princess?" he sneers.

"I don't feel very well," I lie, grasping my stomach. "I think maybe if I had something to eat..." I let my voice trail off and allow my eyes to fall to the ground to appear weak and submissive on the outside — the exact opposite of how I'm feeling internally right now.

Growling in frustration, he hisses, "Fine. I think there are some leftovers in the fridge." He grabs my upper arm in a bruising grip and pulls me towards him. "Don't you dare so much as fucking *breathe* in the direction of anyone or I will have you hogtied and gagged in your room for the rest of the night."

I stare at him in disbelief. Where is the man I was beginning to fall in love with months ago? Where is the man who vowed to protect me before I was even able to walk?

I feel duped. My entire life I was led to believe Gio was a kind man, a forgiving man with a good heart and soul.

However, he's clearly nothing but a monster disguised behind a designer suit and a killer smile.

Giovanni tightens his grasp and practically drags me down to the kitchen. There is a maid cleaning the countertops. "Leave," Gio snaps at her.

With trepidation reflected in her big, blue eyes, the young girl practically runs out of the room.

Giovanni forces me onto a barstool at the breakfast bar and retreats to a large stainless steel fridge to gather several items. "You still like turkey, right?" he mutters.

I give him a nod when he glances my way. I watch carefully as he sets everything on the counter and then begins making me a turkey sandwich with a dill pickle on the side just how I used to always like it.

Tears fill my eyes when I realize that the man who helped to practically raise me still exists somewhere inside the monster he eventually became.

"What's wrong?" he asks when he places the sandwich in front of me. "Nothing. Just hormones," I tell him before picking up the sandwich and taking a bite. "It's good. Thank you," I whisper.

He gives me a small smile and watches me eat. I was hoping that he would leave me alone and that I could search for a way out or a place to hide, but it looks like I'm not going to be that lucky after all.

Swallowing hard past the turkey sandwich that now feels like a big lump lodged in my throat, I ask him for a glass of water. He obliges, setting the glass in front of me.

I take a long swallow, my hand trembling. "Are you planning on keeping me here long?" I inquire. The more information I can find out, the better.

His eyes narrow on me as he replies with, "I don't know yet. It depends on how everything pans out."

His answer is cryptic, and I don't really understand how he intends to take over the empire when half of the family is in prison. And I know that once my father gets out, and I'm sure he will sooner rather than later, he's going to want back control.

The ceiling lights flicker once, twice. I slowly set my sandwich down as Giovanni stares at me. Then the whole mansion settles into complete darkness.

"Fuck," Gio curses. His cell phone lights up his face as he dials a number.

While his back is turned and he's intently focused on the phone in his hand, I realize this could be my only chance.

I slink off of the barstool and take off running away from him with my hands out in front of me, feeling my way through the unfamiliar place.

"Adeline?" I hear Giovanni call. And then harsher, meaner, he yells, "Adeline!"

With my heart threatening to beat out of my chest, I keep moving, staying near the walls and trying not to bump into anything or make any noise.

I can hear Giovanni talking on his cell phone asking what the hell is wrong with the lights.

If he doesn't know, I'm hopeful that this is Jackson's doing. Maybe he's coming to rescue me right now. Just the thought of seeing a familiar face again has my feet moving faster. I'm at least two rooms apart from Gio right now, but I can't see where I'm going or where I am. I hope that I'm not going in a circle and coming right back to him.

Suddenly, a beam of light sweeps over the room I'm in, and I turn just in time to see Giovanni's eyes landing on me. He's holding a flashlight in his hand and pointing the beam straight towards me. "Adeline, don't you

fucking move a goddamn inch!" His deep voice echoes off the walls and has my breath hitching in the back of my throat.

Turning, I run away from him in the opposite direction, wanting to put as much distance between us as I can.

The stream of light wobbles, making the rooms we run through flash from bright to dark, bright to dark as Gio chases after me.

After I round a corner, I no longer see the light following me, and I think I finally escaped him. It's not until he suddenly cuts in front of me that I realize my mistake.

Gio knows this house a hell of a lot better than I do, and he just proved that fact.

I turn to run again, but he tackles me to the ground. With his weight pressing on my back and crushing me on the hardwood floor beneath me, I can barely breathe. "I told you not to run," he says, grasping my hair and pulling my neck back at a weird angle.

Grunting and gasping in pain, I realize he's putting too much pressure on my stomach...on the baby. "Please!" I beg through panting breaths. "Get off of me!" I plead desperately.

It's at that moment the lights turn back on.

And that's when all hell breaks loose.

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CHAPTER 42

LUCIEN

I CALL IN a favor from my mentor, the man who taught me everything I know about the dark web, and he proficiently hacks into the city's electrical grid within the matter of several minutes.

"When I give him the signal, the whole house will be in total darkness for a total of ten minutes," I tell the team of men gathered several hundred yards from the backyard of the house. It's not much time, but it gives us one hell of an advantage.

"Your guy's gonna cut off all the electricity for ten minutes? Fuck, he's good," one agent whistles. "What did you say his name was again?" he asks slyly.

I roll my eyes. "Not a chance."

"Can't blame a guy for trying," he says with a grin.

It's amusing to see the good guys and the bad guys working together towards a common goal. But I'm sure that if we weren't going up against a bigger target than me, these agents would have no problem gunning for me instead.

Giovanni is their number one goal on a long list, and they're going to get a chance to capture him tonight.

Little do they know that they won't be catching him alive; however, because I have no intentions of letting him live to see tomorrow.

Wraith motions for everyone to get into place, and then we're donning the night vision goggles that were supplied by the FBI and making our way through the surrounding tall grass towards the mansion.

When we're within striking distance, we all stop and lie in wait as I send out a text to my hacker colleague to cut the electricity.

Seconds later, the entire property is doused in a shroud of darkness. They have no communication systems from the front gate to the house, no security cameras, no fucking lights, nothing.

The FBI agents go first, securing a portable climbing assist tool to the top of the fence. One by one, they climb up the makeshift ladder and down the other side, disappearing into the night.

Wraith motions his men ahead, and the group runs towards the tall barrier, resembling black knights storming a castle. I watch them repeat the agents' actions from just a few seconds prior. And once they fade into the veiled property of the manor as well, I hear Jax cursing behind me. "Fuck!"

I turn to see him frantically searching the area around us. "What's wrong?" I ask.

"Katya's gone!" he says in a panic. He looks towards the house, and his face falls. "She must have followed Wraith."

I clasp my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure Wraith will watch over her."

He hangs his head and nods. "Fuck, I hope so," he mutters.

I allow some time to pass before Jax and I maneuver our way over the fence. The muffled gunshots can be heard sporadically throughout the property as Gio's men are taken out by weapons equipped with silencers.

Seeing a clear path to a back service door of the mansion, Jax uses a large rock he finds nearby and breaks off the handle of the door.

We enter the house just as the lights flicker back on. Tearing off our goggles, we move carefully through the house with our guns in our outstretched hands. Jax and I tread lightly through the kitchen. But when I hear Adeline's screams coming from a few rooms over, I forget all about my safety and take off running.

"Lucien!" Jax hisses from behind me, but I don't stop.

I need to find her.

On the floor of the dining room is Adeline, and on top of her, trying to hold her down is that fucking bastard, Giovanni.

"Get the fuck off of her!" I roar.

My voice startles the hell out of him, and his head snaps up. His eyes narrow when he sees me, and I know he's wondering in that moment if he's seeing a fucking ghost.

"Look who's back from the dead," he sneers. In a quick move, he stands, pulling Adeline up with him. He positions her in front of him, using her as a human shield.

The fucking coward.

With one hand wrapped around her chest and one hand gripping her hair painfully, Adeline cries out in pain. Her eyes are wide and filled with tears as she stares at me with shock lacing her features.

I want to reassure Adeline that everything is going to be fine and that we're going to be okay. But there will be plenty time for our reunion later, because right now I'm transfixed on my sweet fucking revenge. The urge to kill him is too strong in me now. I want to make him suffer and make him feel every ounce of pain he has put us through.

"Let. Her. Go," I growl, emphasizing each word.

"If I let her go, I'll never get out of here alive," Giovanni says, slowly taking a step back towards another room.

I'm quick to match his steps, not letting him out of my sight. "You're not getting out alive either way," I tell him in response.

He moves his hand to Adeline's neck, squeezing her throat in a threatening manner. "Perhaps, but I like my odds better this way."

"Coward," I spit at him.

Adeline gasps for air, and my heart skips around nervously in my chest. "It will be okay, Adeline," I tell her. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Giovanni clicks his tongue against his teeth. "Making promises that you can't keep again, Wolf?"

"Says the dead man walking," I hiss.

A shadow appears in the next room, and I know right away that the mammoth man is Wraith. He's sneaking up behind Giovanni slowly, and I just need to buy some time.

"Let me go and I won't snap her pretty little neck," Giovanni tells me menacingly.

"You're not getting it," I tell him, scratching my forehead with my free hand and giving him a sly grin. "There's nowhere for you to go. FBI agents

have this place surrounded, and they're dead set on taking you."

"Lies," he says, but I can hear the nervous edge to his tone. "You're a fucking liar. The FBI would never work with you."

"It's funny how a common goal can bring two complete opposite parties together." I take a step closer to him, knowing that Wraith is almost there. "They want to take you in...alive." I watch in the corner of my eye as Wraith steps up behind the sonofabitch. "But I have other plans."

Giovanni opens his mouth to respond, but it's too late. Wraith grabs Giovanni's arms and hauls him backwards, twisting him away from Adeline. He pulls Giovanni's right arm behind his back roughly and sharply. I can hear his shoulder popping out of place and his bones snapping from where I'm standing, and I grimace.

"Fuck, that's gotta hurt," I whisper as Giovanni begins screaming in pain. My gun is still trained on him, and my vengeance is so potent I can almost fucking taste it. I need to kill him before the agents come busting in and ruin my plans.

But a sharp sob coming from Adeline tears me from my homicidal thoughts. Turning, I take a step towards her before stopping suddenly. She's on the floor, and one hand is pressed against her stomach. And the other hand is outstretched towards me, shaking and...covered in blood.

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CHAPTER 43

LUCIEN

MY FIRST THOUGHT is that Adeline had somehow been shot or hurt during the chaotic melee.

I tuck my gun away and rush over to her, trying to block the thought of blood out of my mind. She's hurt, and that has to take precedence right now. I force my fucked-up mind to focus on Adeline and her alone, her health and wellbeing and not anything else around us.

Cradling Adeline in my arms, her entire body trembles and her breath hitches with sobs as tears streak down frighteningly pale cheeks.

"Where are you hurt? Were you shot?" I demand, the tremor in my voice giving away my underlying panic. I try to pry her hand away from her stomach so I can assess the damage, but she won't budge, and I don't want to hurt her any more than she's already obviously hurting.

She shakes her head and mutters something I can't understand, but I'm able to catch one word — *baby*.

"Baby," I whisper. "What baby?"

"Our...our baby," she gasps before her green eyes roll into the back of her head. She collapses, and I catch her limp form in my arms. I stare down at her rounded stomach under her shirt. I didn't notice it at first, because she's obviously not far along...but holy fuck...Adeline is pregnant.

When my eyes drift further down her body and notice the blood soaking the front of her jeans, a lump forms in my throat as tears sting my eyes.

Fuck.

She needs help. *Our baby* needs help.

"Jackson!" I call. When he doesn't show his face immediately, I find myself shouting his name. "Jackson!"

Moments later, he hurries into the room with Katya by his side and a gun drawn. But the moment he sees us, he shoves the gun into his waistband and runs over, collapsing onto his knees beside Adeline's unconscious body in my arms.

He rests his fingers on her neck, checks her pulse and meets my eyes. "W-what happened?" he asks, his anxiety mirroring me.

My brain slowly puts the puzzle together even though I can't believe what I'm about to tell him. "She's...she's pregnant," I spit out in disbelief.

Jackson's eyes flare with surprise, and then slowly peruse her body, taking in the blood staining her clothes and hand. His expression settles

into a look of understanding...and perhaps acceptance. "We have to get her to a hospital right now," he says harshly. He reaches for her, but I shake my head.

Standing with her in my arms, I pull her against my chest, breathing in her scent mixed with the metallic smell of her blood. My shoulder aches, but I block out the pain, refusing to let her go.

Jackson gives me a stern nod before saying, "We're going to have to take one of their cars. Where's Wraith?"

I'm about to tell Jax that he's busy with Giovanni, but I see that the FBI agents are handcuffing Giovanni and leading him out the door. "Wraith!" I call. When his attention is on me, I tell him, "We need a vehicle. Now!"

Wraith nods before bolting out the door. Jax grabs Katya's arm and leads us to the front of the house. "Wait! Who is she? What's going on?" Katya asks, fighting against his grip, but Jax is not having any of it.

Just as we step outside, Jax stops and grabs her arms, pulling her towards him so that only an inch of space separates their faces. I've never seen him this angry or upset before, and it scares the shit out of me.

"I'm done playing these games with you, Katya!" he yells. "I need you to fucking listen to me just this once!" he growls, and I don't think I've ever heard Jackson talk like that to anyone...ever.

His demeanor right now tells me a lot. It tells me that he's scared and worried...and that Adeline's condition is much worse than what I can possibly imagine.

A black SUV comes to a squealing, sudden stop several feet from the front entrance. Wraith is out of the driver's seat and rounding the back of the vehicle before I can blink. He opens the passenger side doors, and I gently rest Adeline on the soft, dark leather seat before climbing in beside her.

Jackson pushes Katya into the front passenger side and slams her door before climbing in the back behind me.

"Where to?" Wraith asks when he gets behind the steering wheel once again, gripping it tightly with his large hands.

"The nearest hospital," Jackson instructs Wraith as he opens an app on his phone to find the closest one.

The car ride is mostly quiet except for the satellite radio playing softly in the background. *Bottom of the Deep Blue Sea* by MISSIO filters over the speakers as I brush Adeline's dark hair away from her beautiful, ashen face.

Her pregnancy explains the morning sickness and not being able to keep food down in her final days on the island that we had blamed on a stomach bug.

It must have been that day in the library when I craved her so badly I forgot to even wear protection. But now that I think about it, there were other times too. How could I have been so fucking careless? I cringe when I think that I didn't even give her a choice in the matter. We never even talked about the consequences...our future...

What if she loses too much blood? What if she loses our baby?

She may never forgive me.

And I don't know if I could ever forgive myself.

I should have been more cautious. I'm always so fucking careful. But Adeline makes me lose my goddamn mind. I'm not my normal fucked-up self when I'm around her. That is proving to be both a blessing and a curse at this moment.

And now I may be losing our baby before we even had a chance to be happy about it.

Every now and then Jackson leans over the seat and checks her pulse. The ever-present frown on his face tells me that things are not looking good.

I can't lose her. I can't lose her. I can't lose her.

I keep saying the mantra over and over again in my head, as if it will make some kind of difference over what I want versus what her body can

suffer through and still survive.

But when I hear Jackson respond with, "I know," I realize I must have said the words out loud. Then he says, "Turn left up here, Wraith, and fucking step on it."

I hold Adeline tightly in my arms as Wraith takes the turn at a dangerous speed and the SUV speeds down the highway.

Moments later, the SUV is stopping in front of a large hospital. Jackson climbs out first and opens my door. I climb out with Adeline, grimacing when my shoulder and thigh ache in protest, as Jax and Wraith run ahead through the doors leading to the emergency room.

I haven't stepped foot inside a hospital since I was rescued by my uncle. Back then, my phobias were just starting to develop. And the thought of going inside now has my skin crawling.

I stare at the bright, white foyer with a nurse's desk and an adjacent waiting room littered with chairs. There are a few people seated inside, and I can't seem to stop myself from fixating on one in particular.

An old man is hunched over a chair in the corner, looking like grim death and coughing into his hand. My eye twitches at the thought of how many germs are trapped in the air in that room...how many different strains of bacteria are on just one armrest.

My legs grow heavier and heavier with every step, and I struggle to maintain my balance.

"Fuck," I grunt, trying to pry my eyes away. But it's like watching a car accident. I can't seem to look away, and every heave of his stooped back as his lungs expand to pull in more to expel into a germ-filled cough is burning its way into my retinas.

My own lungs seize; my breath frozen in my chest as a wave of panic hits me like a ton of bricks. My knees threaten to buckle. I nearly drop Adeline from my arms, but manage to recover and pull her against me once more.

Jax looks back through the open automatic doors when he realizes I didn't follow him inside. "What's wrong?" he asks with worry and confusion lacing his features.

I gasp a haggard breath and tell him, "I...I can't..." Shaking my head, I internally curse myself for being so fucking weak, especially now...especially with Adeline's life and our baby's life dangling so precariously on the edge of darkness.

Jax doesn't hesitate. He simply runs to me and pulls Adeline from my arms, ignoring my feeble protests. His eyes meet mine as he apologizes, "I'm sorry, Luc." He backs away with her cradled against his chest, and she

looks so pale...so innocent. "I have to be strong enough for all of us right now," Jax says softly.

In silent dismay, I watch him carry Adeline into the dreaded hospital, calling for someone to help them. I can hear the desperation in his voice, how much he cares for her...how much he loves her.

But I saw the shift in his mood and demeanor when I told him she was pregnant. I'm almost positive his love for her now has morphed into something more akin to friendship.

And for that I'm thankful...because right now he's the protector that I cannot be.

With more self-loathing than I have ever felt before in my life, I retreat from the hospital. I stop a few feet away from the SUV and pull in several gasping breaths.

There is only one thing that may calm my troubling thoughts, and I need it. Now.

Rushing to the back door, I swing it open wide and search desperately for my suit jacket. It had fallen to the floor during the high speeds Wraith took to get here. I scoop it up and dig into the inner pocket.

The moment my fingers come across the small bottle of hand sanitizer, a feeling of relief instantly floods my veins.

I flip open the cap and begin to coat my hands and forearms with the liquid. It mixes in with Adeline's crimson blood smattering my skin, and I cry out in desperation when I can't rid myself of the substance.

I grab the suit jacket and wipe off my arms and start over again with lathering the liquid onto my skin and rubbing it in.

Even though the blood is gone, I can still see it in my mind every time I close my eyes. Frantically, I begin to claw at my skin, desperate to get the burning substance into every fucking crevice and clean me from the inside out.

Suddenly, I feel a hand on my back. Whirling around with my fist raised and ready for attack, I instantly relax when I see Katya standing there with a confused look on her face.

"Are you okay?" she asks softly.

I stare down at my scratched skin, which is now burning from the alcohol in the sanitizer. "I'm never okay," I mutter more to myself than her. Raising my head, I glance from her to the hospital. I no longer see Wraith, Jax or Adeline, so I assume they were able to get her the help she needed.

"I should be in there," I whisper in angst.

"Then why aren't you?" Katya asks.

I sigh and crush the empty bottle of sanitizer in my hand before throwing it on the floor of the SUV. My hands tremble as I hold them in front of me. *I'm fucking losing it.* Of all times to fucking lose it...why did it have to be now?

"I can't explain everything to you right now," I tell her, grimacing. "I'll just say I have a lot of issues."

Katya places one hand on her cocked hip. "No shit," she spits in her thick Russian accent.

If there's anything I've learned from Katya over the past couple of weeks, it's the fact that she speaks her mind. I think that's one of the things I like most about her. She's definitely been keeping Jax on his toes.

"Who cares if you have issues? We all have issues," she says, and I can see the hurt in her eyes beyond the stony expression. But as quickly as it appeared, it's gone. "You love her, don't you?" she asks pointblank.

"More than life itself," I confess.

"Then get your shit together and be the man she needs you to be right now."

Scowling, I rake my hands through my hair. "I fucking can't!" I yell. I feel helpless and hopeless and everything in between. "She deserves better

than this," I murmur. "She deserves so much better than what I can give her."

Katya sighs and then is silent for a long time while I pace around the parking lot trying to force my legs to move towards the hospital instead of in a fucking endless circle.

"I'll be right back," I hear her say before she walks towards the hospital.

Fuck. Now she's gone too. And I'm out here all alone, not knowing what the fuck is going on with Adeline...or our baby.

My breathing becomes harsher, more desperate as I keep pacing, muttering to myself and counting the fucking cracks in the pavement.

The severity of the situation feels like a million ton weight on my back, and I feel like I could crack into a million different pieces at any given moment.

I could be losing them both right now. And without having Adeline in my life...I'm not sure what would happen to me.

I just finally got her back, and now I could lose her all over again... forever this time.

By the time Katya returns, I'm a fucking mess. She takes one look at me, and her eyes widen slightly before she schools her features. "Jax told

me a little bit about your...issues," she says softly. "I think these might help."

I stare at the contents in her arms. I gently take everything and set it on the seat of the SUV. It looks like she raided a surgeon's locker. Turning to her, I ask, "Where exactly did you get all of this...or should I ask *how* did you get all of this?"

She cocks a brow and simply says, "I have my ways." Then she instructs me with a stern tone, "Hurry. Put them on."

Grabbing the set of scrubs first, I slide them over my clothes. Next, I slip on the boot covers and put the mask on my face. I breathe through the mask and instantly feel better.

Lastly, I grab the blue latex gloves and put them on.

Glancing at Katya, I earnestly tell her, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, let's go see how your girl is doing."

CHAPTER 44

ADELINE

I SLOWLY BLINK my eyes open, blinded by the bright fluorescent light above me. I turn my head to the side and see a doctor sitting in a chair by the side of my bed before I close my eyes again.

I must be in a hospital, my foggy brain tells me.

I'm having a hard time remembering what happened.

Opening my eyes once again, I stare at the doctor. He's wearing light blue scrubs and a surgical mask. His gloved hands are threatening to pull his hair out by the root.

Why is he so stressed?

And then it hits me like I just ran into a brick wall. *The baby...the blood...what happened to me?*

A whimper escapes my lips, and the doctor's head snaps up at the sound. When his dark eyes meet mine, a sense of recognition instantly comes over me. "Lucien?" I ask, unsure.

He pulls down his mask, revealing the lower half of his incredibly handsome face. "Adeline," he croaks, his voice chock full of a million emotions.

He stands, pulls off his latex gloves and comes to me then, sitting down on the edge of the bed. I lean up and throw my arms around Lucien. He's stiff at first, but relaxes in my grip and snakes his warm arms around me, holding me as if he's afraid I'll float away.

Tears spill down my cheeks. "I thought you were dead. I thought I'd lost you forever," I choke out with a sob.

"I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere," he whispers in my ear.

He holds me while I cry it all out, soothingly running his hands down my back and placing soft kisses on my cheek and neck.

Then he releases me and pulls my hands into his. The warmth of his hands wrapped around mine feels so good on my icy cold skin.

"I don't know what I would have done if..." his voice trails off, and I can see the anguish in his gaze. I don't know if I've ever seen Lucien this upset before, and it's beginning to scare me.

"The baby," I whisper. "Is the baby okay?"

He takes a deep breath, not answering me right away. I mentally try to prepare myself for the worst, but then realize I can't. If we lost the baby, I

will be completely devastated.

"Twins," he whispers.

"Twins?" I ask in disbelief.

"We lost one of the babies," he tells me.

My heart breaks a little, and I hold back a sob. "And the other baby?" I urge.

"Doing okay for now." His brows knit together. "You have to take it easy for the next few weeks and go through a lot of tests and ultrasounds to be sure everything is all right, but the doctor seemed pretty optimistic that you'll be able to carry to term."

He gives me a shaky smile, and I know exactly how he feels at the moment. Heartbroken because we lost one baby...but overjoyed because the other one is still alive.

"What happened...what happened to Giovanni?" I ask apprehensively.

Anger laces his features as he explains, "He's in jail where he belongs, but I promise you he'll never see the light of day again as long as I'm breathing."

I nod solemnly. Even though I wish he were dead, it brings me some comfort to know that he's behind bars and not walking around a free man

and taking over my father's legacy. He's no longer a threat to us...for now. But I don't doubt Lucien's promise for a second that he'll make sure Gio never gets out of prison.

"I don't want to talk about him anymore," I tell Lucien. "I don't even want to think about him."

"Good," he sighs. "Me either." And then he says, "We have more important things to discuss anyhow." Lucien leans back and places his hand over my baby bump. "I can't believe it," he whispers in astonishment.

"I know. It was a little unexpected," I say, laughing and crying all the same time. "When I thought I was going to have to raise our baby alone... that he or she would never get a chance to meet you..." My face falls and the rivulets of tears start all over again.

"Shh, baby," Lucien says, drawing me into his embrace once more. "You don't have to think about that anymore, because I'm here. I'll always be here. I'm not going anywhere."

I nod against his chest.

"Adeline," he starts. He leans back and reaches into the pocket of his pants underneath the pair of scrubs he's wearing. "I've been carrying this around for weeks now, wanting it close to me at all times."

I gasp when he retrieves a small, blue box. "Lucien," I whisper.

"I wanted to take you to the Eiffel Tower and propose...or maybe on a trip to Antarctica...or maybe to a rainforest or —. I don't know," he says, shaking his head. "I definitely didn't want to propose to you in a hospital... but I can't wait any longer to make you mine forever," he confesses.

"I don't need to go anywhere or to do any of those things, Lucien. I only need you," I tell him adamantly.

He flips open the box and reveals the most gorgeous ring I've ever seen in my life. A large, round solitaire diamond sits atop a diamond-encrusted rose gold band.

Lucien pulls the ring out and cradles it between his thumb and finger. He stares at it thoughtfully for a few seconds before he turns to me. "Adeline, before I met you, it was as if the sun had set on my world, but never once risen. I never realized how much I was missing out on life before you walked into mine. You make me want to be a better man." He rests his other hand on my stomach, and a smile graces his lips. "And I want to make you and our baby feel cherished every single day for the rest of our lives together. If you'll have me, that is." Lucien takes my hand in his as our eyes meet. "Adeline, will you marry me?"

"Yes, yes, of course!" I cry out.

He slips the ring on my finger, and I feel complete even though our journey is just truly beginning. He kisses me and then hugs me to him. "I'm never letting you go," he whispers in my ear.

"I don't want you to," I tell him honestly. "Don't let me go, Lucien. Ever."

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EPILOGUE

ADELIE

I was able to carry to term, just like the doctor predicted. And a little after seven o'clock in the evening on August 13th, a perfect little boy with ten fingers, ten toes and his daddy's dark hair and warm, chocolate eyes was born.

Alexander William Sterling.

Barbara and her new beau, Dr. Benson, came to visit me in the hospital. I had been so worried about her, but she recovered quickly from the torture that Giovanni had unleashed upon her. And still going with the belief that everything happens for a reason, she full-heartedly believed the whole ordeal brought her and Dr. Benson closer. She told me he'll never replace Paul, but he's a damn close second and makes her happy.

After Lucien and I arrived back on the island, I was worried at first as to how he would cope with a baby, but he has surprised me at every turn.

As long as I take care of the poopy diapers, which even most *normal* fathers don't want to deal with, he's been absolutely helpful and pretty darn perfect.

Lucien's obsessions with cleanliness haven't been nearly as bad since he's been having regular communications with a new therapist. Dr. Dan used to suffer from the same afflictions as Lucien, and they both survived horrible childhoods. Having found a common bond with the doctor, Luc flourished in therapy and learned how to control his urges and need to control.

Not that I don't want some of his control at times...especially in the bedroom.

"Hurry," Lucien says as he ushers me into our room.

We just put Alexander down for a nap, and when he's sleeping is the only time we can make time for ourselves. This is how our days go as busy parents of a newborn, but we always find time for each other.

Stripping out of our clothes and losing them along the way to the bed, we fall onto the soft mattress naked.

Luc's teeth tug at my lip before he kisses me like a man possessed. He's been insatiable lately since getting over a lot of his phobias, and it's been a challenge...but also so much fun for me to keep up with his appetite.

He leans back and gazes into my eyes. I run my fingers through his hair, which is always haphazardly sexy now instead of perfectly styled.

Lucien's lips trail down my chest to my full breasts. He kisses each mound and says, "No wonder Alexander's always hungry. I can't stay away from them either."

I slap him jokingly and giggle.

He looks at me and smiles a breathtaking smile. "Love that sound," he whispers before his mouth meets mine once more.

My thighs part for him as he nestles between them. His fingertips find my sensitive nub, and he softly rubs me into oblivion. Just as I begin to shatter under him, he enters me, not stopping until his thick cock is fully seated.

I gasp and then sigh in content. He feels so damn good inside of me. And since I got a Depo shot a few weeks ago, we don't have to worry about condoms...or more babies until we're good and ready.

Lucien says he wants to wait until after we're married to try again. We were so caught up with my nerve-wracking pregnancy that we put off the wedding until we can actually enjoy ourselves and not be stressed over everything.

And I cannot wait to marry this man and spend every waking moment with him.

With his hands planted by my head, Lucien's strong arms quiver as he tries to rein in his control and allow me time to adjust to him. But I don't want him to. "Take me, Luc," I whisper to him, licking the shell of his ear.

My words are his undoing, and his control unravels quickly. He pulls out of me almost the whole way before thrusting the whole way back in. I call out his name, and he growls against my neck, "Yes, baby."

He fucks me with reckless abandon after that, and I absolutely love it. Lifting my thighs, I wrap my hands around his backside and dig my fingernails into his muscular ass, pulling him into me harder and harder until we're both shouting and tumbling over the edge together.

He shudders in my arms as his hot seed spills inside of me. "Fuck, Adeline. I'll never get my fill of you," he says before dipping down and placing a kiss on my forehead. He pulls back to meet my eyes and then whispers, "I love you."

I close my eyes for a moment, relishing in the sound of those words coming from his mouth. I don't hear them often, but when I do, they mean so much more every time he says them.

Smiling up at him, I say, "I love you too."

The squeal on the baby monitor has our eyes locking and our smiles growing bigger. "He has impeccable timing," Lucien comments with a

chuckle.

I hurry into the bathroom to clean up, and then we dress in record time, heading out the door when Lucien runs right into Jackson ...*and Katya?*

Growling, Lucien says, "Tell me you *both* aren't into voyeurism now."

Jax holds his hands up in a placating gesture. "Hey, we were just coming to ask if we could take Alex for a walk in the stroller this afternoon."

Jackson has his practiced innocent look on his face. But Katya, on the other hand, looks guilty as sin.

Lucien turns to me with a knowing grin, and I smile back at him. He's leaving the decision to call them out on me, but I decide to let them off the hook...*this time*. "Sure, you can take him. But I need to feed him first."

Jackson nods and takes Katya's hand in his. "Okay. Well, we'll be...in my room...if you need us." Then they glance at each other like lovesick teenagers before walking away hastily.

"Fucking voyeurs," Lucien mutters under his breath as we watch the happy couple disappear down the hall.

I laugh and wouldn't be able to stop the giant smile from forming on my face even if I wanted to. Katya and Jackson seem really good together, and I couldn't be happier for the both of them. Katya keeps her secrets pretty

well guarded; but from what I've gathered, she had a pretty shitty life before they found each other. And if she finally found her happiness with the man of her dreams, then I definitely know how she feels.

And it's the greatest feeling of all.

Lucien takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. "We should go feed Alex," he murmurs.

"We?"

"Well, you feed him. I'll watch," he tells me with a fire in his eyes.

"Now who's the voyeur?" I joke.

He scoops me up in his arms and kisses my nose. "Oh, baby, I don't mind watching or being watched...but I'll never share. *You're mine,*" he growls. "Forever."

"Forever sounds nice," I tell him.

He kisses my lips sweetly before carrying me towards Alexander's room. "Forever it is then," he agrees.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading!

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The *Keep Me* Series will continue in 2018 with Jackson's book, *Watching Her*.

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