



A NOVEL FROM CHICAGO SYNDICATE SERIES

Black Hat Hacker

Soraya Naomi



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Black Hat Hacker

Chicago Syndicate, Volume 6

Soraya Naomi

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BLACK HAT HACKER

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“The power of a glance has been so much abused in love stories that it has come to be disbelieved in. Few people dare now to say that two beings have fallen in love because they have looked at each other. Yet it is in this way that love begins, and in this way only.”

~ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*.

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black hat hacker

/ˈblæk/hæt/'hækər/

Noun

- COMPUTING *informal*

A person who attempts to find computer security vulnerabilities and exploit them for personal financial gain or other malicious reasons.

This differs from white hat hackers, which are security specialists employed to use hacking methods to find security flaws that black hat hackers may exploit.

Black hat hackers can inflict major damage on both individual computer users and large organizations by stealing or changing personal (financial) information, compromising the security of major systems, or shutting down or altering the function of websites and networks.

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CHAPTER 1

Mary

I tuck my brown curls behind my ear as I sneak down the narrow hallway of a dog shelter near my college, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Reaching the end, I open the door of an office and the first thing I notice is what a dump this place is – yellowed wallpaper peeling off the walls, junk everywhere, and a dirty fenced dog cage shoved in the corner. But what’s worse is that there are five Chihuahuas piled together inside of it, some of them hurt with bandages covering their paws.

“Oh, my god,” I mutter, having no idea what to do next because I’m here all by myself.

Or at least I think I am until, out of the blue, a hand smothers my mouth and a strong arm hooks around my waist, pulling me against a rock-hard chest.

Shrieking, I claw at his wrist when a low, controlled voice whispers into my ear, “It’s me. Calm the fuck down.” And I can feel the intense anger radiating from him.

Recognizing the black leather braided wristband with a silver ring looped into it as he lowers his hand, I relax and turn around, letting out a loaded breath. “You scared the crap out of me, Henry!”

Since he’s over six feet tall, I come face-to-face with the black spade tattoo peeking out from under the collar of his dress shirt that’s stretched taut over muscled shoulders, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows to expose the Celtic cross tattoo on one forearm.

When I look up, I meet his vivid yet outraged grey eyes which are streaked with shards of silver, giving his gaze a lethal edge as he stares me down through his black rimmed glasses. His thick hair that’s dark as coal is

a flawless, spiked mess, as if he's been dragging his fingers through the strands.

"Jesus Christ, Mary! What the fuck are you doing here alone?" Henry barks, and the sharpness in his tone astounds me.

"I'm *alone* because I called you earlier tonight to ask you to come with me but you didn't answer. And when I saw the owner leave half an hour ago – for the first time in days – I knew I didn't have time to wait. Remember that I told you I heard a rumor on campus about illegal underground dogfights in the Loop? Well, another rumor is that this shelter works with the organizers."

He edges closer until he towers over me, clenching his jaw. "I was working. But when I called you back and you didn't answer, I knew you were up to something."

"So how did you find me?"

"I tracked your phone," he answers, and I perk a brow.

"Tracked me? That's not very nice," I retort, refusing to back down under his unrelenting glower until he abruptly grabs my arm and tugs me with him down the hall. That's when I believe I've finally pushed him to his limit. He's warned me over and over not to go on these missions, yet I can't help myself when I think of those poor, defenseless dogs that are probably being used to rile up other dogs to fight.

"No, Henry!" I dig my heels into the floor, but he's much stronger, so I have to yank free from his grip, annoyed at his interference.

Spinning around to face me, Henry states, "Mary, don't fucking argue with me on this. Let's go."

He's never been this incensed with me, but I'm not leaving without freeing these dogs. "Oh, my god! We don't have time for this."

"Then I suggest you move your sweet ass." Arrogantly, he angles his head to the side, warning me not to disobey him.

Because his commanding behavior slightly intimidates me, I decide on another tactic, asking in a vulnerable voice, "Henry, since you're here now anyway, couldn't we free the dogs and drive them to another shelter that can take care of them properly?" Then I place my hands on his warm, solid pecs.

His breaths coming harder, he shuts his eyes, shielding them from my probing gaze, and after a few agonizing seconds, he relents, "Fine."

“Maybe you can hack into his computer, screw up his system for me?” I suggest quickly. “I think the owner is some kind of bookie for these fights.”

Henry shakes his head slowly, but he seems less mad. “Just hurry up before I change my mind.”

At that moment, one of the Chihuahuas whimpers in pain, and I run back to the office with the cage as Henry follows me.

“You said dogs. These are rats,” he accuses from behind me.

Snickering, since I know he doesn’t share my love for animals, I explain, “They aren’t rats. They’re Chihuahuas.”

Glancing back at Henry, I pull the lock out to the side, indicating for him to break it. He snatches his handgun, which is equipped with a silencer, from the back waistband of his black jeans as he makes a jerking movement with his head, indicating for me to get behind him. After I step past him, he holds me back to protect me, steadily aiming and releasing one bullet, the destroyed lock trickling onto the ground as just a soft thud resonates off the walls and only one of the animals stirs awake.

Pulling open the door to the cage, I scoop up the tiniest little mutt, who’s covered in scratches and small enough to fit inside a mug. I check to find that it’s a girl as her round black eyes stare sadly at me, so I hug her gently, ensuring not to hurt her.

Meanwhile, Henry’s pacing toward the corner of the room where there’s a desk with a computer and stacks of paperwork resting on it.

As Henry starts up the computer, he sets his gun on the desk.

“Where are you parked?” I ask. “I have my sister-in-law’s car, but it’s two blocks away.”

“Around back. In the alley.”

“Okay, we’ll take yours, so I’ll go ahead and load these five in. I’ll get Cam’s car tomorrow.”

“No—”

“We’ll be finished much faster that way. I’ll just run in and out.”

Henry grunts, not granting permission, but I don’t want him to abort this mission, so I take it as a yes.

“You come back immediately,” he orders in a tone that leaves no room for argument. “Don’t wait at the car.”

“Okay.” I nod my chin in the direction of the computer screen. “What are you doing?”

“I’m *screwing* with his system as you requested,” he says with a smirk as his long fingers run across the keyboard with controlled accuracy.

“You’re awesome,” I compliment him before pushing open the door with my back.

“I do this only for you, Mary,” he responds without looking away from the screen.

“I know. And I appreciate it.” As I carry out the first two, I’m relieved he didn’t ruin my chance to help these precious little dogs.

Running back and forth twice into the barely lit street, I arrange the Chihuahuas on the back seat of Henry’s silver sedan as the summer breeze cools my cheeks.

After closing the car door, I freeze when I see a man prowling toward me. The fat, balding owner of the shelter leaps forward to grab me, but I dive to the side and head for the entrance of the alley.

“Henry!” I scream as the guy races after me and jumps on me so that I collapse onto my palms and knees, burning my knees through my jeans. “Henry!”

Fear claws at me while I pray that he heard my shouting. Then the owner lunges on top of my back, flattening me onto my stomach on the dirty asphalt. A rush of air leaves my lungs, and I cry from the agony just as, unexpectedly and lightning fast, he’s ripped off me with a thunderous snarl.

“Don’t fucking touch her!” Henry bellows, gripping fat guy’s t-shirt and beating the butt of his revolver against his temple.

Grunting in pain, the attacker punches Henry’s side as I catch my breath and glance around for anything to clock him with. Yet he wrenches free and hurls himself at Henry, causing them to topple backward onto the ground. They wrestle, and the man leaps up, flashing a pistol while Henry’s lying there. However, before he can focus on his target, Henry quickly raises his arm and shoots him in the knee.

“Argh!” he roars, staggering, but when he attempts to steady his aim, Henry blasts him in the forehead and he drops dead onto the asphalt.

Freaked out, I scramble to Henry as he sits up and takes off his glasses, putting them in his pocket, and I plant myself astride him. His arms come around my waist as mine circle around his neck, and I find calmness in his caring, solid embrace. I’ve wondered what it would be like to have his

powerful arms around me. He's a tight hugger, and I feel as if he'll never let go.

"Fuck!" he grumbles, cupping my jaw and forcing me to look at him.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I just fell," I answer.

On its own volition, my forehead rests against Henry's while the pad of his thumb strokes my cheek, down to the birthmark above my lip. In turn, my fingertips skim down the side of his face, over the hairs on his unshaven jawline, and we stay like that for a long, hushed moment. The smoldering look I sometimes catch is back in his eyes, and I can feel his bulge between my legs while my mouth hovers an inch above his, almost brushing his lips.

Then he glances at the attacker, and his gaze slowly cools. He lets out a sigh into the darkness and leans back just enough to put some space between us, stashing his gun in the back of his pants before we stand up.

Forcefully combing both hands through his hair as the reality of the situation sets in, he spits, "Goddammit, Mary. This is exactly why you can't go on these missions of yours alone!"

I tremble and can't really say anything to defend my actions due to what just happened. And Henry could have been hurt as well; that bothers me. So I concede because his anger affects me. "I'm sorry. I do know it was too dangerous. It was inconsiderate of me."

He throws his hands in the air and grinds out, "You always say that and then you go running around by yourself at night again. What if I hadn't been here?"

His fuming tone starts to irritate me. "You *were* here, and stop treating me like a little sister. What's wrong with you today?"

He merely tilts his head to the side, pinning his piercing glare on me. "What's wrong with *me*? I have to come here to rescue you, and now we need to contact a soldier to dispose of this fucking body, which means your brothers will know. Did you think about that?"

I bite back my retort since he's got me there.

After shooting me another scowl, he takes out his phone to bring it up to his ear. "I need a soldier for clean-up at East Ford Street. Now." Then he hangs up and marches to his sedan, expecting me to trail him.

Quietly, I climb into the passenger seat and reach behind me to get the one Chihuahua that's still awake, setting her in my lap. And with the fresh night's air blowing through my curls, the adrenaline rush of a few minutes

ago lessens. This is my life and I'm not unknown to this kind of violence, so I force myself to put this incident out of my mind for now.

Henry watches me in an odd manner before shifting the car into *drive*. "Where do we drop them off?"

"Here." Leaning forward, I program the street name into the GPS so Henry can follow the directions to a location only fifteen minutes from the shelter.

During the short ride, I keep petting the dog as she mewls and gapes at me forlornly. In an instant, I decide, "I'm going to keep this one."

Henry glimpses at me sideways, his annoyance still palpable, but I know he'll calm down eventually.

"I was afraid of that," he comments as his phone chimes in. Grabbing it from his pocket, he shows me the screen and sends me a pointed look. "It's Adriano."

I'll have some explaining to do to my brother.

"As I predicted, he knows I ordered a soldier to dispose of a body. We've been summoned to Club 7."

"Oh, fuck! He's going to kill me," I grumble.

"Probably," Henry answers, and I make a face as I groan.

After that, Henry doesn't have much to say, and I simply watch the skyscrapers go by as we head to our destinations, dropping off all the dogs except my new pet before driving to my brother's club in the Loop.

I have my Chihuahua tucked in my arms while Henry and I careen through the crowd inside the spacious club with a fourteen-foot-high ceiling and a balconied second floor. When we pass the bar, Henry comes to a halt and I bump into him.

Reaching behind him, he grips the side of my waist as he sneers, "Well, look who's here: Keano."

Instantly, I step back and look toward the end of the bar to view the back of Keano's blond crew cut.

"Did you fucking call him?" Henry snarls as Keano spots us and advances in our direction.

"No," I whisper, yet Henry doesn't hear me and faces the bar, waving over a brunette bartender when Keano stops in front of me.

With both of them there together, for some reason, I notice how much more impressive Henry's body is compared to Keano's, even though they're the same height.

Keano sends a dirty look to Henry, who casually props his elbow on the bar before scowling at me. Seems like everyone's mad at me tonight.

Keano demands, "Where have you been? I've been calling you."

"I rescued some dogs," I reply distractedly, fixated on Henry, who tosses back a shot as the bartender leans forward, flashing him her cleavage – her outrageously well-endowed cleavage – and his stare strays to it.

Ass.

"Henry, want to play a game of poker with me?" she practically purrs, and I grind my teeth.

Oftentimes, I have to watch women fall all over themselves to attract his attention, to try to assume the role of being his next conquest. I resist wrinkling my nose as he smiles at her.

"Jordana, I'd feel bad taking more of your money." He flirts with her right before my eyes, and I feel the blood draining from my face.

"We can play for something else?" she speaks with innuendo, and at this point, Henry has downright forgotten about me, yet with Keano standing there, I have no right to take the moral high ground and scream at him as tiny cracks materialize in my heart.

Keano opens his mouth but closes it when he spots the mini Chihuahua in my arms, pointing at her and looking at me questioningly.

"I have a new pet," I say.

"Since when?"

"Since today. But I'll explain later. I have to see my brother," I reply as Henry's gaze is unexpectedly focused on me while he ignores Keano.

"Why? Can't we just go?" Keano objects.

Oh, crap, this is awkward.

I keep glancing between them, torn because I want to stay with Henry. Though when Jordana touches his shoulder and he grins and then watches me as she mutters something to him, I've had enough.

"Maybe..." I answer, peering at Henry, all mixed up about if I should go with Keano but at the same time, hoping Henry will say that I can't as the green monster invades me.

Apparently, Henry misunderstands, because he comments dismissively, "You can go if you want. I'll handle Adriano." His words tell me to go, yet

his eyes plead with me to stay. That is, until he turns his back to me, leveling his charm on his prize for the night.

Still, he helped me and I don't want to part ways like this, so I inch sideways and go on my tiptoes to whisper into his ear, "Thank you. I was truly dreading facing Adriano."

A shiver runs through his body, but as he looks back at me, he's obviously agitated, hissing, "You can't get us into these situations anymore, Mary. This is the last time I'm helping you if you don't discuss it with me first."

Before I can respond, he's already walking toward the end of the bar where Jordana steps out from behind it and meets him while I merely stare at his retreating commanding frame, puzzled at his level of annoyance.

Begrudgingly, I go with Keano, the man I'm dating, and leave Henry, the man who keeps friend-zoning me, behind. And I remind myself that he's not mine. He's simply a hacker in my brother's mafia, the Chicago Syndicate, whom I've known for six months, yet he never really saw me until four months ago when I started to hang out with him.

Does he ever think of that night? Does he ever think of me the way I think of him?

After tonight, I understand why it's torture on your heart to want someone who isn't yours. They say love takes time – I don't believe that's necessarily true. Love can smack you right in the face and knock your socks off, like what happened to me the first time I saw Henry. But he's never seen me in the same way.

CHAPTER 2

Henry

I feel Mary go on her tiptoes from behind me, pressing against me in distracting ways to reach my ear. “Thank you. I was truly dreading facing Adriano.”

“You can’t get us into these situations anymore, Mary. This is the last time I’m helping you if you don’t discuss it with me first,” I reprimand her, ready for her to get out of there so that I don’t have to see her with Keano. Otherwise, I might do something stupid, because I’ve clearly lost control over all my emotions.

What the fuck does Mary see in that guy?

She goes back down on her feet and my neck burns hot where her soft breath touched me. It’s been entirely too goddamn long. Frustrated, I stride away. Now I have to get rid of Jordana.

As she steps out from behind the bar, she suggests, “Why don’t we have a drink upstairs first?”

“No, thanks,” I reply, aggravated.

“I thought we were going to play some one-on-one?” She shifts closer to me, oblivious to the fact that I used her.

“Maybe another time,” I throw back, and she looks dumbfounded at my unexpected dismissiveness.

I’m not interested in this girl that I slept with one time weeks ago. Most women I meet are straightforward, making it known they’re only in it for a quick fuck. But the way she gawks at me without shame – seemingly only concerned with my looks – is tiresome. No one really wants to know the man beneath the façade. This is how people are, and I play that game as well.

I prefer dealing with systems to people; therefore, any woman who's with me needs to understand the rules of a one-night stand. However, one night of empty sex after the next is becoming less satisfying for some reason.

At twenty-four, maybe I'm finally ready to move forward from the woman who broke me. The woman I fell in love with when I was eighteen who repeatedly deceived me.

I can't say what's happened exactly, only what initiated this unwelcome feeling a few months ago: Mary Montesi.

*

Four months ago

When I enter Club 7, the first thing that gets my attention is a stunning woman in a bright green blouse and tight skinny jeans that accentuate a lush, round ass. While she seductively combs her reddish-brown copper curls over one shoulder as she flirts heavily with an Italian bartender, I recognize that it's Mary.

Although I only know her as Adriano's little sister, I'm drawn to her tonight and stand behind her stool, planting both palms on the bar counter and caging her in, enjoying how petite she is. She's short, but all woman. And the handful of times I've seen her since I initiated into her brother's Syndicate, I've noticed that her smooth skin looks like it's photoshopped.

Bending down, I whisper into her ear, "Mary, stop flirting with him before Adriano kills him."

"Some room, please," she chides, lifting a brow conceitedly, and my gaze strays to the beauty mark right above the corner of her plump lips.

Disregarding her statement the same way she disregarded mine, I push my chest against her back and hear her sharp intake of breath, noting that there's something different about her today. There's a certain sadness marring her upturned hazel eyes – that are fringed with long, dark lashes – that's contradictory to her usual spirited expression.

Then, all of a sudden, she jumps off the stool. "Let's dance."

Confused by her behavior, I follow her to the dance floor, curious to see what this vixen's endgame is.

Just as Mary turns around, she glares at me when another girl ogles me. I pull up my shoulders. “What—”

But Mary catches me off guard by winding her arms around my neck and pressing her breasts against my chest. When she looks up at me, her smile is a little crooked and bold, as if there’s a hidden passion inside the innocent girl she portrays, waiting to be touched, waiting to be fucked. This is the first time she’s put her hands on me, and my dick hardens in response.

My arms snake around her middle, and when she peeks over my shoulder, I smoothly rotate us in a semi-circle to find a blond guy scowling at me.

He starts to move toward us, but I cock my head, mouthing, “Fuck. Off.” And I glare right back at him.

Wait a minute. Isn’t that Keano? The man Mary’s dating? So she’s using me...

Smirking, I pull her flush against me as she spins us around again, most likely to watch him.

However, I distract her when I dip my head, my lips against the shell of her ear. “Trying to make Keano jealous, Mary?”

She stiffens, saying, “Don’t men want what other men have?”

“Do I look like a relationship expert?”

“Just dance closely with me, I need him to see it,” she tells me in a bossy tone while observing him.

Without difficulty, I swing us around again, making her protest, “No! I need to see him.” She pouts as I grin when he storms out of the club.

“He knows you’re watching him. He needs to *see* you...Isn’t that what you want?” I sway her to the beat of the music, my hands drifting to her lower back, fingertips on the swell of her ass, and she’s now entirely focused on me. “Why don’t you let me show you how I can make you forget him?” I pull her into me and trace my nose down the bridge of hers, and her eyes fall closed as I weave a spell around her, gruffly whispering, “I’ve wondered how you’d look riding my cock, baby.”

Her breathing is harsh when I brashly rub her behind, pressing her into my erection, and she moans before opening her eyes, in shock it seems, so I warn, “Feel what you do to me. You started this when you told me you wanted to dance, remember that.”

A waft of perfume I can’t identify drifts up as I sweep her curls over one shoulder. I keep moving with her, and she isn’t tempted to look for

another man anymore as the air around us grows thicker, the contours of her body now etched into my memory.

“Come home with me, Mary,” I say in a low voice.

She studies me, and for a second, I think maybe she’s going to be the first woman to tell me to *go to hell*.

Yet she answers with a breathy, “Okay.”

Without giving her any time to rethink her decision, I twine our hands and haul her outside to my car parked at the front entrance.

Within twenty-five minutes, we arrive at my apartment in a four-story brown brick residential building in the Loop, and as she treads inside in front of me and gazes out the window at the stars lighting the sky, I glance at her sinfully sexy ass in those tight jeans she’s wearing.

“I knew you’d have a million computers in your apartment,” she comments, peering at the lengthy desk pushed against the wall that holds two computers and two laptops.

I take her by surprise when I fling my keys onto the coffee table and walk toward her with determination, spinning her around by her arm, grabbing her face in both hands, and latching my mouth onto hers as I kiss her with a ferocious passion.

Mary clutches my dress shirt while I cradle her cheek in one hand and her ass in the other, pulling her against me as our tongues entwine feverishly. Teeth clash and I let out a growl when I taste her at last. I’m hard enough to fucking punch through my zipper as I slam her against the window, nipping her throat while her fingers weave into my hair. Groping her perfect little breasts, I groan and undo the top buttons of her blouse.

“Oh, Henry,” she whimpers in a tone full of desperation and need, yet her eyes are squeezed shut, as if she’s fighting herself, amazing me when she says, “We can’t.”

She’s the first girl I’ve ever known to feel guilty *before* she does something stupid and deceives her boyfriend.

Mary leans back, and I stand up against her, gently brushing her curls from her face but pulling away when the familiarity of our interaction doesn’t sit well with me.

What the fuck am I doing? I don’t do intimacy. I should run. Now. She’s my boss’s sister and isn’t a woman to mess around with.

Moreover, with the way she was dancing with me and trying to make Keano jealous at Club 7, I can guess that they screwed up their relationship.

And I don't need to take advantage of that. Therefore, instead of fucking her to satiate my own lust, I exhale a heavy breath and release her, stepping back and letting my blood flow upward for a moment so I can think.

Mary's eyes open as she traces her swollen lips with her fingertips, apparently upset at her own actions. It sucks that my conscience decides to show itself today. I can't use her like I use other women – she's different.

"Mary, tell me what happened with Keano. I can see something's wrong," I say to her, confounding myself with the fact that I care.

She palms her forehead and sags against the windowsill. "He cheated on me last night. After I just slept with him for the first time."

Everyone cheats; I've lived through that too. That douchebag doesn't even deserve her loyalty.

"I might have misjudged him and let love blind me, or the idea of being in love. I don't know."

Well, isn't Mary full of surprises? I always thought she was immature and dreamy, more a teenager than a twenty-year-old. But she's much more perceptive about love than I was at that age. I couldn't once see that I was in love with the idea of being in love.

"I'm sorry. I'm so embarrassed now."

I smile at her confession. "There's no need to be embarrassed."

"We're not even broken up or anything. I'm doing the same thing he did."

"You're still with him?"

"Kind of. We fought yesterday and haven't talked since," she admits sheepishly. "But..."

"But what?"

She evaluates me for a long, uncomfortable moment before saying, "Nothing."

"Go home, Mary. If you stay, we might do something you'll regret."

"I'm not so sure I'll regret it," she mumbles, but a knock on the door interrupts us.

For some reason, I don't want to be her mistake. Plowing a hand through my hair, I repeat, "Go home. I won't tell anyone about this."

Forcefully, she buttons up, muttering, "I should've just stayed home and watched *Narcos*."

"I saw the first episode yesterday."

“Me too,” she answers, her interest piqued. “It was so good. None of my friends have watched it.”

“Yeah, I liked it too,” I reply honestly.

She tilts her head to the side and appears hesitant to add more but then says, “We can watch the rest of season one together.”

She doesn’t ask. No, she merely informs me, which is amusing and so fucking cute.

“Okay. Sounds good.” I gesture for her to fasten all of her buttons before opening the door and ending our rendezvous.

However, watching *Narcos* together the next few weeks actually ended up being pretty fun and prompted an unlikely friendship.

*

“Henry?” Jordana calls, jolting me back to the present.

“I have to go,” I remark, hiking up the stairs, two at a time, and as I go, scrutinizing Mary being escorted out by Keano while wondering why she even left with him.

Still irritated by Mary’s irresponsible behavior tonight, I realize my fist is clenched and try to shake this bizarre feeling that’s overcoming me, hating that she’s naïve enough to go on these undertakings by herself.

When I pace across the second floor, the door to Adriano’s corner office is open and he’s settled behind his polished glass desk, stubbing his cig in the ashtray. Adriano’s my boss, the head of the Chicago Syndicate. The man who’s given me a future, power, and money to live a life an orphan could only dream of. The Syndicate rules the import of the purest heroin and cocaine into Illinois and their subsequent distribution, and for six months, I’ve been an official member as Adriano’s hacker and fifth in rank. I’m also the security director of Club 7, which is owned by Adriano and is the hottest dance club in the Loop that serves as a front for the Syndicate and also pays my salary.

There are many captains and soldiers in the Syndicate who execute the day-to-day operations – the actual importing and selling of drugs in and around Chicago. And a large chunk of them are sold in the posh underground area of Club 7 where the sex club is located. It’s a cutthroat business, and earlier, when Mary tried to reach me, I was changing data on

a police report, after hacking into the Chicago PD database much too easily, because Adriano needed to eliminate some competition in the area.

Once inside, I stop opposite Adriano, retrieving my gun from my back waistband.

“Where’s Mary?” he asks, leaning back and scratching the black hairs of his beard.

“She left with Keano. I don’t think she wanted to face the music.”

“So what did she do?”

“She went to the shelter alone.” Agitated, I practically hurl my gun onto the surface of the desk. “But I got there in time.”

His lips twitch in aggravation.

“I tracked her phone. You know how determined she can be,” I update him.

After being friends with Mary for four months now, I was certain that she’d go without back-up. She can be so obsessive about animal cruelty. It’s endearing, but it also pisses me off.

“I’ll talk to her tomorrow at brunch,” Adriano explains in a resolute tone.

“Good,” I agree. “This is too dangerous.”

“Then I might strangle her for going alone.”

I smile. “I almost did.”

“Thank you, Henry,” he says, getting his pack of cigs from the desk and taking one out with his teeth.

“Not a problem. You know she’s my friend.”

He evaluates me as he brings up a gold lighter to ignite the tip of his smoke. “I know. But she’s my little sister and impulsive sometimes.” He tosses the lighter back onto the desk and exhales slowly. “However, she’s also smart and kind. And I’m not a man to interfere in personal lives. So whether it’s friendship or whatever you want to call what’s between you two, just make sure you never hurt her. I will end anyone who hurts her, Henry. I won’t allow you to date her...for fun.”

Smirking at his threat not to fuck with her like I do with other women, I assure him, “I don’t think I could handle Mary and her animals.” Adriano sends me a pointed look, so I hold up my palms. “I got it. Don’t worry.”

“You better,” he states, leaning forward again. “You can go. I’ll see you tomorrow. I have to check our numbers because a batch of heroin is missing from the underground club.”

I nod, pleased with the amiable relationship I've established with the most powerful man in this organization. Adriano has supported my friendship with Mary, and something tells me he doesn't like Keano either.

When I return downstairs, a waitress blocks my path, cocking her hip brazenly.

"Hey, Henry. Haven't seen you in a while. My shift is almost over. Maybe we can get a drink? I can text you when I'm done."

I sigh, annoyed at her forwardness and realizing I need to stop fucking around where I work.

"You don't have my number," I throw back just as my phone chimes in, so I fish it out of my pocket.

Tapping the message, I see that Mary's sent a photo of her Chihuahua and a text.

Mary (the hot one): Thank you for rescuing me. I'm sorry I went alone.

Henry: Prepare for a lecture tomorrow.

Mary (the hot one): Urgh

And she types another text.

Mary (the hot one): I just realized that I completely forgot that I have to feed this dog...

Earlier tonight, I didn't enjoy having to lay into her like that, but damn if the woman isn't stubborn. Even though she's going to have to understand that I'm just trying to protect her, I keep remembering what she risked to save those dogs, and without thinking, I head for the exit of the club.

"Henry?" the waitress I entirely forgot yells after me, but I pay her no heed.

Instead of doing my usual and going home with a woman, I drive to an all-night store and then toward a glass high-rise in the downtown Loop. Parking my car at the front entrance, I call Mary, who picks up on the first ring.

"Hey..."

"Come downstairs, Mary. I have something for you," I say, and it's quiet for a moment while I wait with anticipation, knowing she's probably not by herself.

"Are you here to give me a hard time? If so, I'll pass, Henry."

I deserved that, so I let it go. "I'm not. I can come upstairs, but I bet you're not alone. Your choice..."

“You won’t do that,” she responds in her usual playful tone.

I will. “Want to take that chance?”

She chuckles. “I’ll be down in a sec.”

To my surprise, the entrance doors slide open within minutes and Mary hops into my car with her pet in the crook of her arm, looking much too tempting with her curls tied up in a messy bun and wearing sweatpants and a simple white t-shirt.

“You’re already attached to her.” I can’t help but smile at her adorable expression. There’s always a look of such vitality on her face that seems to captivate me more and more as I get to know her better.

“She’s so cute,” Mary exclaims and takes my hand in hers, palm up, to place her Chihuahua in it. “Look how small she is. She can fit into your palm.”

Uncomfortably, I hold the abnormally lightweight dog up and away from me.

“It’s a dog, not a bomb,” she says jokingly, and I give her a mock glare.

“What’s her name, by the way?”

“I haven’t named her yet.” Gently, she takes the squirming pet from me, and I swipe my palm over my pants.

“I got her food.”

“You brought dog food?” She assesses me, as if peeling down my layers, and adds with a grin, “I thought you didn’t like animals?”

“I don’t, but that doesn’t mean I want them to starve,” I retort, reaching back and grabbing the paper bag to hand it over. “I got you organic and natural brands.”

“That’s so nice of you, Henry,” she murmurs in the sweetest, most appreciative voice. It’s refreshing how easygoing she is. “But I think I’m rubbing off on you and you’re starting to like animals...”

“I don’t think so, baby,” I counter, fascinated by the slightest arc of her brow, the merest wave of her hand as she dismisses my comment.

“I think so, baby,” she fires back, and we lock eyes while I reminisce about her sitting astride me earlier. “And I’m not your *baby*.” She breaks away from my stare, mumbling, “I should go. He’s upstairs.”

“I guessed that,” I growl, not hiding my emotions like I normally do.

Unpredictably, she kisses my cheek, much too close to my mouth. The same thing I do to her when I tease her, but these days, she’s the one doing

the provoking. I constantly touch her in tempting ways, yet she permits it and never moves away from me anymore.

“Thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she whispers, and I stroke a knuckle up her cheek, sliding my fingers into her hair and cupping the back of her head.

I’m beginning to think that if I were to kiss her, she wouldn’t stop me.

Unfortunately, a honking horn has us both pulling back in unison, so I release her hair and order, “Go inside, Mary.”

Quietly, she opens the door, and I watch her until she enters the building, my mind swirling with confusing thoughts.

While journeying home through the dark streets, I realize that she and I have never been purely friends, and the sin of envy has started to show itself as the nature of our interaction grows beyond simply flirting with each other.

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CHAPTER 3

Mary

Back inside my apartment, I'm met with Keano's fury as I fling my keys onto the square pine table that's pushed against the green and orange painted wall of my entryway.

"Where were you?" he demands.

"Henry dropped off food for my dog," I answer, holding up the bag, and not in the mood to argue with him, I don't explain any further.

I'm consumed with Henry and his peace offering – the dog food. He may not ever verbally apologize for lashing out at me, but he does manage to do so with gestures such as this, not knowing that he steals a piece of my heart every time.

"Why did you have to go downstairs to see him?" he sneers, jealousy an unattractive trait in him. Especially since he's the one who stomped all over my feelings four months ago. Right now I'm not sure why I ever wanted him back. All we do lately is bicker while we barely see each other, which makes me conclude that we'll probably never trust one another again.

Keano broke us when he took my virginity and then cheated with that redhead within days. Afterward, he begged me to take him back, and at that time, I was so infatuated with him that I forgave him. He was such a sweet guy when we met. Not as strange and rude as he is nowadays.

But truth be told, I also forgave him because the day I found out he'd cheated, I made a mistake as well. That was the day my friendship with Henry began and I allowed him to woo me. The day that Henry and I danced provocatively before I went home with him, where we kissed. And I'm afraid that kiss ignited a fire inside me for Henry that I can't seem to extinguish. It was enthralling, not like anything I've ever remotely felt with Keano.

But since that night, nothing else has happened except for the beginning of a friendship. A friendship where I've discovered that there's so much more to Henry, who's not just a womanizer and a ridiculously fine-looking hacker. He's a great friend when he allows someone to get close to him; only, he's private about his past. And I believe he's more himself with me, which allows me to feel free and protected when I'm with him, emotions I rarely experience living in a mafia world.

"Well, he's my friend and you need to accept that." I shoulder past Keano to the L-shaped plum sofa in the corner of my living room and place my little dog on it, draping a blanket around her so that she can snuggle into it.

"Fine," he mutters tersely while I'm repeatedly thinking about another man in indecent ways.

Plopping down on the couch, I yawn, hinting I'm tired. Yet Keano doesn't get the clue and sinks down next to me, throwing his arm around my shoulder and trying to cuddle with me until I lean forward, away from his hold.

"Why are you still punishing me?" He sighs heavily.

"I'm not doing it intentionally, Keano. I just still need some time to get over the fact that you cheated on me right after you fucked me!"

"And you'll never let me forget it," he hisses. "But you also kissed Henry!"

"That was just a kiss, and at least I was honest," I defend, snarling, "I had to find out what you did from another girl." Inhaling a deep breath, I drop my head into my hands. "I'm trying here."

"Are you? You always seem to want to give up so easily. I'll give you more time, but you need to stop pushing me away."

Before I can reply, he stands up and disappears down the hall and through the first door into my bedroom. I don't want him to sleep over, but I have other things on my mind, so I lie back on my couch and stare at a crack in the ceiling as I pull the blanket over my body. I've never gotten the feeling that Keano actually loves me, yet whether he does or doesn't, I'm so bad with confrontation that I just keep letting things go. Even though this relationship is tainted and doomed, totally conflicting with the picture-perfect kind of love I want. Thank god I haven't slept with him after that first time.

I simply don't want to is my last thought before I drift off to sleep, where my dreams feature a certain hacker I shouldn't be thinking about. He's a man that goes from bed to bed, which is not something I want any part of.

More importantly, it's a dangerous path to travel with Henry being a member of the Syndicate. I'm basically afraid to risk my heart over a handsome, unattainable man.

Maybe I should let him go before I waste any more of my life on a fantasy?

The next day, I stroll into Adriano's studio loft on the top floor of the Astoria Tower, not fifteen minutes from my apartment. I'm late on purpose, hoping the rest of the family will already be here and Adriano will be too busy to give me a long lecture.

When I turn left, past the open kitchen where a delicious fragrance of fresh rolls wafts up, I find that everyone's already gathered around the rectangular cherry table, and as I hoped, I'm the last one to arrive.

I bump into Henry at the bar counter, and he eyes me in a way that makes me feel exposed and vulnerable. Usually, being watched makes me uncomfortable, but such attention coming from Henry feels different – warm. And I'm glad his anger from yesterday appears to have completely vanished. He's not wearing his glasses today, and he looks irresistible in black jeans and an indigo V-neck tee that shows off his two tattoos, topped off with a Fedora hat.

Before he can speak, Adriano and Carmine come bounding down the floating staircase from the open second level. Adriano has my one-month-old niece in his arms, so I hope that means he'll be lenient. That is, until they both impale me with an icy stare.

Clearly, Adriano told Carmine. Great!

My older brothers are quite intimidating with their designer suits, dark eyes, unruly brown hair, and tall frames – I'm the only one who's short in my family. Furthermore, it's creepy how much Carmine resembles Adriano as he grows older, especially now that he's his counselor and lawyer, also working full time for the Syndicate.

“Mary,” Adriano starts, cuddling little Amalia, whom he’s outfitted in a pink dress with her diaper peeking out. “How often do I have to tell you to stay out of trouble?”

My brothers let me live my life without their interference as long as I’m cautious, which I obviously failed at yesterday. “I wasn’t *in* trouble.”

“You were lucky I was there,” Henry traitorously replies, but he does stand beside me, making me feel strangely secure.

Carmine points his finger at me and pipes in, “One more of these incidents and you’re moving back to Mom and Dad’s.”

Adriano and Carmine pay for my apartment because I told them it’s too difficult to live there with my parents since they don’t know about Adriano and Carmine’s mafia connections. Also, I needed more freedom. I know Carmine means well and he wouldn’t actually take my apartment, but the fact that he threatens me with it tells me I truly alarmed them.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I just have to get used to being more careful. But you know how much I love dogs, so I had a good reason.”

“Dogs?” Adriano raises a brow while Carmine rolls his eyes heavenward like he’s praying for patience.

“It’s a rat.” Henry laughs, pointing at my Chihuahua, causing my brothers to smirk.

“It’s a Chihuahua,” I correct him.

“It sure looks like a rat,” Henry retorts, and I shoulder him playfully, grateful that he’s lightening the mood.

“Forget the rat—dog,” I say as I glimpse at Henry and can’t help but snicker too.

At that moment, Adriano’s wife, Cam, comes up behind me, stroking my pet. “I think the dog is lucky to have you as a mom, Mary.” Then she glances at Adriano and Carmine. “Are you guys finished chastising her so we can eat?”

Adriano grins at her as if they share a secret and kisses Amalia’s head when she stretches her tiny, chubby limbs.

“Yes, please, let’s eat,” I insist. “I’m starving. And I promise, no more rogue missions. Well, not before calling any of you.” I motion to all three of them, and they glower at me.

Chuckling, I finally greet the rest of my family, who are already seated.

As Cam sits back down in her chair and plates a mozzarella omelet and Italian sausage for him, Adriano takes his place at the head of the table,

gazing at her and then Amalia with a look that melts my heart.

I kiss Amalia's sweet face and then Adriano's cheek. "Don't worry about me, okay?"

"I'll always worry about you, sis. But you're in luck since, apparently, I'm getting softer because of my daughter." As if on cue, Amalia opens her dark brown eyes and Adriano says, "Hi, my baby girl."

When she recognizes her father's voice, she kicks her legs excitedly.

I grab a fresh strawberry from the bowl, toss it into my mouth, and continue my rounds, pressing a kiss on Luca's and then his wife, Fallon's, cheeks. Luca's my brother's best friend and his underboss whom I've known for ten years and had a huge crush on when I was younger.

"Hey, guys." Lastly, I greet Logan – Adriano's head captain – his fiancée, Rosalia, and their adorable son, Adam. Although Adam's adopted, he has blond hair just like his father. Actually, Logan and Adam are the only blonds among our dark-haired group.

Adriano, Luca, Logan, Carmine, and Henry are the most powerful men in the Chicago Syndicate. And while Logan and Luca are practically my third and fourth brothers, Henry's definitely not like a brother to me.

"Mary has a doggy!" Four-year-old Adam hops up in his chair as Rosalia and Logan, seated on either side of him, reach out to steady him so he doesn't topple sideways.

"I do. But she doesn't have a name yet. Do you want to name her?" I sink down next to Henry.

He nods eagerly and stares at his father like he can't believe it.

"Any name you want," Logan explains.

"Um...Strawberry!" Adam yells the first thing he spots on the table as everyone starts filling their plates with bread, eggs, and sausages.

Logan and Rosalia laugh, and Henry mutters, "You asked," before saying aloud, "I think it's an awesome name, Adam."

As I glance sideways, I notice him inhaling deeply and pulling away.

"Did you just sniff me?" I question in a hushed tone. More often lately, he gives the impression that he feels just as helpless in the face of our predicament as I do.

A crease forms on his forehead, and he's clearly flustered, because his eyes round for a second. "What? No," he replies firmly and looks at Adam, so I drop it.

“I like that: Strawberry,” I answer as Cam leans across the table to hand me a plate before pouring a coffee for me.

“Here, your vegetarian sausages.”

“Thank you.” I place Strawberry on the floor and she starts to hop around, evidently feeling much better than yesterday.

Starving, I break off a chunk of fresh baked bread and load up my fork, shoveling my food into my mouth.

“I’ve always wondered how those veggie sausages taste,” Henry says, focused on me and adding, “For a tiny woman, you do eat a lot.”

“I love food. What can I say?”

“Except meat,” he states, showing his teeth.

“How’s your pig sausage?” I point my fork at his food and glance at his groin, causing him to shift uncomfortably.

Inwardly, I smile as he takes a huge bite. “It’s delicious.”

“So is mine.” I cut off a chunk, which Henry steals and pops into his mouth, chewing and then stopping, his lips in a thin line. Laughing, I ask, dreading the reply, “And?”

He swallows slowly, drawling, “This is disgusting, Mary.”

“It’s not disgusting,” I defend, but everyone else pipes in, “Yes, it is.”

With a pretend glare to my brothers, I give up and direct my fork around the table. “You’re all meat addicts.”

“And proud of it,” Logan and Henry brag in unison.

“I wanna taste too, Mary,” Adam chimes in from opposite me.

I feed him a bite, and he pushes it out of his mouth with his tongue just in time for Rosalia to catch it.

“Don’t spit out food, little man,” Logan chides him, cleaning Rosalia’s hand with a napkin.

“See. Even Adam rejects your food,” Henry teases.

“Adam, you bailed on me,” I say around a smile.

“I didn’t like it, Mary,” he responds sweetly.

“That’s okay, pumpkin. I forgive you. You mostly like candy anyway. Henry just doesn’t know good food.”

“Why only me?” He waves a hand around. “They all agreed with me.”

I shrug and this time, our eyes meet and hold while the others are in conversation. For a moment too long for two people who are just friends. Unfortunately, he glances away.

Then Adam puts in defensively in the cutest tone, “I don’t always just like candy. I-I eat sushi too.”

“Me too,” I say, wanting him to forget my comment because I was just teasing him. “Especially the seaweed salad.” Actually, only the seaweed salad and soups. This prompts Adam to relay all his favorite foods, and I listen absentmindedly.

Reaching forward, I pour a glass of water and observe my entire family, minus my mom and dad, who aren’t here. Adriano, Carmine, and I visit them separately because they don’t know about the Syndicate, and since the men discuss business sometimes, we don’t want to risk accidentally letting anything slip.

As I watch them interact, I notice how everyone’s settled down, other than Carmine and me. And Henry. But I’m not sure Carmine ever will. However, a few years ago, I also thought Adriano would never marry. Throughout each of their lives, my brothers have left a trail of broken hearts in their wake, and Carmine still does, although he’s nearing thirty, so maybe he’ll grow up just like the rest of this group of thirtysomethings.

Henry and I are the youngest. Maybe that’s the reason I’m drawn to him? But no matter what type of kinship I feel with him, he’s also a womanizer, just like Carmine.

Studying Luca and Fallon, Adriano and Cam, and Logan and Rosalia, I realize that Keano and I don’t look at each other the way these couples do. As if they communicate with a mere glance, speaking a thousand words with a look of undeniable trust that only a true lover gives you. Their relationships seem textbook perfect, but strangely, I don’t feel sad about what I don’t have with Keano. The realization hits me hard until I’m distracted by the handsome man who suddenly scoots his chair away from the table, the legs screeching on the tiles when my dog tries to climb on him.

I laugh as Henry sits motionless with an unrelenting scowl I find all too appealing, the glare in his expression only rendering him more handsome.

“Mary,” he warns in a low tone.

“Why do you hate animals? You eat them and never want them to touch you.”

“Just because I’m not an animal lover like you doesn’t mean I hate them. I simply prefer systems to animals and people. They’re easier to handle.”

“Such a hacker’s answer,” I accuse, reaching down and picking up Strawberry.

With a wolfish smirk, he places his arm on the back of my chair.

Due to his charismatic arrogance, I hover Strawberry in front of his face, causing him to break his cheeky façade again when he jumps up. “Mary!”

Strawberry barks and I laugh while Henry whispers, “I’m getting you back for that. When you least expect it.”

“Bring it, Henry. I’ve got Strawberry to defend me, and you fear her.” I scratch her neck as she rumbles in delight.

“Yeah, you laugh now,” he counters with a devilishly attractive feigned glare as Luca and Fallon stand up. “I’m not *afraid* of her. I just don’t want her in my face.”

Luca interrupts us, “We’re going to a bookstore Fallon wanted to visit.”

“Want to come, Mary?” Fallon asks.

“No, thanks. I’m going to take Strawberry to the beach since it’s such a beautiful day.”

“Alone?” Carmine and Adriano inquire at once.

In response, I stare at Henry with an expectant expression, hoping he’ll go with me, or else Adriano and Carmine will probably send a guard to trail me.

Henry watches me as though he doesn’t understand my silent message, making me think he probably has plans for today with someone else.

But then he speaks, “I’m going with her. She and Strawberry need an escort, clearly.”

Smiling, I rise. “We’re leaving now too.”

Before Henry changes his mind or my brothers start to question us, I quickly walk out behind Luca and Fallon, and Henry joins us, mouthing, “You owe me, baby.”

Moving toward the elevator in the hall, I grin, and he runs his hand across my ass. Again, an inappropriate touch I don’t berate him for. Secretly, I enjoy it way too much.

CHAPTER 4

Mary

With its spectacular view of the city's architectural skyline, Oak Street Beach is swamped on this sunny day at the end of summer. While Strawberry splashes in the water toward a group of children, I stroll along the public beach with Henry, holding my sandals in one hand and kicking the sugary soft sand with my toes.

Due to the heat, I swipe a layer of sweat from my upper lip and Henry grabs his shirt at the back of his neck and pulls it over his head. I can't help but gawk at his bronzed, inked skin, chiseled abs, and broad shoulders that could shelter a woman for the rest of her life. Maybe I shouldn't stand where I can almost feel him, breathe him in. Where I could reach out to touch him so easily.

"Christ, I'm roasting out here. Aren't you hot, Mary?" he asks.

Is there a double meaning in his words?

"Yeah," I agree as he lifts his arm, taking off the Fedora and placing it on top of my head. Because it's a size too large for me, I tilt it up a little and strike a pose, making a duckface.

"How do I look?"

The corner of his mouth quirks up. "Without the pout, you look fucking sexy."

"Oh, then no duckface," I concede, duly noting his compliment and coming to a standstill when Strawberry circles around my feet before skipping into the water again.

From my back pocket, I get my phone and snap a picture of her and then a selfie, getting Henry in the picture too. But he snatches it from my palm.

“No. Don’t delete it!” I pull his hand down to check the picture. “I didn’t even get your head in the photo.” I quickly steal my phone from his grip.

And he praises me, “Very fast, baby.”

“I have skills you don’t even know about, baby,” I retort, since he’s also been making these suggestive comments the last few days, and he rubs a hand over his mouth, hiding his wide grin. “Let’s take one good pic.”

Henry sends me a bland look. “What is it with women and selfies?”

I ignore his question, imploring dramatically with fluttering lashes, “Please? I promise that I’ll never post it on my Facebook. It’s just for me...”

He bites the inside of his cheek, yet I catch his lips twitching. “Fine. One picture.”

I go up on my tiptoes while standing in front of him to get us both in the shot, which I shouldn’t have done – his bare chest is pressed against my back with only the thin layer of my emerald tank top separating skin-to-skin contact.

Henry places his hands low on my hips and dips his head, bringing us cheek to cheek. Quickly, I snap one photo and step forward – I’m hot and bothered, and it seems like neither of us is setting any boundaries between us anymore. This attraction has grown into something beyond my understanding, beyond my capability to stop myself.

However, everything changes in an instant when, much to my dismay, a brunette in a red striped triangle bikini with legs that go on forever stares at Henry. She has *cougar* written all over her since she must be in her late thirties, judging by her crow’s feet. She beams crookedly, but he immediately disregards her and tips the Fedora up with his thumb when it slides down my forehead.

“You’re completely flushed from the heat. Let’s swim.”

“I don’t have my bikini,” I remark as he undoes his brown leather belt and strips down to his black boxer briefs, resembling Michelangelo’s David.

Oh dear, he’s hung.

“You wear underwear, don’t you?” he questions, yet I’m focused on the hard lines of his chest until he flexes his pecs, and I look up when he points two fingers to his eyes. “My eyes are up here.”

“Then stop doing that.” Theatrically, I gesture to his chest.

Swiftly, he flings off the Fedora and lowers my hand, keeping his fingers around my wrist as I drop my sandals.

He has the widest smile when he asks, “Are you going commando?”

My head drops back as I chuckle. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but no, I’m wearing panties and a bra.”

Though he appears to be even more pleased. “Then let’s cool off. Take off your clothes.”

“Without any foreplay?” I reply jokingly, making him laugh as he shows me a grin that eases all the way up to his silver-grey eyes.

Walking backward, I shimmy my jeans down my legs and remove my top, throwing them next to his pile of clothes that are lying at the base of the tree where Strawberry’s tethered and digging a hole.

Henry’s gaze rakes over my burgundy lace bra and boy shorts, which I thankfully had the forethought to wear today. I snap my fingers to get his attention, and he smirks before sauntering into the water. He dives in and I follow, gasping when I go under, and as I come up, I push my wet curls from my face. The cold water is such a relief.

Henry stops a few feet in front of me, and his chest and arm muscles bulge as he runs his hands through his thick, black hair. “You can stand here.”

“Yeah, right. It comes up to *your* shoulders. I can clearly see that it’s deep.” Still, I go forward, drawn to him.

Afraid to get too close and not knowing what game we’re playing, when I’m about a foot away from him, I float in place, feeling for the sand under my feet, which isn’t there as I suspected. Then I arc a brow, throw out my arms, and splash Henry, making him splutter as I dive to the side.

When I come up, the woman in the red striped bikini is swimming past us, trying to get Henry to notice her, but he lunges at me instead. Shrieking, I attempt to surge away by kicking my legs and manage to stay out of his reach, shouting, “Too slow, Henry!”

I swim ahead of him and hear his laugh while I do the breaststroke, stopping when I bump into someone.

“Watch it!” a high-pitched voice yells as the waves come and go.

Blinking through the water that’s obstructing my view, I catch my breath and offer, “Sorry,” just as I realize I’ve come face-to-face with *red bikini* woman, who’s sneering at me.

“Watch where you’re going,” she repeats with a scowl.

“I said I was sorry.” I didn’t intentionally bump into her.

But her focus is, of course, behind me, and her nasty attitude has me swimming back in that direction to stop her from getting what she wants: Henry.

“Do you know her?” I swim around him.

“I think so,” he answers without meeting my gaze, as if he’s uncomfortable with my question.

“You think so?” I frown, and then, understanding dawns. “Oh, my god. You don’t remember if you’ve slept with her?”

His lips thin into a hard line at my disgusted face, but he keeps quiet. I want to say something yet bite my tongue and drift away, careening around some guys playing with a giant beach ball.

Henry swims a few long strokes until he’s beside me again and demands, “Tell me what you wanted to say.”

I swivel around, treading water. “Don’t you ever think about their feelings?”

“Feelings aren’t involved; they know that.”

“Are you sure about that?” She was obviously pretty jealous.

“Yes. It’s not like I hide how I am or pretend to be Prince Charming. The women that go home with me know the deal. They’re not like you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, please, Mary. You judge me for fucking around, but it’s not like I take virgins.”

I snicker. “I don’t judge you. But you know that sometimes girls want more.”

“Which they won’t get.”

“But what will happen when you fall in love?”

His eyes round at my direct question; we’ve never discussed feelings. “I won’t. I don’t *do* relationships.”

“That’s stupid. Why not?”

“Why not what?” he retorts, confused.

“Why don’t you do relationships?”

This astonishes me. I gathered he liked screwing around because he’s never fallen in love. How can you not want a relationship? Not want love? All I want is that one thing with a man who adores me wholeheartedly, the same way my father adores my mother and Adriano can’t live without Cam.

He lets out an impatient sigh yet answers, “Growing up as an orphan and without any siblings, I’m used to being alone.”

“That doesn’t automatically mean you don’t do relationships. You said you keep people at a distance because you prefer systems to them,” I echo his words.

“Systems are more trustworthy than people, Mary. Systems don’t fucking cheat. People cheat,” he says, betraying he’s most likely been cheated on, like me.

I gamble with my next words. “Maybe she didn’t love you enough, Henry,” I utter, and he seems taken aback. “Not everyone cheats, I hope. At the end of the day, don’t you dream of having a family?”

He regards me intently. “If you knew what I dreamed of, you’d run from me.”

There it is again – some innuendo he throws in during casual conversation, making me think that he wants to be more than a friend to me.

“I believe that one day you’ll fall in love and *do* a relationship.” *And I’ll hate it.*

He freezes for a split second and then recovers with a wicked gleam crossing his face. “I doubt that.”

Suddenly, Henry leaps forward, his arm swooping around my torso as he slaps a ball away before it clunks me in the head, and when he circles us around, water seeps into my nose and mouth.

“Hey, man!” Henry rumbles with an unrelenting glower as strands of his dark hair topple appealingly over his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” the other guy apologizes.

Coughing, I breathe heavily as he holds me up without effort. He’s deliciously big and strong, and I’m much too aware of his imposing upper body, coiled muscles, and the way the sun glistens on the spade tattoo on his neck.

On instinct, I lock my legs around Henry’s hips as he looks back at me, and I murmur, “Thanks.”

His arms tighten around me, and out of the blue, he says, “You’re so petite.”

For some reason, I’m not liking his statement. “I’m not just a petite or sweet girl who needs protection all the time.”

“Why do you say it as if it bothers you?”

“Because it does. People are constantly calling me petite or sweet or short,” I tell him honestly.

“Those are compliments.”

“No, they’re not. *You’re short* is simply a statement, an observation. And the short and sweet girls are always being friend-zoned by men,” I blurt out, hoping he understands my words, but when a wave hits us and the tip of his nose bumps against mine, it’s like a literal slap back to reality, so we abruptly release each other.

My mind mixed up, I swim back to the shore without a word to Henry and approach Strawberry, my body dripping wet. Henry, who’s followed me out of the water, shakes the sand out of his t-shirt and spreads it out so that we can relax while the warm rays of sun dry our skin.

I observe the clear blue sky and then peek sideways at Henry, who’s lazing back, stashing one arm behind his head and the other over his eyes.

“Stop staring, Mary,” he speaks without moving or uncovering his eyes, and I instantly glance away.

Busted!

Nonetheless, I glimpse at him again to see a smile curving his mouth. Since he seems wholly comfortable, I take a chance and fire questions he usually evades at him. “Why are you named Henry?”

“I don’t know. I only know my birth mother was British.”

“Maybe she named you after King Henry the Eighth,” I muse aloud.

“Who beheaded his wives? Great role model,” he mutters, making me grin.

I think we can establish that Henry’s mom wasn’t a great role model herself, because she dumped him at an orphanage and he grew up with different foster families until he was eighteen.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to know more about your parents or where you come from, Henry?” I probe, genuinely curious.

“Not really. It doesn’t define me.” He crosses one ankle over the other and grunts just as his phone rings from his jeans lying next to me on the sand, so I take it out and read *don’t answer* flashing across the screen.

He sits up when I show it to him with a frown. “*Don’t answer?* You have code names? Let me guess...the code names are for women?”

He smirks arrogantly, so I swipe my thumb across the screen and say, “Hello?”

“Goddammit, Mary! I’m going to kill you,” he threatens, sounding authoritative, and reaching for his device as I fall sideways.

No one answers. “Oh, she hung up.” I feign disappointment.

Henry rolls on top of me, but when I stretch my arm as far out of his reach as possible, I accidentally open his messages and see *Mary (the hot one)*.

At that moment, he snatches his phone and rolls to his back. So without thinking, I straddle him, and he pulls up his knees, shoving his phone under him before clutching my waist to hold me still.

“Who’s *the hot one*?” I want to know, dreading the answer a bit.

Another Mary or me?

Henry runs one hand through his hair, making it a sexy mess. “No one.”

My face falls, and his thumb caresses my side as he sighs and confesses, “You are, okay?”

My heart skips a treacherous beat, and I sit back against his knees. “I’m honored.”

“I already regret telling you.” He shifts me a little and accidentally grinds me over his bulge.

I suppress a moan as we both sit still immediately. Then I attempt to move, resting my palm on his pecs, yet he grips my sides again, more forcefully this time, and meets my eyes. The air thickens. Only, now it’s different because we’ve been flirting the entire day. Although we’ve never crossed that line, we’re hovering perilously close to the edge. Ordinarily, one of us breaks away from the tension, but somehow, with every encounter, my resolve to keep him as only a friend vanishes a little more. And considering he’s just confessed to having me as *the hot one* in his phone, I know that this attraction I can’t seem to escape is mutual. On the other hand, Henry’s drawn to a lot of women and doesn’t do relationships. And I have Keano to think about – I’m in the wrong here.

With much effort, I try to pry his fingers loose, yet he doesn’t relent. His gaze brands my skin as it travels over my face and down my cleavage, and he breathes harder as he swells beneath me. This is becoming much too dangerous, and I might surrender to him if I don’t put a stop to it.

Though just as I reach the point of no return, he comes to his senses, dropping his head back and glancing away, before – lightning fast – he shifts me off him and deposits me on the sand like I weigh nothing. Then,

when Henry surges up as if he needs to shield me, I see Keano charging at us.

“No, Keano!” I shout, jumping up and diving in front of Henry, who shunts me behind him and holds up his palm in a commanding manner that stops Keano.

“Mary, come here,” Keano tells me as the two men engage in a glaring contest.

“No! Stay right fucking there,” Henry orders in a tone I don’t dare to defy, and damn if his protectiveness doesn’t make me feel cherished.

“Why do you keep trying to get into Mary’s pants?” Keano yells to Henry, launching a fist at Henry like a catapult.

Henry catches it midair with shocking speed and spins Keano around, pinning him motionless with his own arm against his chest as a muscle ticks in his jaw. “Why do you keep interrupting us?”

Even though Keano hisses in pain, he stands his ground.

“Henry, let him go.” I claw at his hand, yet he doesn’t budge. “Henry!” As he looks to the side, he notices the people around us witnessing the scene, so Henry releases him with a shove and Keano stumbles forward, rubbing out his wrist.

“He wasn’t trying to get into my pants,” I defend lamely. “You’re wrong.”

Keano’s scowl remains on Henry, who appears to be ready to pounce on him, the lines in Henry’s face uncompromising.

“Am I?! Why the hell were you straddling him? In your underwear?!” he gestures at Henry and then at me irately.

“Because she likes it, motherfucker,” Henry growls, baiting Keano, who lunges at him before Henry catches him under the chin with an uppercut, causing Keano to stagger backward as Henry snarls, “She’s *not* yours.”

I jump between them and hold out my hands. “Oh, my god. Stop it!”

They pay me no heed while Keano loosens his jaw, so I slam both their chests to make them look at me. “Keano. Calm down. Let me dress and we can talk, okay?” Before he can confirm, I pull Henry’s arm to spin him around and inch him to the side with me.

Reaching down for my jeans, I shake them out before pushing my legs into them. As I stoop low again to get my tank top, I say, “I’m sorry. I’ll handle him. But...can we talk later?” I want to stay with Henry but need to end it with Keano first.

He unclenches his fist and lets out a deep sigh while I brush my wet curls back with my fingers. I want to know where we stand. What's been happening the last few days?

Henry picks up his clothes, muttering in an annoyed tone, "About what, Mary?"

This isn't the reply I was expecting. Bemused, I freeze for a second while pulling my top over my head and then yanking it down to find his eyes narrowing at a point behind me.

"About us..." I answer, whirling my head around and pursing my lips as the woman in the red bikini approaches us.

"Mary, you're my friend. I don't want to ruin what we have."

"What *do* we have? Because I'm in limbo here." The question hangs in the air as silence stretches around us, and I become more and more furious at his unpredictable behavior toward me.

When he does ultimately answer, it's the opposite of what I want to hear and cuts close to the bone.

"A friendship." His chivalrous response destroys me, and my heart sinks to my feet.

While I was reaching a completely different conclusion, he just shot down wherever this was going.

"Then stop flirting with me." My voice breaks, although I try to sound steady as he's fixated on the other woman.

This is who he is, a man distracted by feminine beauty. A man who doesn't do relationships and seems to be fine with the current status of his life.

Disappointed and hurt, I grab my sandals and loosen Strawberry's tether before whisper-shouting to Henry, "You know what you fucking do to me."

"And you fucking play along," he throws back and holds up his palm, deeming this conversation over.

At this point, all I can do is accept the way he pulled me close and is now pushing me away. On the other hand, I don't need to see Henry with other women anymore, so while he's looking at *red bikini* woman, I shoulder past him.

He walks ahead to meet her and she smacks a kiss on his cheek while watching me, spiking my jealousy into territory unknown.

Unluckily, that's when Keano demands my attention. "Mary!"

I grumble, "Why do you bark at Henry? I hate it when you do that."

His body tenses up. “That’s all you have to say? He hit me! What were you doing being so close with him?”

“He’s my friend and you misread a situation,” I lie but then add, “I-I don’t know anymore...This isn’t working, Keano.”

He ignores my statement. “No, I’m sorry. Maybe I did misread it.”

Utterly shocked, I reveal the truth, “You didn’t—”

“Let’s just forget it.” He inches closer and I edge backward, puzzled.

“What? No—”

He dips his head to kiss me, but I turn my cheek to him and am suddenly fascinated by Henry’s powerful back, straining with muscles. The woman traces a path up his arm, outlining the cross tattoo before moving up to his neck until he shivers, and I’m green with envy.

“Just leave me alone,” I insist to Keano, and in a perplexed state of mind, I turn away from both men with sadness marring my soul.

Maybe I’ve been misinterpreting Henry, because apparently, his flirting means nothing. Although it’s a little late for me to have that realization now when I’ve already fallen for him.

CHAPTER 5

Mary

I've been slacking off on working toward my bachelor's degree in art history, so on Friday, I'm sitting with several students at a round table in the School of the Arts Institute's library where I'm trying to get caught up. With the murmurs of their conversations around me, I reread the last passage of my Renaissance art paper on my tablet and email it to my professor just before noon, right at the deadline.

Hearing my phone vibrate, I search for it in my plaid leather shoulder bag that's lying on the table, hoping that a certain man is finally contacting me after five days of no communication, but I let out a disappointed sigh when I read Keano's message.

Keano: I want to meet and talk to you.

Um, hello to you too. How are you?

I toss my phone back into my bag, missing Henry. I'm starting to believe that this attraction was one-sided. However, even if it was, I still miss my friend and wonder if he thinks of me at all? A sense of gloom hovers over my head like a dark cloud, various emotions and questions swirling inside me.

What's he doing? Who's he with? Why hasn't he texted me?

I decide to call him when a shadow moving over my tablet has me looking up into the bright blue eyes of a girl in my class. "Hey, Kate."

"Hey," she whispers. "Keano was looking for you earlier."

"Okay, thanks. I'll call him," I comment.

"Did you turn in your paper?"

"Yes, just now."

"Me too," she replies. "In the nick of time. I'm off to work, but I'll see you tonight, right?"

“Where?”

“The poker tournament at your brother’s club. My boyfriend, Chris, is playing, so I have to support him.”

I forgot about the tournament, yet this is a great excuse to see Henry. “Yeah, I’ll be there.” Then I stand up and stuff my tablet into my bag. “I’ll walk out with you. I’m leaving too.”

It’s eight p.m. when I enter Club 7, edging along the black and white tiled dance floor that’s located in the center of the spacious room. The bass booms in my eardrums as the club fills up quickly, but there’s no Henry in sight.

I comb my fingers through my hair, which is flowing in waves down my back over my long-sleeved little black dress. The dozen thin gold bracelets around my wrists tinkle as I approach the bar in my strappy, high-heeled sandals.

Unfortunately, behind the bar is Jordana – bartender girl who’s always flirting with Henry – in her tank top that barely contains her breasts, giving me an insincere smile.

“A bottle of water, please,” I order, and she dips down to grab it and hands it over, knowing she can give me what I want free of charge since I’m Adriano’s sister.

Before the dance floor gets too crowded, I continue my perusal to the far side of the club. As I screw open the top of the bottle, my movement stops when I notice a couple at the foot of the polished black staircase.

Henry stands out in his impeccably pressed slacks and fitted white dress shirt, completed with a black bow tie. Only, tonight, his thick hair is slicked back, and he’s with *red bikini* woman, the brunette from the beach on Sunday. They’re talking to each other in a manner that indicates familiarity, and she keeps touching him, trying to seduce him in her champagne-colored dress with a plunging neckline, yet he doesn’t appear to be annoyed by her frisky behavior. Quite the opposite, he shifts closer, muttering something to her, causing her lips to curve up into a Cheshire cat grin.

My legs feel weak, and I lean back against the bar for support, placing the bottle on to the counter. He’s been with her while I’ve been pining for

him like a moron. I'm no one to him, or else he would've at least called to settle our disagreement. Weren't we friends?

My heart shatters into tiny pieces as my stare is glued on them. They're beautiful together. Both tall and dashing. I realize she must be someone important to him, because I've never encountered Henry with the same woman twice. Apparently, she's made him forget about me.

What does she have that I don't?

A lump forms in my throat, but I refuse to break down in public. The second I start to turn away, Henry looks up and meets my eyes as I blink back pooling moisture. He straightens, then takes a step forward but halts.

"Hey, Mary," a voice says from behind me.

This guy has the worst timing.

"Keano." I hold Henry's cool gaze.

"I'm sorry about Sunday. Can we just have a drink together?" Keano touches my hip, standing sideways against me.

Henry's expression becomes unreadable before he turns and practically tugs the woman with him up the stairs.

When resentment fills me, I say to Keano, "Yes, let's have a drink upstairs."

I won't allow Henry to callously cast me away, so I make a beeline around the dance floor toward the staircase as sadness is replaced with irritation. He gets to fuck every woman in the Loop, but he can't even speak to me because he sees me with Keano? After he's ignored me while he was most likely with her?

On the second balconied floor, poker players, all in tuxedos, are situated at the tables alongside the wall in the carpeted VIP area that's been transformed into a casino for the Heads-Up Poker Tournament.

Incensed, I search for Henry and find him settling himself in a padded chair, a king seated on his throne, at a mahogany table with a croupier, and the woman is standing next to him.

Unexpectedly, Keano passes me and claims the chair opposite Henry, who leans back defiantly as I flank Keano and he loops his arm around my middle.

Henry's silver-grey irises become ice-cold, and then, calmly, he scoots his chair back and the woman perches down on his lap while his gaze is locked on mine.

Are you freakin' kidding me?!

His provocation works. Not once have I ever confronted him willingly with Keano, but he keeps throwing his women in my face.

Want to play, Henry? Let's play.

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CHAPTER 6

Henry

I tow Tara along with me to the poker table and order a beer before taking my seat. I've never had such a wide array of clashing emotions pulling me in different directions.

As I roll up my sleeves, I'm consumed with a petite woman who makes me rethink my cautiousness about letting someone get close to me. A woman who's currently mad at me.

Last Sunday at Oak Street Beach marked a change between Mary and me, and since then, the thought of her with Keano pisses me off to no end. That aside, we didn't end on good terms that day, and she didn't contact me afterward. I've simply been busy with work, but I assumed she wasn't with that guy anymore. Yet now I finally see her again after five fucking days, only to discover that she's here with him, and that makes my blood boil.

A waiter places a bottle of beer on the table just as Keano plops down across from me, grinning conceitedly and sending me a silent message: *Mary's still mine.*

To which I send my own message: *Fuck you, motherfucker.*

Then Mary stops next to him, eying Tara with derision. Downright caught off guard by Mary's boldness – I'd guessed she would have left – I clench my beer for a second, feeling like the glass is going to give under my fingers. But when Keano puts his arm around her and pulls her close, the sheer, unadulterated fury coursing through me snaps.

Scooting my chair back, I watch Mary as I angle my knee sideways and Tara sits down eagerly, mumbling, "Well, this is interesting. I'll play along."

Disregarding her, I take a long swig of my beer while the croupier informs Keano, "Sir, that seat is taken. A reservation is needed to play with

Mister Pierce.”

“It’s fine. One game,” I interrupt, examining Mary’s tight black dress, which stops mid-thigh and is wrapped around her body like cling wrap, accentuating her narrow waist and curvaceous hips.

She’s a vision with her copper brown curls swept over one shoulder, gold bracelets adorning her wrist, and barely a hint of makeup, tempting and so fucking sexy in her own unique, spirited way.

Brazenly, I laze back and untie my bow tie, letting it hang around the collar of my white dress shirt before I undo the top two buttons of it. Mary follows the movement closely, her gaze moving up my throat, over the spade tattoo, and past my beard – I haven’t bothered to shave in days.

Her mouth is set as if she ate something nasty when Tara leans close to my face and whispers, “I’ll just wait until you two are done.”

Tara rests back against me, and a tremble goes through me from the unwanted closeness. Her spicy perfume overwhelms me while arrows of jealousy fly from Mary’s hazel eyes. I really shouldn’t engage Mary like this, but evidently, I act before I think when it comes to her.

“Deal,” I order, throwing a five-hundred-dollar chip onto the center of the table, wanting his arm away from her waist before I pull out my gun.

Taking my cards in one hand, I fan them out to see that I have a pair of queens, which is a good hand in one-on-one poker.

Keano releases her, discarding two cards and drawing two new ones – he’s much too eager. Undoubtedly not a regular player. “Raise.” He matches my five hundred and raises it with another five hundred.

I school my expression into one of indifference. “Call.” I match his five hundred as his smug grin grows wider, but the vein in his neck is ticking relentlessly – he’s afraid to lose two thousand dollars now.

This is all a numbers game, and chances are highly unlikely that he has a hand that’ll beat me. I think he only has one high card and is bluffing to save face in front of Mary, who’s glowering at me nonstop.

Back down, baby. Don’t push me.

I swear it’s as if she reads my thoughts, because she arches a brow in challenge and places her palm on Keano’s shoulder to supposedly look at his cards as I grip mine forcefully, allowing her to bait me.

What the fuck am I doing?

Keano lays out his hand, showing an ace – just as I anticipated: one high card. I fling my pair onto the table, fighting not to look at Mary, because

frankly, I'm liable to shoot someone if everyone keeps playing games around me.

Gesturing for Tara to stand up, I tell her, "Order another beer for me."

She gets up and struts away.

I lean forward, threatening, "Don't ever bother me again, motherfucker. You don't want to feel my wrath." Then I wave over the nearest guard. "Escort him out and ban Keano Mathews from the club."

While Keano keeps quiet, his arrogant attitude fading away, Mary's brows furrow and she objects, "What?!" not even finding me important enough to look at anymore. "You can't—"

"You can join him if you'd like," I cut her off, loathing how she defends him.

"It's okay, Mary. We can just go to Cocktails & Heels." He rises as one of the guards grabs his upper arm.

"Seriously, is this necessary, Henry?" she addresses me directly for the first time while I nod for the guard to proceed and he pulls Keano down the hall. "You're an ass," Mary snarls, and when she turns on her heel, I surge up and block her path.

"If I'm an ass, what does that make you?" I edge forward as she moves back until she hits the wall, and I speak in a low voice, "Why the fuck are you still with him?"

She straightens as I pay no attention to the other people milling around. "Why do you care? Why have you been with her?"

"Tara?" I muse aloud, tilting my head.

"Yes, if that's the name of the cougar. I guess you were too busy with Tara all week to take time to call me, your friend." The word *friend* is hissed with spite.

I wasn't. I only saw Tara on Sunday and then again tonight, right before I saw Mary.

Becoming even more irate when she doesn't deny that she's still with Keano, I plant one palm against the wall and retort, "You could've called me. But I guess you were too busy continuing with Keano while you know damn well you don't want him." Then my other arm shoots out, hand against the wall so that I have her caged in as our eyes meet, even though I'm a head taller than her. "You don't want him the way you want me, baby. That's what pisses you off."

She pushes against my chest, yet I don't move a muscle nor do I invade her personal space.

"You can judge me all you want for staying with Keano, Henry. But we both play the same game. I'm just your friend, remember? You've made that abundantly clear. And I've never once thrown my relationship with him in your face while you've been screwing around with bartender girl and Tara."

"*You* keep coming to *me*, remember that," I point out with a growl. "You came to this club with him. You fucking came up here with him."

"I didn't come in with him," she returns, and my hands fall away from the wall as she shoves against me, quickly stepping around me this time. The saddest expression flits across her face as she walks backward, away from me. "But since you've banned him because of me and you're busy with Tara, I'll leave you to it."

I let out a grunt, not knowing how to respond, which is a rare occurrence for me. But when Tara returns with my beer, I realize that I need to handle her first, so I let Mary go, gritting my teeth so hard my jaw hurts.

I have to organize my thoughts. Thoughts that keep being disrupted the second Mary's in my proximity.

Violently, I grip my hair but drop my hands when Tara jerks her chin toward Mary as she leaves. "So who is she? Another one of the women you've been with in an attempt to forget me?"

My fist clenches, and Tara sees the movement. "Or isn't she?" When I don't answer, she continues, "Well, either way, it won't work. Because no one knows you like I do, Henry Pierce. You used to look at me the way you've been looking at her." She shifts closer. "She doesn't know who I am, does she? I think Mary would be disappointed to see that you glare at the love of your life the way you're looking at me right now."

I snarl in agitation. Wanting her to believe Mary's just one in the string of women I've used to get over her, I lie, "You think I fucking care what anyone thinks, including you?"

Tara's the reason I don't want intimacy anymore; it weakens a person.

She sneers, "Oh, have you finally gotten over me? After fucking half the population of the Loop?"

"You made me this way. You fucked everyone when we were together, so I learned from you." Hateful memories invade my mind.

“Get over that. I also taught you a lot of things,” Tara retorts. “You wouldn’t have half the knowledge you have today if you’d never met me.”

Regrettably, that’s true. I fell in love with Tara when I was a naïve seventeen-year-old, living in foster care and without a future, and I was captivated by her maturity since she’s twelve years older than I am. She was also the first small-time black hat hacker I’d ever met, and in order to make me one too, she secretly enrolled me in night classes – my foster parents paid little attention to what I did or whom I did it with – while also teaching me everything she knew about computers. Apparently, Tara saw something in me that told her I’d be a better hacker than she was, and she’s always been motivated by personal gain.

We dated on the sly until I turned eighteen and was released from the system. Then we lived together while she educated me about sex and the ease of hacking, after which, we stole passwords, exploited bank accounts, and forged debit cards, amassing substantial amounts of cash.

Unfortunately, within a year, I caught her cheating in our own bed. And despite our volatile relationship, I stayed since she already had me in her clutches. Besides, I had nowhere else to go. However, she kept cheating, and when I found out months later, we had an ugly fight and I left her. I knew that without me, she couldn’t continue with the same illegal activities. And neither did I. I focused on a new plan after moving to the West Loop: initiating into the Syndicate.

Once in a while, I’ve seen her around town and stayed as far away as possible. But when she discovered I work at Club 7, she suddenly showed up at the beach on Sunday, and while I haven’t seen her in years, we still have unfinished business. Of course, she doesn’t know the owner of Club 7 is the boss of the Syndicate, because if she did, I’d never get rid of her.

“Why the fuck are you even here, Tara? I told you the last time I saw you that I don’t want anything to do with you unless you’re willing to give me the one thing I want.”

“Maybe I’m ready to concede, Henry Pierce.” Her voice becomes sultry, just like it used to in the past when she wanted to seduce me.

And it fucking grates on my nerves how she consistently uses my full name. I hate the way she reminds me of the inexperienced boy I was all those years ago – before I started to learn from the Syndicate men how to read and manipulate people.

Back then, I was a boy blinded by love, by a beautiful face that hid a dark soul, although my soul might be just as dark as hers is these days. I'm a fully pledged mafia member, and my way of thinking is altering. For now, though, I need to keep her away from Club 7. It won't go over well with the organization if they uncover the fact that I lied and have unbroken ties to regular civilians.

"I miss you. I miss working with you. I have a proposition, but we can't discuss it here," she utters, piquing my interest. Her features soften, reminding me more of the woman I fell in love with so many years ago. When I felt things I've long since suppressed.

Goddammit, I don't need this on top of already being infuriated about Mary.

I must regain some control over my emotions to avoid allowing Tara to interfere in my relationship with the Syndicate. She could become a liability and has no fucking clue how much power I yield. How, if pushed, I could get rid of her at the drop of a hat.

"Tomorrow. I'll come to you. Noon," I suggest, and she smiles slowly before nodding and swaggering away as men gawk at her behind.

At that moment, a bulky guard comes up to me and reports, "Henry, you're needed in Adriano's office. It's urgent."

"On my way. Tell the dealer I won't be back to play," I instruct, brushing past him, down the hallway and toward the corner office.

After I knock twice, the door is unlocked by our counselor, Carmine, and I enter to find all of the Syndicate's high ranking men waiting for me. Adriano, his underboss, Luca, and his head *Capo*, Logan, are standing behind his desk.

As Carmine closes the door, I ask, "What's going on?"

Uneasiness fills me. *Did they see Mary and me?*

"A silent alarm went off in the system, and they told me to call you," Adriano explains, leading the way into the adjacent security room.

Surreptitiously, I inhale a calming breath.

"Henry, someone's fucking with us," a soldier says, seated in front of the panel of a fifty-two inch display with a computer screen and footage of all the cameras in the club, as he slides his chair back from the desk and vacates it.

I sink down onto the chair and begin typing away on the keyboard, opening a new screen to log in to the backend of the system and finding an

unknown source in one of the servers. Trying out different programming codes, I attempt to decipher where it's located.

"What's happened, Henry?" Adriano stands to my right side.

"A DDoS attack," I explain, fixated on the screen while clicking various settings to change them.

"In plain English," he throws back blandly, and I grin.

"There's a virus attacking your server." My fingers halt for a split second when I notice that settings are being reprogrammed at that very moment. And not by me! There's someone else in this system besides me.

What the fuck?

"We need to go offline." I click *enter* to confirm to shut down one server.

"But what will happen?" Adriano inquires.

"Nothing. There's a backup server. But if I don't shut down the other one, it's going to cost you a shitload of money." It works successfully, so I clarify, "I bet this is why your numbers aren't adding up."

After I take care of the server, I change all the passwords, effectively kicking the other hacker out. Everyone else just sees rows of data, except Logan. He must've also seen that someone other than me was programming.

I wheel around in the chair and catch Logan's frown. He's a CIA agent who defected to the Syndicate, and he and I built this system with software he stole from them. I tested and tweaked the software, and we implemented it together.

"We're clear," I announce.

Adriano and Luca each raise a brow, prompting me to explain further.

So I add, "Someone was hacking into your system."

"Can you find out who it was? Trace it?" Luca observes the screen.

"I'm trying that already, but my guess is that it won't be easy. I changed all the passwords and some settings to enforce the firewall."

"How's this possible?" Adriano asks.

"This is all digital, Adriano. Nothing's one hundred percent secure. But if someone is interested in Club 7's system, it's most likely linked to the Syndicate."

And Tara suddenly showing up while there's a hacker trying to access Club 7's system can't be coincidental. Although Tara isn't nearly computer-savvy enough to decode my software, and on top of that, she was with me

just now. Something else is at play here, but I can't rule out that Tara might be involved.

"By the way," Carmine says, and my attention switches to him leaning against the doorframe, "a soldier informed me earlier that he discovered a bar that's rumored to be selling our heroin, but it's not on our list of distributors."

"Well, this is becoming more interesting by the second," Adriano grumbles and exchanges a glance with Luca.

Carmine continues, "It's only a rumor, so I ordered him to investigate the place and report back to Logan or me as soon as possible."

"Fine. Well, until we have an update, everything's under control. Right, Henry?" Adriano concludes, wanting me to confirm.

Nodding, I swivel back around and check the screen once more. "Yes."

Then I take off my glasses, since I only need them for reading, and toss them onto the desk. As I pinch the bridge of my nose, my brain is flooded with images of Mary with Keano until I hear Logan asking Carmine, "Which bar is it?"

"Cocktails & Heels," he replies, and I leap up.

All gazes land on me when I grind out, "Jesus Christ, that's where Keano took Mary."

"When?" Adriano demands at the same time that Carmine fumes, "I don't like that guy."

"Just now," I tell Adriano.

Sprinting out of the office with Adriano and Carmine on my trail, I hear Adriano say, "I guess we're all going..."

"Yes," everyone answers his rhetorical question, and he grunts but lets it go.

Adriano rides with Luca and Carmine as Logan jumps into my passenger seat.

When your only role models in life are the most powerful members of the mafia, it changes you to your very core. They twist fate into their favor and live like gods among ignorant civilians. And the power seems to be seeping into my psyche as well, because after I fire up the engine and hit the gas, I have only one goal in mind as I hightail it to Cocktails & Heels.

CHAPTER 7

Mary

I thought I was prepared to see Henry at Club 7 until I saw his current flavor of the month. The ridiculously beautiful Tara.

And now, sitting in a booth in this loud bar, I feel more dejected than ever. Keano's talking to his friend, who's settled across from us, while I wonder what the hell I'm doing here. I need to end this relationship and stop allowing Keano to convince me otherwise.

Then, to my amazement, a skinny bartender gives a plastic bag of white powder to Keano's friend and he empties it and arranges the contents on the surface of the table, right out in the open.

Keano snorts a line before he hands me a rolled up dollar bill. "Maybe this will help you unwind."

"What is it?" I ask. I've never seen him use drugs.

"Heroin," he answers curtly – we've been at odds ever since leaving Club 7, where I so clearly used him to make Henry jealous.

Affected by everything that's been going on tonight, I take it and lean forward to sniff up one line. Grimacing, I swipe my nose when it burns, and as the drug is carried to my brain, I lounge back against the booth cushion, recalling Henry with Tara. *Urgh!*

I shake my head, and after a few seconds, I begin to feel relaxed. Euphoric. And for the first time in days, I succeed in forgetting my unrequited attraction to Henry, who's not even my friend anymore. Somehow, all we do is make each other angry.

When the other guy leaves the booth, Keano reproaches me, "Are you going to be cranky all night, Mary?"

I'm too relaxed to let him provoke me. "If you don't like my company, you can leave."

“Maybe I’ll do that!” He slides out and marches away, leaving me gaping at his retreating back.

Meanwhile, my head is clearing entirely of my scattered thoughts. It’s a weird sensation that I’m thoroughly enjoying until I glimpse toward the entrance of the club and see Henry and Logan hurrying through the throng. Sitting up in panic, I scoot to the end of the booth and duck down on my hands and knees as they peruse the crowd.

“Gross,” I mutter, touching the sticky tiled floor.

Shit! Are my brothers here too? If they find out I’ve used heroin, they’re going to kill me. Even if I tell them it’s the first time.

As I crawl around, I try to focus through my drug infused haze, skirting around people and slinking forward until a pair of polished black shoes block my path. I go left, but the feet move too, and then I go right, but they mirror my action yet again.

With infinite slowness, I look up over pressed slacks and into the penetrating silver-grey eyes of Henry. He’s still wearing his dashing poker attire, untied bow tie hanging around his neck and exposing his powerful throat. In addition, his hair that was sleeked back earlier is now tousled as if he’s been dragging his hands through it.

Next to Henry is Logan, watching me with amusement.

“Mary.” Henry tilts his head as I surge upward, stumbling, so he grips my arm to steady me.

“Hey, guys.” I try to sound cheerful but suspect it comes out a little slurred when a crease forms in his forehead. Recalling the night and how he seems to have forgotten all about me, I attempt to loosen his hold by jerking my arm, to no avail. “What are you doing here?” I snort when my nose tickles.

“Are you alone?” His tone sounds just as irritated as it did when we argued over an hour ago.

“You’ll be happy to know that Keano left after we had a fight.”

He lifts one brow, then the other, as though this fact surprises and then angers him. “Why the fuck would I be happy about that?”

“Because you’ve made the way you feel about Keano perfectly clear, not that it matters since you had your own date to demand your attention,” I grumble, and Logan smirks, evaluating us in an odd manner.

“She wasn’t my *date*.”

“But she’s a woman you’ve slept with, isn’t she?” I say softly.

He glances away – that’s an affirmative answer. Sighing, Henry let’s go of my arm, but I’m weak in the knees and deliciously lethargic, so I start to topple over.

Henry catches me effortlessly and holds me flush against him, cupping my cheek. “Are you drunk?”

“Noo...” I reply as Logan presses two fingers against my neck, checking my pulse.

Then he nicks the tip of my nose and inspects his finger, sending a knowing glance to Henry.

Henry’s jaw is clenched as he combs my curls from my face, and I lean my entire weight against him, loving how his strong frame anchors me.

“Mary,” he says in that inflexible tone I’ve come to recognize. “Did you do cocaine or heroin?”

There’s no need for denial. “Heroin.”

“When Keano left?” Henry probes, stroking the side of my face soothingly.

“No. With Keano. But we had a disagreement, so he bailed.”

“Son of a bitch!” both men snarl.

“Do you know where he got it?” Logan asks, and I rest my head against Henry’s toned chest.

“Yes. One of the bartenders here sells it.”

“Which one, Mary?” Henry nudges my chin up with his thumb.

I turn around and he tucks me into his side while I scour the room, catching sight of the bartender at my booth in the corner of the bar. I point straight ahead. “Him.”

As Henry navigates us around the people and objects in our path, I sense his tightly coiled body; he’s vibrating with anger.

Unexpectedly, my stomach starts churning, and just as we reach the booth, I push my nose against Henry’s chest and feel his palm caressing my neck as he asks, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m nauseous.”

“Breathe slowly. In and out,” he instructs, skimming his hand over my curls, and as it subsides, I wind one arm around his middle.

My touch on his back is innocent, so no one would guess that all my attention is focused on my fingertips, which feel like electricity is flowing into them. Especially after missing him for a whole week and the horrible way we treated each other at the club earlier.

When the bartender glances up, Henry's pressed against me and takes out his gun from his ankle holster while Logan's standing behind us to block us from the view of other customers.

Without releasing me, Henry digs the barrel of his weapon into the guy's temple, his hands flying up in surrender as Henry threatens in a sinister tone, "Sell her drugs one more time, motherfucker, and I will end you with one bullet through your head. Do you understand me?"

"Y-yes. B-but I didn't sell it to her; I sold it to the men." Panic flashes in his eyes.

"Where did you get it?"

"T-the owner orders us to distribute it," he stammers.

Logan warns Henry, "Stash the gun. People are watching."

"Where's the owner?" Henry finishes, tucking the weapon into the back waistband of his slacks and pulling out his shirt to hide it.

"Down the hall. His office is at the end."

Without another word, Henry releases me from his embrace and I immediately miss his warmth. He tangles our fingers and tugs me along, down a poorly lit hall to the office, smashing open the door with his fist and making it bang against the brown painted wall.

Regrettably, we're outnumbered. Three men are beating up another one who's sprawled on the floor in front of a scratched up wooden desk that has a few plastic bags of drugs stacked on it.

"What the fuck!" yells the medium built guy with a nasty scar beneath his eye. He's hunched over the man on the floor, letting go of his collar so that he collapses, unconscious, and the other two guys flank him like dogs. I guess he's the owner.

As Logan shuts the door, Scarface screams, "Who the fuck are you?" And he takes out a pistol from a holster at his waist, leveling it at Henry, who shields me calmly, showing no fear.

I study Henry's profile as he aims his glare at the man. He stands tall and dominant, like a pillar from ancient Rome, personifying supremacy and confidence. "I'm the Chicago Syndicate."

With that statement, the whole mood changes. The owner's eyes widen so that the whites are entirely visible. The power has shifted; they're all immediately wary of Henry.

Then the door opens and Adriano, Carmine, and Luca step inside before Luca coolly closes it again. *Holy shit!* All the high ranking men are here,

and the three opposite them are motionless with Scarface still directing his gun at us. And although we're in the middle of a tense situation, I can't help but notice the vast difference between my five family members, all in tailored suits with controlled, furious expressions, and the three thugs in jeans and t-shirts.

Adriano scans me from head to toe, and Henry nods at him as Logan whispers into his ear, most likely to update him. Logan leaves out the fact that I'm high, I assume, since Adriano doesn't scowl at me.

"We seem to have a problem, gentlemen," Adriano begins, stopping in front of the end of the barrel that's pointed at his chin since he's much taller.

Struggling to concentrate, I stand up straight to hide my buzz from Adriano and Carmine, who comes to a halt next to Adriano and reaches inside his grey suit jacket to fish out his gun while Henry pushes me farther behind him as I clasp his hand.

"Lower your gun. Now," Carmine commands, and after a hesitation, Scarface stands down.

"Why is your fucking bartender selling our heroin?" Henry demands, and I see Adriano grinning at him with pride.

No one answers, so Adriano strolls around the desk, touching an opened package and letting some heroin flow through his fingers. "I don't remember giving you permission to sell my drugs. Did we, Logan?"

Logan strolls alongside the desk, the tip of his weapon scraping across it, causing powder to flutter to the floor. "I don't think we did."

When one man moves, Henry and Luca cock their weapons as well, and after that, chaos erupts. The guy on Scarface's left jumps aside as Scarface lifts his arm again, but Carmine blasts his shoulder, making him swing backward against the edge of the desk and sag to the floor with a cry.

Then Henry shoots the second guy in the heart twice, and he also collapses.

In the meantime, Logan grasps the throat of the third man, who's tried to sneak out the door, slamming him against the wall with a thunderous growl, pushing his gun against his chest and chiding, "No, no. You're not going anywhere."

Adriano rounds the desk and looks down his nose at Scarface, who's clutching his injured shoulder. "You chose to make this difficult." Then he kicks his stomach with a furious groan. "You *will* tell me who sold you my

drugs.” Adriano unbuttons his suit jacket and flings it onto the desk. “I guess this is going to be a long night.”

However, when he stoops low and grabs a knife from his ankle sheath, flashing it before Scarface, Luca interrupts, prompting, “Adriano.” And then he nods in my direction.

Adriano looks at us and orders, “Henry, take Mary home.”

Instantly, Henry guides me toward the door, stashing his gun in his waistband when Luca pulls down the handle and inches it open for us to cross the threshold.

As the door shuts behind us, I hear Adriano say, “By the way, that’s my little sister, and her life is worth more than all of yours combined.” The last thing I hear is a smothered cry.

Despite this violent display, I’m distracted by Henry winding his arm around me and tucking me into his side. Utterly comfortable and high, I’m not even registering what just happened. Instead, I’m focused on being so close to Henry after arguing with him earlier.

“Where are we going?” I ask, having no desire to return home whatsoever.

This time, his answer is exactly what I hoped for. “Somewhere we can be alone.”

That smoldering look is back in his eyes, beneath the layer of anger and concern. The sentiment touches me as he guides me out without releasing me once, as if he’s afraid someone will hurt me if he let’s go.

And my heart is no match for this Henry, a possessive and protective Henry.

CHAPTER 8

Henry

I grasp Mary's hand as my mind spirals out of control, not sure whether I want to kiss her or strangle her. I'm furious at Keano for giving her the drug and at her for snorting it. Furthermore, I'm taking a huge risk for Mary; I even covered for her. Logan and I didn't tell her brothers she used heroin. Only that the bartender tried to sell it to her.

Additionally, it pisses me the fuck off that she was even in that tainted place. Alone. While I've always believed she's a little naïve sometimes, her calm reaction to what occurred in the office amazes me. Now I realize she isn't naïve at all. Her sweetness is just inherent to the vitality that surrounds her all the time. In reality, she's clever enough to assess a situation and knows when to keep quiet and cooperate. It's a damn sexy trait. Combine that with the way I've been feeling ever since I saw her with Keano again at Club 7, and I'm no longer capable of restraining these emotions.

Once we reach my silver sedan and are on our way, I maneuver it through the darkened streets of the Loop, toward Lincoln Park, where I park the car and storm across a stretch of trimmed grass until I reach a small, round pond.

Mary stops next to me as I glare at the light rippling over the surface of the water, fuming yet trying to contain my rage. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"What?" she responds, annoyed. "I'm high, Henry. Don't you dare treat me like a little sister right now."

I turn sideways and grab her shoulders, barking, "Jesus Christ, Mary! This was completely irresponsible. Do you even get that?"

The wind rustles through her curls while she tries to wrench free. "I'll admit it wasn't my best choice, but why were you even there?"

“Because Carmine discovered that the Syndicate’s heroin was being sold at Cocktails & Heels.” I release her harshly as she studies me in a manner that seems too intimate, like she can see into my goddamn soul. And I’m bewildered as to why I’m not doing what I usually do and running in the opposite fucking direction, because the thought of Mary in trouble weakens me. I’m used to working with data and avoiding personal attachments; however, since joining this Syndicate, I’m not sure I want to live like that anymore.

I watch her scowling face, how the moonlight makes her skin glow. She obviously *is* high, because she’s standing tall, even though she just witnessed something most women would cower under. Any other woman would probably want my comfort, yet not Mary. She’s different, resilient, and knows her place in this mafia life. And deep down, I always knew it.

“That still doesn’t answer why *you* were there. Weren’t you with Tara?” she spits, poking her finger into my chest. “You don’t get to play hero while you constantly push me away. This has nothing to do with me being high —”

I grip her hand forcefully and pull her close. “It *is* about how fucking stupid I find it that you got high. With him.”

“Fine. Maybe it’s a little about that. But it’s mostly about how you can’t deal with your damn feelings! Because you’re a hacker and *prefer systems to people.*”

Instantly, I let her go as if she’s burned me, but her words keep tumbling out.

“You dismissed me on Sunday like I was one of your one-night stands. Did you ever think about how that made me feel? No! Because you’ve been MIA for days to be with *her*. Who is she?!”

“Someone from my past,” I answer too quickly, needing this subject to go away.

She assesses me while puffing out her aggravation. “Past? Or present?” I cock my head, and she sighs.

“Are you currently dating her?” Her tone becomes loud again.

“No,” I retort with a snarl, “Not the way you date *him*. Christ! What the fuck do you expect from me, Mary?”

“I expect you to treat me like a real friend. To not disappear on me and...” Hesitantly, she rubs a hand over her forehead. “...tell me, why are you so protective?”

“No. First”—I crowd her again, so she looks up into my eyes—“cut the bullshit and tell me what you expect from me? *You* are dating someone; *I* am not.”

“So you’re not dating Tara? She was just your fuck of the week? I hate seeing you with her.” She spins around, turning her back to me. “I hate her.”

“*You* hate *her*?” The anger, along with the jealousy that’s eating me up inside, which I’ve never encountered with another woman – not even Tara – rears its ugly head again. “How do you think it’s been for *me* to see *you* with fucking Keano? For weeks!” I grip her arm, pivoting her back around as her hair cascades over one shoulder. “Why are you still with him, Mary?”

Her nostrils flare. “You only want me as a friend. So why do you care if I’m with him?”

I disregard her comment. “So you just stay with him, even though he gives you drugs. Even though we both know you don’t want to be with him. That’s really fucking smart.” I’ve lost the reins on all my mixed emotions.

Her lips thin and she jerks free. “It’s my mistake for not ending it with him and for using the heroin, and I know that. But you don’t get to lecture me.” She tries to provoke me. “You don’t get to be jealous while I have to watch the parade of conquests you bring to the club.”

I finally snap because she’s driving me absolutely crazy. I haven’t been with a woman for weeks, while she’s been with him. “Maybe I need to have other women to deal with the fact that you go home with him every fucking night.” I vehemently grab her face with both hands, dragging her closer to me again, and grind out, “To drown you from my mind while you fuck him! This is the last goddamn time I’m asking, Mary. Why are you still with him?”

Mary’s palms rest on my chest as she meets my eyes. “I’m not. Not in the way you think. I haven’t slept with him except that one time.”

I rear back without releasing her face. “What?”

“I don’t have sex with Keano. I don’t even kiss him. We don’t touch each other. He isn’t really my boyfriend, not to me anyway. I haven’t spoken to him since Sunday either.”

My hands fall from her face in astonishment. “How?”

“Our relationship has been weird ever since we got back together; we barely see each other. And I’m confused...because of you,” she explains in a softer tone, her temper more in check.

I rub my hand over my mouth and decide to be honest as well, or else I'll go mad with whatever this woman does to me. "I might have confused you because I didn't want to ruin our friendship, Mary."

"But we are more than friends, aren't we?" she questions with an expectant expression in her captivating, doll-like facial features.

Nodding, I stroke from the high arcs of her cheeks down to the corners of her full, rosy lips with my thumbs. Simultaneously, we expel a deep breath.

My senses are accosted by her signature perfume, which is also driving me wild, and I ask before I forget, "What perfume do you use?"

"It's not perfume. It's argan oil. It has a nice scent, but I can't believe you can smell it. It's magic potion for the skin and hair."

"I see." I wrap a satiny curl around my finger while I imagine pouring this argan oil all over her body.

Then I return to reality when Mary shifts forward, looking up as she toys with the end of my untied bow tie. She goes up on her tiptoes, and I mesh my fingers into her hair, the sexual tension that persistently surrounds us growing stronger.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you," she mumbles as the warmth of her body presses into mine. "And for using the heroin."

"Don't ever fucking use it again," I order, snaking my arms around her and hugging her tightly.

"I won't. I promise." She gazes up at me, and I'm softened by her show of remorse.

"How are you doing?"

"Okay. I'm less sluggish, so I think I'm less high," she answers before confessing in the sweetest tone as she skims the tip of her nose over mine, "I've missed you. So much."

Instead of running away from the intimacy she's creating, I need to mark her with my kiss before I lose it. Yet not like this, not until she's all fucking mine. So I hold still, gripping her hair and pulling her head back as my lips hover an inch above hers. "I won't kiss you. You won't cheat with me, Mary. End it with him. He's an asshole anyway for deserting you."

"I've been trying to break up with him for weeks, but he always manages to convince me otherwise. I don't know why, because he doesn't seem to be any more invested in this relationship than I am."

That's odd. "I can go with you," I offer in all seriousness.

When she laughs, it cuts through the solemnity. “No, that would be a little mean. I can’t dump him with the guy who beat him up standing right there.”

“You’re too goddamn nice to him. He doesn’t deserve you,” I tell her while watching the heat in her expressive eyes. “And I didn’t beat him up. I only punched him once. But end it with him so that he fucking understands it or *I* will.”

She grins, and I’m not sure which one of us initiates it, but before I know it, we’ve sunk to the ground and she’s astride me. My hand roams down her spine as her center presses against my rapidly stiffening dick, and my resolve to hold off, which I expressed only minutes ago, vanishes as I massage her ass with both hands.

“Fuck waiting,” I rasp against her lips, not kissing her. “I want you now – one way or another.”

I’m mad. I’m certifiably insane, but I don’t fucking care. My desire for Mary is beyond all reason, and I will take this moment and this woman as far as she’ll let me.

When she arches her body and starts to move, I nip her throat as our suppressed longing sets off and we’re both unable to end it. Nevertheless, we still don’t kiss, denying ourselves at least that much.

Mary moans when I suck her neck, bunching her dress up as I run my hands up her thighs, which are locked around my hips. She shivers as my fingertips continue to glide over her skin, and I become hard as steel when I expose her sexy red thong.

Molding her behind, I possessively growl into her neck, “You have the sweetest ass.”

Her eyes glaze over with lust, and when she slithers her nails down my chest, I actually fucking tremble, aching to be inside her. Impatiently, I unfasten my pants while Mary yanks my dress shirt up and my boxers down slightly, stopping for a split second when she notices my straining erection.

Grinning, I nip the corner of her mouth and order, “Turn around, Mary.”

Grasping her sides, I rotate her effortlessly and situate her to face away from me, giving me a perfect view of that ass that’s been featured in the majority of my fantasies lately.

I hook one finger in her thong, nudging it aside to drag the tip of my cock over her pussy. Then I place both my palms on her round cheeks,

roughly squeezing the soft flesh. We both gasp when our skin makes contact, her core rubbing all over the length of my cock.

As I dig my fingers into her behind and thrust my dick between her cheeks, Mary groans and throws her head back while I watch her perfect body moving against mine. “Jesus Christ, Mary. You better get ready because I *will* be fucking your pussy. Soon.”

“Oh...Henry.” Whimpers come from deep in Mary’s throat as she gyrates against my dick, tangling her fingers into her own hair and riding me without restraint.

It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. The way her back curves and her copper brown curls flow down it in captivating waves, the way she breathes those husky little sighs.

I jack my hips up, groaning because of how goddamn good it feels and grabbing hold of her before slapping her ass twice, hard. My cock is throbbing and I’m about to blow, pressing it against her slit and ass, and it takes enormous willpower not to drive into her.

Mary moans unashamedly loudly, so I quickly survey the area to ensure we’re still alone, although I’m fucking loving the way she doesn’t hold back at all. As we move together with urgency, I know there’s a good chance my grip will bruise her, but we’ve both lost control, needing to express our pent-up hunger for each other.

“Come for me, baby,” I order, smacking her luscious behind again and guiding her to ride me harder until I feel her wetness coating my entire cock as she locks her legs on either side of my thighs and comes.

I follow right behind her, my balls tightening. Thrusting up three times, I push her ass cheeks together and explode in violent spurts all over them. My whole body reaches a zenith, and it’s the most incredible sensation I’ve ever felt, especially after waiting for so long.

“Fuck, Mary!” I rumble, breathless, as she looks at me over her shoulder with a satisfied afterglow. I collapse backward to catch my breath for a few seconds before I yank out my handkerchief and swipe her clean, slapping her ass one more time because I can’t help myself.

“Ow,” she protests, yet I hear the smile in her voice.

Throwing the handkerchief aside, I sit up and guide her to recline against me. Lazily, she puts all her weight on me while I stroke the insides of her thighs. We’re both still half naked, but neither one of us gives a shit at the moment. I just need her to stay where she is – I need to feel her. We

don't speak, and I now notice that the temperature's dropped. Depleted and satisfied, I hold her to try to keep her from getting cold so that we don't have to move, but unluckily, reality interferes when an ambulance siren in the distance breaks the spell.

Suddenly, I see that Mary's eyes are closed, so I cup her chin and she opens them. She's hesitant to speak, but there really isn't much we can say until she ends it with that motherfucker, Keano, and I guess she understands that as well since she mumbles, "I should go."

"You should," I agree, and her face falls, though I'm not sure why. "My offer to go with you still stands."

"No. I need to do it alone." I pull her dress down as she gets up and asks, while glancing away, "Um, can I see you later?"

I button up my slacks and rise too. "Yes. But first, end it with him. Tonight."

Mary runs her hands through her hair to make herself presentable again. "If you can drop me off at home, I'll call him or meet with him tonight."

I'd rather she doesn't meet him alone, but she seems adamant to do this by herself. And I'm glad she's going home since she's still high.

After Mary dumps him, I'll deal with Keano with the assistance of Adriano and Carmine. He'll pay for giving her that heroin.

"Okay, let's go."

Within twenty minutes, I'm parking my sedan in front of the high-rise where Mary lives. My burner phone chimes – all Syndicate members have several burner phones, which we switch up and destroy often to avoid leaving any evidence about our drug business – and I read a message from my boss.

Adriano: Where's Mary? I called her, but she didn't answer. And I need to talk to you. Come to Club 7.

"Adriano called you," I inform her.

"Yeah, I saw. Please tell him I'm sleeping and that I'm fine. I'll talk to him tomorrow," she says, so I text him a response.

Henry: She's asleep already and doing fine. Send a soldier to stand guard at the entrance of her apartment.

Adriano: A guard is on the way.

Henry: As soon as he gets here, I'll come to the club.

I place my hand on the handle to step out, but Mary comments, "You don't have to go up with me. I'm okay."

I frown yet let her go because this night has been a whirlwind of emotions and activity.

Before closing the door, she hesitantly inquires, "I'll call you later, okay? After I've talked to Keano?"

"Yes. No matter the time, call me, Mary," I command in a firm tone, and she nods before walking away.

I wait until she's inside the building and disappears into the elevator. Then I head to Club 7, understanding full well that we've crossed a line. Everything that's happened tonight has only tripled my hunger for Mary, and now I fucking ache to be inside her.

All the men are waiting for me when I enter Adriano's office. He's seated behind his desk with Luca and Carmine on either side of him and Logan in the chair across from them.

Sinking down next to Logan, I tilt my head in question. "What happened at Cocktails & Heels after I left?"

Adriano gets right to the point because it's already nearing midnight, "We ended them. Logan erased the security tapes, and I had a few soldiers confiscate the heroin and ordered them to investigate which soldier on this team has been selling to Cocktails & Heels without my permission. When we find out who it is, he'll be handled accordingly. All of us went this time because Mary was there, but of course, we won't go on such an unplanned mission ever again. Though I'm quite pleased with how you're evolving. You understand when violence is needed to settle scores."

I realize I've plunged into the darkness of a place where brutality rules. Where enforcing power the old-fashioned way ensures the regime stays put.

I look at Logan, not understanding where Adriano's going with this.

"There's another reason why Luca and I made you fifth in rank, which is a covetous position. All four of us believe you can take this over one day. Not in the near future, but this team won't change any more, and after tonight, you've shown us that you're one of us now."

"Why are you telling me this?" I say.

“I want you to work more closely with Luca and me. We trust you and will allow you insight into all Syndicate business. We’ll teach you everything we know and show you how to manage the men. And one day, you can take over Club 7. I’m not planning to be boss forever.”

“What about Luca, Logan, or Carmine?”

“They don’t want to be boss. Luca has a wife outside this mafia who’ll never be completely comfortable with this life. Logan can’t because he’s still also with the CIA. And Carmine”—he sends him an amused glare—“is too busy with his ladies.”

Carmine smirks, casually leaning one shoulder against the windowsill. “I prefer female company over the company of you and the soldiers.”

Warily, I probe. “Why me? Why not one of the captains?”

“The captains aren’t intelligent or tech savvy enough,” Adriano explains. “They’re perfect to execute the street work but not what we do on this level. Furthermore, I think the Syndicate will need a hacker to be in command in this ever-growing digital world. I rely on you a great deal.”

I did notice they kept me apprised of a lot of business but never anticipated this opportunity would present itself. He’s offering me a future I could’ve only dreamed about. One full of lifelong wealth and power yet also more murder and mayhem. Regardless, the wealth and power trump anything else, especially after living with an obstacle I’ve been unable to dispose of for years: Tara. But this also means she’s become an even bigger goddamn liability to me. Adriano will kick me out of this organization, without a doubt, if they ever discover I lied in the beginning. No. Correction – he will *kill* me. And I need to handle Mary very carefully because of my issue with Tara and my expanding relationship with Adriano.

Fuck! Couldn’t he have said this before I crossed the line with Mary? The contours of her body are now imprinted in my brain and we’re no longer just friends.

Despite the problems this could bring, I still want to reap the benefits of establishing a prosperous relationship with the boss. “Then I accept. But what will change for me?”

Adriano leans forward with both elbows on the desk. “You’ll work directly with us more often from now on and not as much with the lesser ranks. Just like Luca and me, you’ll be more behind the scenes on the top-level issues. We’ll start with figuring out who planted that virus.”

I want to handle that assignment alone so I can ensure that if Tara's involved, no one finds out. "I can dig around among the black hat hackers. Maybe one of them has heard or noticed something. This is definitely not some ordinary tech guy. Only a black hat could get past my firewall."

Adriano consents, "Fine. It's your main assignment to catch the hacker. Use any resource necessary."

He gave me carte blanche. Now I don't need permission to kill anyone important. This bodes well and having it as my primary task means that I won't have to lie about anything and can deal with this hacker all by myself. The hacker who could be Tara.

"You need to remember your rank and exercise your power commensurate to it. I heard from Logan that you're quite good with that already. We'll train you to control your anger in challenging situations so that you always keep the upper hand. I'll increase your pay from four thousand to ten thousand a month. Also, apart from your regular salary, most payments, like a bonus for a mission, will be deposited into an offshore account. Carmine will finalize the financial details with you."

I look up and he seems perfectly fine with spewing these numbers. They're buying my loyalty. Logan previously informed me that this organization divides the wealth and once I was completely in, I'd be a rich man. The way they bring it – confident, content men in their designer suits – I want that life as well. When it comes down to it, money does make the world go round. Money makes everything possible.

"I'm looking forward to it."

Adriano grins slowly as he stands. "So am I. Go home and start thinking about new living arrangements because that apartment of yours is a shithole."

I chuckle. "Fine. But I can't just leave it. I'll need to find an apartment where I can easily connect my servers."

"Our secretary, Janey, can arrange anything for you," Luca advises. "She works for all five of us. Whatever you need, contact her."

"Okay."

"Kind of like a PA. Just call her," Carmine adds with a smile and dips his chin, leaving the office first.

"I'll get in touch with her this week," I inform, rising. "I'm going home now. It's been a long fucking night."

“I’m going too.” Logan follows me out, and while we walk down the hall, he says, “You’re a full-on member, getting carte blanche from the boss.”

“Yeah,” I reply absentmindedly. That’s just what I was thinking. Although *someone* is even more of a problem for me now.

Outside, Logan goes in the opposite direction, and I get my phone from my pocket, irritated that it’s been over an hour since I left Mary and I haven’t heard from her, so I call her.

“Hey,” she answers.

“Hey. Have you spoken to Keano yet?”

“Yes. He just left, but I’m really tired. Can we talk tomorrow?”

First, I need to know one thing. “Did you end it?”

“Yes.”

Fucking finally. Even though I’m not liking not being able to see her right away, I need to come up with a definite plan of action regarding Tara and the unknown hacker situation; therefore, I concede, “Okay.” And before I know it, I ask a woman for the first time, “Do you feel all right?”

“Yeah. I’m not high anymore. I’m crawling into bed now.”

“Okay. Night, Mary.”

“Night, Henry,” she utters in a tone that’s different from her usual vital one.

An unsettling shudder surges through me, but it’s late and she said that she was fine, so I blow it off for now and drive home through the dim streets with the scent of her still on me.

Inside my one-bedroom apartment, I go to the long walnut desk that holds two computers and two laptops, powering on one computer to tackle two problems: Tara and whoever planted that virus in Club 7’s system.

First, I check a hacker forum where black hat hackers from all over the world communicate with each other. Via a foreign proxy server – so that I can log in from another country and it’ll be more difficult to trace it back to me in the U.S. – I enter the chat room with my code name, *Spade*, to see if any new black hats have become members. No one has.

Out of nowhere, my entire screen turns black.

“What the fuck?” I mutter.

Then a chat screen opens.

Anonymous: Good evening, Mr. Pierce.

Henry: Who are you?

Anonymous: That's of no importance. What is of importance is that I managed to leave a virus at Club 7.

Meanwhile, I switch on my second computer that runs on a different server.

Anonymous: I know who you are.

Henry: That's very cryptic. So?

Hurriedly, I attempt to locate the IP address of the sender while typing on both keyboards to keep him talking.

Anonymous: Beware and be ready because I'll need you soon.

Henry: I don't obey orders.

Anonymous: You will.

Henry: You know I'll find you. Eventually.

The second computer is localizing the address in Illinois. And then Chicago, narrowing it down to the Loop, the West Loop.

Anonymous: Don't bother. You're not the best hacker in town anymore. I'll contact you soon, Mr. Pierce.

Right before I can pinpoint an exact location, Anonymous logs off, and I have an area of the entire fucking West Loop. I proceed to search for a trace of Anonymous in my computer without any luck. Entirely absorbed, I stay at my desk and change settings in the backend to make it even more impossible for Anonymous to contact me again.

"Fuck!" I grip my hair, messing it up.

Then I roll my chair to the side to face the second computer, pull out my cell phone from my pocket, and since I have her number, I check to see where Tara is at this moment. According to the location settings on her phone – which are switched on – she's currently downtown, and I bet she rents a shitty apartment there.

This doesn't make any sense, although it appears that the timing of these two occurrences – Tara showing up and someone hacking into Club 7's computer system – *could be* coincidental.

However, as long as I'm in the dark about whom I'm up against, I need to protect myself. I can't completely rule out Tara yet, and she still has something to hold over my head until I can decide how to get her out of my life indefinitely. Instead of waiting until our appointment at noon tomorrow,

I decide to pay her a surprise visit in an attempt to keep the upper hand in this fucking situation.

When I arrive at the address, it's a worn-out three-story block building in the cheapest part of downtown. As luck would have it, a resident is exiting the front entrance, so I slip inside right before the doors close, going up to the second floor and knocking on the third door on the right.

It opens a crack and Tara grumbles, "What are you doing here at fucking two a.m. And how did you find me?"

I barge past her into what appears to be a one-bedroom apartment that has a kitchenette in the far corner and is sparsely furnished.

"If you come to the club unannounced, then I'll show up unannounced as well – at times when you least expect it." I face her just as she ties the belt of her white robe. "And don't pretend you didn't want me to find you," I point out, and her eyes round. "You would never leave your location settings on unless you had an ulterior motive. But let's get to the point. What's your offer?"

She fiddles with her belt for a second and then straightens. "I want to hack into Club 7's computer system."

"Why?"

"Because I want to steal a large amount of money and live a normal life. There's a shitload of it flowing around in that club. And if you help me, I'll give you what you've wanted from me for years. And then we can part ways."

"You don't have a computer here?" I state after perusing the room, realizing she's most likely not Anonymous.

"What?" she retorts, puzzled.

"You want to work together and hack into Club 7's system, but you don't even have a computer."

"I'm broke, and you know I'm not a black hat anymore. The new generation of hackers' knowledge has surpassed what I've been privy to these last few years. That's why I need you. You work there and can speed up this process. Because I know you want your files unlocked at City Hall, and I'm the only one who can do it for you. We now need each other."

Fuck! I don't want anything to do with her or her goddamn deal, yet I need to keep my enemies close right now. "If we do this, you have to listen to me because it'll take some investigation on my part," I lie, and in order to buy myself time without her interference, I continue, "Stay away from the club. If I see you there again, all bets are off." No one can learn who she is and possibly connect her with me. But more importantly, I need her to steer clear of Mary.

Tara frowns as she edges closer, but when I fake a grin, she thinks she's got me right where she wants me, doing her dirty work. She stands before me, dusting an imaginary piece of lint off my shoulder to give herself a reason to touch me.

Her gaze is fixed on mine as she whispers, "Fine. But we can also have a little fun while we work together again. Like old times. When we first met..."

She licks her lips as her palm moves up the side of my neck, and I'm bombarded with memories I had long forgotten – when I was infatuated with her. When her mouth almost touches mine, I seize her wrist and forcefully shove her backward before letting her go.

"No mixing business with pleasure. I'll call you in a couple of days after I've dug around." And I step past her to leave.

I need to buy myself time to think of a strategy to get her to unlock my files at City Hall and then get her out of the Loop without anyone finding out how she's linked to me or that she even exists.

"What am I supposed to do in the meantime?" she inquires.

That's a loaded question, but I bite my tongue. "I don't fucking care what you do, Tara. Just wait for my call and don't come near Club 7," I order and walk out, shaking off the uneasy sensation I often get when I'm around Tara. Tonight, I allowed her to come too close.

I consider going to Mary's because there was something in her tone earlier that still bothers me. However, it's been a long night and she's probably already in bed, so instead, I drive home and conk out the second my head hits the pillow.

Unfortunately, I should've listened to my instincts.

CHAPTER 9

Mary

“Yes. No matter the time, call me, Mary,” Henry tells me before I close the door to his metallic silver sedan and enter my apartment building, reveling in how protective he’s been ever since we finally opened up to each other about our feelings at Lincoln Park.

My rendezvous with Henry ignited something inside me I’ve never felt before; however, by this time, my high has gone down significantly, and now the reality of what I did is kicking in. I do feel bad about it, but I believe that being with Henry before I was unattached will always be my favorite mistake. Still, I need to handle Keano before Henry and I take it any further.

Once I’m inside my apartment, I go into my living room, shrieking when I discover a shadow on the couch, and as I switch on my lights in panic, Keano surges up.

“Jesus Christ! What are you doing here?” I blow out a sigh and glance at Strawberry sleeping peacefully in her basket next to the sofa as Keano puffs like a bull. Immediately, I blurt out, “You can’t just show up here unannounced. I’d like my key back. I’ve been trying to talk to you, but I can’t do this anymore. It’s just over between us.” Lifting its strap over my head, I let my purse drop to the floor.

Keano’s chest is heaving as he blasts back with, “Were you with him?”

“Does it matter?”

He scans me from head to toe, noticing the state of my wrinkled dress and my tousled curls.

“I can fucking smell him on you,” he snarls, advancing toward me.

“This isn’t about him. I don’t want to be with *you*. I’m sorry.”

Pure rage blisters across his face. “You fucked him, didn’t you?” Like a predator, he approaches me.

Yet I stand my ground, even though he towers over my small frame. “I think it’s best you leave.”

“No, I think it’s best you understand your role in this situation. You don’t allow me in, but Henry, a guy who’s the biggest manwhore in the Loop, is who you leave me for?” And he hisses, “You’re such a slut.” Before I realize what’s happening, he raises his hand and slaps my cheek with the force of his fury.

At first, I’m frozen in shock as my hand flies to my cheek to soothe the sting. Then I scream at him, “I’ve been trying to make it clear to you for weeks that I wanted to break up. And you didn’t truly make an effort either. If you ever come near me again, I’ll shoot you! And trust me, you have no idea what you’ve just done. Get the fuck out of my apartment!”

He doesn’t seem to regret his action as he glowers at me, shouldering past me into the entryway.

Pivoting around, I follow close behind him, demanding, “And give me my key.”

He flings the keychain onto the floor and yanks open the door, disappearing down the hallway. I slam it shut and turn the lock, spinning around and leaning against the door as Strawberry runs up to me. Bending low, I pick her up and loosen my jaw while I grab my purse, stunned that Keano had the audacity to hit me. The guilt I felt for being with Henry reduces to next to nothing.

Heading to my bedroom, I set Strawberry down on the floor and catch my reflection in the full-length mirror hanging on the wall just as my phone alerts me of a call. A reddish bruise is already forming on my cheekbone.

“Shit!” I mutter as I hurry to my bed and zip open my purse to get my cell, seeing *Henry* flash across the screen.

He’s going to want to meet up, and I really want to see him too, but he would make this into an even bigger issue than it is or, worse, inform my brothers, and I definitely don’t want them to get involved. If any of the Syndicate men find out, they’ll probably murder Keano, and I’m not angry enough to wish that upon anyone. Besides, I handled him myself. Although I hate not being able to be with Henry, because I know damn well he can be easily distracted by other women, I need to avoid him right now.

“Hey,” I answer, attempting to sound uplifting but failing miserably.

“Hey. Have you spoken to Keano yet?”

“Yes. He just left, but I’m really tired. Can we talk tomorrow?”

He probes, “Did you end it?”

“Yes.”

He’s silent, as if he senses I’m not being honest yet eventually responds, “Okay.” There’s another pause before he adds, “Do you feel all right?”

“Yeah. I’m not high anymore. I’m crawling into bed now.”

“Okay. Night, Mary,” he speaks in a gentle voice I’m starting to love – a voice he doesn’t use with others.

Don’t read anything into it, Mary. Guard your heart.

“Night, Henry.” I end the call, toppling backward onto the baby blue duvet and falling asleep from fatigue.

My eyes pop open and I’m wide awake, instantly thinking of last night with Henry and smiling, despite the fact that I have a bad case of cotton mouth and my head feels heavy. Stumbling to the bathroom, I remove the dress I fell asleep in and step into the shower, turning on the faucet and tilting my face up to let the hot stream of water cleanse me. When I get out, I feel better yet cranky – probably a side effect of the heroin.

“Urgh, never doing that again,” I vow out loud, looking into the mirror as I put on some makeup to hide the purplish bruise on my cheek. It’s very light and doesn’t hurt, and I manage to cover it up pretty well with foundation.

Then I see marks on my neck from where Henry kissed me. Biting my lip, I grin so widely it’s ridiculous, and it sends butterflies going wild in my stomach. Without even having texted or talked to him, he’s made sure that he’s on my mind the first thing this morning. Though I don’t know if that was his intention.

When I check my texts from last night, there’s one from Adriano letting me know I left my coat at the club and he put it behind the bar. With everything that happened, I didn’t even realize it was missing. So after I walk Strawberry at the park across the street, I drop her off at my apartment and take a cab to Club 7.

When I enter the empty club, I move toward the waitress, Jordana, who's wiping the bar counter clean.

"Hey, Adriano stashed my jacket here."

"Oh, yeah." She dips down and comes up with my red trench coat.
"Here it is."

"Thanks." I take it from her and follow her line of sight when the door opens behind me and Henry and Carmine saunter in.

Carmine's on his phone, pausing just inside the entrance and continuing his conversation with his back to us while Henry, dressed much too enticingly, approaches me with a wolfish grin. My gaze travels up his tailored black slacks to his white dress shirt that's topped with a striped black and white tie and a silver-grey vest that matches his vivid eyes. As usual, his sleeves are folded up to his elbows, exposing the leather braided band on one wrist and a chrome watch on the other.

Jordana speaks first, "Hey, Henry."

"Hey," he says without shifting his stare from me, kindling emotions that melt my insides with a simple look.

"Henry," the waitress tries again, and now she's starting to annoy me.
Sense the mood, woman, and leave.

Fortunately, he merely responds, "I just need a word with Mary. Can you give us a sec?"

To which she slinks away.

Has something happened between these two?

Henry's eyes suddenly narrow. "Why are you wearing so much makeup?"

"What?" I say, and he steps closer, stopping right in front of me so that I have to look up.

His thumb nudges my chin up more. "You never wear this much."

He's noticed that? With those words, he steals another piece of my heart.

A slow smile starts to form on his face until the mood shifts, and as it turns into a frown, he says, "You didn't do that for me, did you?"

Now it's my turn to smirk. "You're very arrogant. No, I didn't do it for you. I didn't even know you'd be here."

He shrugs and compliments, being outrageously flirty with me, "Well, just so you know, I find you most sexy without all that makeup."

“Thank you.” I inch closer until I can almost kiss him, his cologne wafting around me before, out of the blue, Henry abruptly rears back and cups my chin. When I wince, he releases me but swipes my cheek with his thumb, and I grimace when he presses over the bruise.

“What is that?” The pad of his thumb caresses the marking, gentler now. Then I see a muscle ticking in his jaw as he demands to know, “Is that a fucking bruise?”

I jerk my head away from his touch, but he grips my shoulders, not allowing me to turn from him.

“No—”

“Don’t lie to me,” he warns, scaring me a little with his icy stare and making me hesitant to tell the truth.

“Mary,” he prompts in a low tone while his face flames with rage.

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CHAPTER 10

Henry

“Mary,” I repeat, unable to control the perfect storm brewing inside me.

“Yes, it’s a bruise. Keano and I argued,” she confesses, confirming my suspicion. “But I handled it, okay?”

My hands fall away from her shoulders as I examine her. “What exactly did you handle? Did that motherfucker hit you?” Each word is delivered with a sharp inflection.

She palms her forehead, but I grasp her wrist to pull her arm down.

Mary assesses me for far longer than makes me comfortable before muttering, “Yes. He was at my apartment and assumed I’d been with you.”

I harden my jaw. “And?”

She pulls her wrist free from my hold. “When I told him it was over, he slapped me once. But nothing else happened and I’m okay.”

Her last words aren’t registering as I spin around so fast that she jumps in front of me, planting her palms against my chest with surprising force for such a petite woman. I stop when I almost mow over her in all my anger and steady her by the arm.

“No, Henry! What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to fucking kill him!” I roar, seeing red and releasing her.

Carmine’s beside us in an instant, glancing at Mary first and then at me, lifting a brow in question.

“She dumped Keano and that asshole slapped her,” I explain, gesturing to the purplish marking on her cheek, and Carmine’s lips thin.

“Keano hit you?” Carmine tilts her face up.

“Yes,” she sighs. “But there’s no need for you guys to get involved. It’s not like I was completely innocent,” she tells me with a pointed look, referring to our liaison last night.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” I bark. “That doesn’t make it okay for him to hit you.”

“I know. That’s not what I meant.” She throws up her hands in exasperation as I dart around her.

I should’ve trusted my instincts when I felt something was different in her voice last night. The tight leash I keep on my emotions snaps, yet again, when it comes to Mary, and I want to throttle Keano for hurting her. This is how much she’s starting to affect me.

Carmine trails me as I hear Mary grumble, “Oh, my god. Men!”

As we’re charging out, Logan enters the club, so I order, without looking back, “Stay with Logan, Mary.”

“Do you have any idea where Keano lives?” Carmine asks.

I shake my head, taking my phone from my pocket. “You drive. I know his last name; I’ll find it within a couple of minutes.”

We jump into Carmine’s BMW that’s parked in front of the club, and with screeching tires, he pulls onto the street, just as livid as I am. Only, for completely different reasons.

In a small and simple residential building in the West Loop, I bang my fist against Keano’s door twice. When no one answers, I thump once more before the door screeches open slightly, and I smash my palms against the surface and throw it open with all my weight, pushing Keano – who’s wearing only his boxer briefs – back inside.

Carmine rushes past me, grabbing Keano’s hair and yanking his head up to backhand him.

“W-what the hell?” he stammers, trying to jerk free as I quietly close the door.

“Shut the fuck up! You think you can touch my sister and get away with it?” Carmine threatens, his height menacing. He resembles his brother a lot in his uncontained fury, and once a Montesi is mad, you’d better run.

Carmine drags him into the studio living room that’s filled with clutter, the faded floor creaking when he drops Keano at his feet.

Who the hell is this guy? He lives like a pauper, but then again, he is still a student.

In my frenzy to get out the door of the club, I forgot my Smith & Wesson, but Carmine grabs his from his waistband and tosses it to me as he stoops low and hooks his arms under Keano's, hauling him to stand up straight.

"Henry," Keano spits, breathing heavily. "You slept—"

I punch him in the face before he can finish the sentence and he grunts in pain, loosening his jaw and struggling against Carmine.

"That's for hitting Mary, motherfucker," I grind out.

"She was mine!" he screams, and a crease forms between Carmine's brows as he starts to put two and two together.

I sink my fingers into Keano's throat, and with my other hand, I dig the barrel of my gun into his forehead, snarling, "You're fucking wrong. She's never been yours."

Blood trickles down his chin, yet he smirks smugly.

Carmine states, "Maybe we should finish him off?"

"I'm willing to die," Keano pipes in.

I tilt my head to the side and smile. "I'm not willing to kill you. I'm going to make your life a living hell."

And I swing my fist into his stomach, making him double over and fall to the floor as Carmine lets go of him. Hunching down, I grip his hair, pulling his head back, and slam the butt of the gun into his nose, hearing the bones break while he howls in agony and blood gushes out.

Carmine watches me, allowing me to vent before he unbuttons his suit jacket and squats next to me, grabbing Keano's chin forcefully. "We're going to leave you on the edge of death, and for a long time to come, you'll have to look over your shoulder. I'm going to ruin your life, boy, and you'll pay in ways your mind can't even conjure."

To drive our point home, I plant another fist into his cheek, causing his head to fly to the side.

"S-stop. Please..." he protests, but Carmine snatches his gun from me and hits his other cheek with the butt of it.

Then I rise and kick Keano's stomach again and again, every blow carrying the heavy weight of my anger. I judge and condemn him for hitting a woman who means something to me, something *I* don't even understand yet.

"Henry!"

In a maddened daze, I abruptly register Mary's voice.

“Henry. No!” she all but howls.

I hear her; however, I continue to beat him to a pulp until Mary unexpectedly jumps in front of me, shielding herself as I take aim to kick again.

“Henry! Stop it. Come back to me. He isn’t worth it.” The softest hands bracket my cheeks over the hairs on my unshaven jaw, and a subtle whiff of argan oil brings me back, breaking through my fog.

I freeze as she cradles my face, and I wipe the layer of sweat from my upper lip, glaring at a bloodied Keano sobbing on the floor with Carmine and Logan standing across from me.

Mary strokes my jaw, demanding my attention. “I was a little in the wrong too. He and I both made a mess of our relationship.” Then she adds, whisper-soft, “I also feel a bit guilty about what happened with us, you know.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“Yes, you do,” she counters, astonishing me with how well she’s gotten to know me. “Please.”

Logan coughs uncomfortably, and Carmine simply waves his gun back and forth between us. “Can someone fill me in on what’s going on here?”

Mary turns around and surprises me by saying to her brother, “There’s nothing going on. Henry and I are just good friends, but Keano assumed otherwise.”

Carmine’s expression is stoic, his stare moving from me to Mary before he stashes his weapon in his jacket. “We need to go. A soldier will take care of him and keep him incarcerated at the warehouse.”

“Starve him,” I command, my mood still savage.

“Oh, we will,” Carmine confirms before vowing to Keano, “This isn’t over, Keano. I knew you weren’t good enough for my sister. We’re going to slowly kill you.”

Then he signals for us to leave. And as he and Logan go first, I start to grab Mary’s hand but decide against it. Instead, I hold out my arm, indicating for her to precede me. As she passes me, she squeezes my hand and looks at me in a way that soothes my savage beast.

While I’m confused by my uncontrolled outburst at Keano, I can tell that my way of thinking and acting has changed. In the past, I mostly worked with computer systems, where I could consider a course of action before taking it. But since joining this Syndicate, I’ve been forced to deal

directly with people more often, without time to think, and nowadays, I also deal with them as a fully-pledged member, so just like Adriano and Carmine, my nature is to murder problems without a second thought. Something that's never an option if you're a regular civilian. Well, if you're a *normal* civilian. I've changed with the reality of this ruthless world. Justice is only served when you take it, and Keano hurt my Mary, so he needs to pay. Remorse is an emotion I don't fucking feel anymore. I use physical violence to get what I want, and I don't care one bit if it makes me a bad person.

We return to Club 7 where, thank fuck, Carmine is called away on business and Logan grants me privacy with Mary after shooting me a warning look to be careful with her.

"I thought I told you to stay here," I chide her, not able to refrain. She awakens strong feelings of longing inside me, feelings that could cause me to be reckless and stupid, and we've already betrayed there's much more between us than meets the eye to Logan and Carmine, which will result in consequences for me.

She holds my gaze steadily. "That's what you want to talk about?"

Silence, thick and heavy, greets that remark, so she spins in the other direction, but I fold my fingers around her wrist.

"You don't get to walk away now," I tell her.

Employees are milling around as they ready the place for tonight, and with Carmine and Logan gone, I clutch Mary's hand and tug her with me out to my vehicle that's parked at the back entrance.

"Where are we going?" she asks once she sinks down into the passenger seat of my sedan and I shift the car into *drive*.

"The beach." I exit the parking lot, letting out a reassuring breath when she reaches sideways to stroke my nape.

By the time we arrive at Oak Street Beach, it's early afternoon, and since summer's coming to an end, it's less busy. I find a secluded spot, plowing both hands through my hair while my mind races with these sensations

Mary stirs awake in me as we watch the waves washing onto the shore and stopping right in front of our feet before ebbing away.

Eventually, she begins, “Thank you for standing up for me like that. But why were you so angry?”

“What?” I ask with a frown.

“Why were you so angry? You seemed much more upset than someone who simply doesn’t like to see a man hit a woman should be,” she expands upon her question, studying me as if she can see through the wall I put up to keep women at bay.

Mary’s more perceptive than I’ve given her credit for, and her big hazel eyes pierce right into my goddamn soul. “Do you realize that you ask me a lot of *why* questions?”

“I do.” Her mouth twitches as she keeps observing me, but without judgment, so I’m helpless to deny her answers.

“I won’t allow anyone to hurt you,” I admit, and Mary’s full lips tip up in a gorgeous rendition of a smile.

“I’m honored you defended me, but he doesn’t deserve to die over me.”

I grunt, since I don’t agree, as the wind picks up.

Chuckling, she comments, “You fit right in with my family of overbearing and *pazzo* men.”

“Just as *crazy* as you, apparently,” I reply.

“Me? *You* think *I*’m crazy?”

I nod, turning to face her. “Among other things, you’re crazy fucking beautiful.”

I can tell I’ve flustered her a bit with that statement, but she continues with the banter, “Well, maybe my craziness could balance out yours?”

“That’s a possibility. But my guess is that all that crazy would turn into something a little wilder than what either of us is prepared for,” I return with innuendo.

With any other woman, I’d have shut this conversation down and made it about sex instantly. Nevertheless, I need this now. Although it fucking terrifies me because I’ve been down this road once before and Tara broke my heart repeatedly until any normal feelings of affection were filtered out of me.

Still, the longer I’m in Mary’s presence, the more relaxed I become. She’s seen me beat a guy to a pulp but understands this life far better than any twenty-year-old woman should.

Mary stands there, arms akimbo, trying to lighten the mood.
“Something tells me you’d like the wildness...”

I advance on her, forcing her backward as we watch each other with intent.

“You might be correct in your assumption,” I tease as she steps into the water.

“Argh!” she attempts to rush past me, but I loop one arm around her middle and pick her up, holding her against my chest and surging forward.

The cold water seeps through my slacks and into my shoes, but when her curvy body presses against my groin, I completely forget about the temperature.

“Henry! Put me down!” she objects, kicking her legs in the air and groaning – which comes out as a moan, a sound that travels straight to my cock.

“But don’t I deserve a reward for protecting your honor?” I whisper against her ear, nipping the shell, and when she whimpers, I’m a goner.

CHAPTER 11

Mary

“But don’t I deserve a reward for protecting your honor?” I get light-headed and think I make a little noise when Henry nibbles my ear.

“Just put me down on the sand first,” I protest, failing to hide the pleasure in my tone.

“I want my kiss,” he replies, and my gaze shoots to him, the tip of my nose bumping against his.

“When did we agree on that? I didn’t hear that.”

“It’s all I heard.” His grin is devilish.

In response, I peck his mouth, but he retorts, “What the hell was that?”

“A kiss.”

“I don’t want a kiss like you give your fucking brothers.”

“Ew. I don’t kiss them on the mouth.” I attempt to take his hands from my waist.

With a smirk, he continues to move ahead, holding me up effortlessly while I struggle in his arms.

“Henry!” I laugh unrestrainedly when he leaps forward and dunks us.

Gasping from the chill, I hold my breath and manage to squirm loose, swimming away quickly. As I glimpse backward, I can clearly see him coming toward me through the rays of sunlight penetrating the water, so I stop and turn when he’s an arm’s length away.

Henry closes the distance between us and takes my hips in his hands as we drift up. Hooking my arms and legs around him, I experience a tightening in my lower stomach as my skin flushes when we reach the surface, and we both inhale a deep breath. When Henry pulls our bodies together, the heat coming off him envelops me in a lustful embrace while

I'm very aware of his broad chest, athletic shoulders, and thighs and calves that are hard with muscles.

Using his fingers, Henry combs back the hair that's plastered to my forehead before he grips my ass, pressing me tightly against his stiffening arousal, his nose tracing a path up my throat as my head lazily falls back.

"I'll take the kiss I want from you," he whispers, drawing my attention to the sensual slant of his lips. "When someone kisses you, you should burn for him, Mary."

As I look at him, drops of water trickle down the black strands of hair that topple over his forehead and onto my nose before they slither down to my mouth. Henry catches one drop, tracing his tongue ever so slowly over my bottom lip. Then he grips my ass more forcefully and latches his mouth onto mine with purpose, plunging his tongue inside and enthralling me with persuasive velvety strokes while we grind into each other, my fingers clutching his nape and his hands molding my behind.

As Henry promised, this *is* a kiss that makes me burn for him, and he swells between my legs as he growls against my lips, our tongues twirling in a compelling foray. His palm rakes up my back and weaves into my hair where he grasps the roots in a rough manner and pulls me into him, seeking a more thorough kiss that flares up a sensation deep inside my belly, a place no man has ever stirred. Eagerly, I lock my ankles behind him, the weight of my clothes dragging me down but not a hairbreadth separating us. I'm fevered, feeling my own pulse between my thighs as he unmistakably intended.

Unfortunately, the commotion of other people around us invades our ears, and with a rumble of frustration, Henry pulls back and rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closed. His raging hard-on pushes against me as I skim my fingers down his jaw, and he sighs in contentment, completely settled down from our altercation with Keano. A part of me hopes I'm the only one who can reach him on that fundamental level.

The sound of splashing has Henry opening his eyes, and when he shifts uncomfortably, I smirk, pretty sure that he's waiting until his erection has gone down to move out of the water.

"You're enjoying this a little too much," he says.

"So are you." I secure my legs more firmly around him, pushing my center against his bulge.

He fits his hands to my waist, keeping me still and shifting me off him. “Fuck, Mary.” He bites my lip, brushing his mouth over mine. “Don’t. Or I’ll fuck you right here.”

With that statement, I have to force myself to play it cool. “I’m intrigued.”

He barks out a huge laugh, but there’s a serious undertone in his voice. “I lied. I want you all to myself.”

That declaration makes me happy until, regrettably, he adds, “But I have an appointment with Logan, so I have to get going. And obviously, I need to head home to change clothes first.”

He’s still a little distracted, so I’m glad we don’t take it any further yet. In reality, I only know that after Henry sleeps with a woman, he never looks at her again, and I don’t want that to happen to me. I need him to treat me like more than just a fuck.

“Well,” I inform him as we go back out to the shore, “that’s your own fault.”

“Thank you for pointing that out,” he counters with a smile, and I almost stick out my tongue, but he cocks a brow, daring me to be that childish, so I switch topics, not wanting him to see me as a little sister anymore.

“Shit, we’re going to ruin your car. We don’t have anything to dry off with.”

“That’s fine. I’ll crank up the heat and it’ll be okay,” he dismisses my concern over materialistic things.

“Oh, I have to walk Strawberry,” I recall aloud. “She’s been inside all afternoon.”

“Well, I’m very sorry to have to miss that.” He doesn’t hide his sarcasm and opens the car door for me as he grins crookedly. “I’ll drop you off at home.”

“Okay, thanks.” I plop down into the passenger seat, realizing that I’ve never felt this kind of all-consuming attraction to anyone.

But will I see him later or tomorrow?

I really want to know, but I don’t ask. I’m letting him set the pace because I don’t want to scare him off. Nevertheless, sooner than I expected, I’m reminded of why I need to be careful with my heart where Henry’s involved.

I haven't spoken to Henry since earlier today when he brought me home, but as I enter my apartment when I return from walking Strawberry after dinner, my phone rings. Rummaging through my purse to find it, I bring it up to my ear.

"What's up?" I answer.

"Woman, what are you doing?" Rosalia asks, and I can hear a lot of noise in the background.

"Just came in from taking my dog out." Since I have early classes tomorrow morning, Sunday is my lazy day.

"Come have a drink with me at the club. Logan has to work and he's waiting for Adriano."

I actually want to know if Henry's also at the club. "Is Carmine there?" I probe, hoping she'll mention the whereabouts of the other men too.

"Yeah, they're all waiting for Adriano."

This means Henry's there too. "Why aren't they entertaining you?"

"Henry's playing poker with them." She laughs as she adds, "And trying to get rid of a brunette who's eye-fucking him constantly."

Probably Jordana.

That's all the information I need. "Okay. I'll be right there."

But first, I change into one of my favorite little black dresses that ties around my middle and hugs my curves and step into my gold strappy sandals.

Within forty minutes, I hike up the stairs inside Club 7 to the balconied second floor, which is filling up quickly, and turn left toward the VIP area that overlooks the first floor. It's decorated with a luxurious Oriental carpet and dim yellow lamps covering the ceiling and has a handful of tables lined along the wall where people are chatting and drinking.

At the far end, Henry's settling himself at his usual spot in a padded chair at the mahogany table with several bystanders around him and Logan opposite him. Situated beside Logan, Rosalia spots me, yet I'm fixated on Henry. His charismatic manner – enhanced by his deep purple dress shirt and messy, thick hair – captivates me.

And when I look behind him, I see that the brunette Rosalia mentioned is indeed bartender Jordana.

Does he like her? Or is she maybe one of his previous conquests?

She places her hand on his shoulder, and to my delight, he leans forward to evade her touch. Then, as if he senses something, he scratches behind his neck and turns his head, his eyes meeting mine through his glasses while I approach him. Giving me a long assessment from head to toe, he lingers at the dipping neckline of my knee-length dress before moving back up again. And apparently, I'm green with envy, because he takes off his glasses and disregards the girl, which causes her to skulk away.

Rosalia observes me with a perceptive expression, noticing I've been focused on Henry, so as the men start a game, she speaks softly, "*Qual è stato quello sguardo?*" What was that look?

I stand next to her and disclose, "*Mi baciò prima di oggi.*" He kissed me earlier today.

She grins, knowing I've had a crush on Henry for a long time.

I evaluate Henry, who reveals his cards to Logan and wins the pot. "*Quanto ha vinto?*" How much has he won?

She shows her teeth. "*Non lo so. Un sacco perché è calci il loro culo uno per uno.*" I don't know. But it must be a lot, because he's kicking their asses one by one.

At that point, Henry turns his body more fully toward me and rests back in the chair as he gazes at me. He looks big and masculine, composed, but somehow still poised to spring into action if necessary.

With a jerk of his foot, he kicks the chair beside him back for me. "Sit down, Mary. Play with me," he requests in a teasing tone.

I swallow heavily, although I'm sure he couldn't have understood what Rosalia and I were saying because thankfully we switched to Italian, so I accept his invitation. Yet there's still a gleam in his eyes that flusters me.

CHAPTER 12

Henry

My mind has been all over the place today. The memory of the wrath I unleashed on Keano was so goddamn distracting that I had to force myself to tamp it down and concentrate on my job. But at the same time, the image of Mary hasn't left my head, the reality of her sweet kiss far outweighing the fantasy I've had for weeks. Then there's the fact that I didn't do my usual thing and fuck her without even bothering to get to know her. I'm not accustomed to being just friends with a girl.

"Sit down, Mary. Play with me," I offer, smiling inwardly.

She's a sexy vixen, standing next to the table in a black dress that accentuates her ass in the most alluring way, tight at her slender waist and flaring over her curvy hips. A low neckline gives me a peek of her petite breasts that fit perfectly in my palms. And those full copper curls with red highlights that betray the passion beneath her exterior beauty drive me fucking wild.

Her gaze snaps to me as I lounge in my seat confidently. Then her eyes narrow, and she glances at Logan.

"Fair warning," Logan explains, "Henry's very good at poker."

"I know that," Mary replies, pointing her finger at my chest, breaking my composure with a playful touch as Rosalia sinks down on the armrest of Logan's chair. "But I accept, Pierce."

"Sit, Montesi," I order, and she complies, while I slide the deck of cards from the table and begin to shuffle, methodically layering and riffling them.

"He's going to take our money," Rosalia mumbles, and Logan strokes her thigh affectionately. From a passing waitress, she orders drinks for us. "I need some liquid courage."

I deal, flinging cards over the surface of the table toward each of them as Mary watches my movements in awe.

Rosalia bends low to Mary and asks, “*Così come buona è lui?*” So how good is he?

Mary answers, “*Che sarà lui a vincere.*” He’ll win.

Unfortunately for Mary, her brothers have been teaching me Italian – I can understand most of their conversation.

Mary worries her lip before she masks her reaction, meeting my eyes as she says to Rosalia, “*Ho intenzione di perdere. E ‘arrogante, non è vero? Forse più che Logan.*” I’m going to lose. He’s arrogant, isn’t he? Maybe more so than Logan.

Her statement causes me to stifle a chuckle as I give Logan his third card, and he frowns when he overhears his name but doesn’t know Italian.

Rosalia utters to Mary, “*Far scorrere una carta in grembo rapidamente. Dovrà affrontare di nuovo poi.*” Slide one card into your lap quickly. Then he’ll have to deal again.

Mary grins, making sure not to look at me, and I’m enjoying this far too fucking much. Giving her a fourth card, I see her slipping it into her lap yet pretend not to notice as I finish dealing and grab my cards, fanning them with my thumb in one hand.

Logan throws a fifty-dollar chip onto the table before Mary casually mentions, “I only have four cards.”

Watching her, I can’t help but smirk at her expectant expression. I lean back and she mirrors the action with a victorious attitude when I lay my cards down and take the remaining deck. Grinning, I fling them across the table and bend forward to hook my ankle around her chair leg, skating it sideways, toward me. Mary’s hands fumble in her lap, but I grip her wrist, pulling her to me. Lightning fast, I snatch the card and hold it up between two fingers, propping my elbow on the table, close enough to catch a whiff of her recognizable scent, which sends a jolt to my dick.

I drawl in Italian, “*Io non gioco con imbrogliatori.*” I don’t play with cheaters.

Her eyes round, and I take pleasure in her shock.

Logan barks out a laugh as he rises, and Mary glares at him. “You could’ve told us he knows Italian.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” He shrugs, moves away with a guilty looking Rosalia, and raises a brow at me, warning me to be cautious with Mary. But

I've already crossed that line with her and am unable to stop myself from wanting her.

"Finish this game with me, Mary," I whisper as she regards me with suspicion; however, I don't plan to take her money.

I hadn't known for sure if I'd see her tonight, yet now that she's here, my body wants her with a ferocious hunger. The second she's near me, that goddamn fantasy consumes me.

How it would be to spread her wide and thrust inside her hot—

"But I only have four cards," she brings me back to the present for a fleeting moment.

"That's your own fault." I smile. "Highest hand wins."

"What's in the pot? Logan's fifty?" she says, joking.

"I'm not interested in money." I brush my fingers across her chin.

"What *are* you interested in?" she infuses in a husky whisper as I finally release her wrist, yet we remain close together, leaning toward each other.

"You," I answer, and she bites her lower lip, causing my gaze to stray to her mouth before I flip my cards over on the table. "A pair of eights."

In this charged moment, with a sexual hurricane swirling around us, I've never wanted anyone to fold more badly. Mary bites the inside of her cheek and holds my stare. This second feels like fucking hours.

She whispers, "I fold." And lowers her arms, laying her cards facedown on the table.

In a flash, I cover her cards with my hand just as hers slaps onto mine. Tipping up the edges, I peek at two tens. Mary chose to fold; she wants this as much as I do.

I close the distance between us until my lips touch the shell of her ear. "Go to Adriano's office, Mary. I want to collect. Now." And as I nip her earlobe, she gasps, rising and turning without a word.

I watch her retreating backside and follow her toward the end of this side of the balconied floor. Glancing around, I notice that almost no one's here in the VIP area, so I hurriedly approach her just as she opens the door and push her inside.

Mary shrieks when I grab her waist, lifting her off the ground and slamming the door shut with my back. Nuzzling her neck, I let her slide down my body before she swivels around, the ends of her curls resting on her cleavage, distracting me.

"You look beautiful, Mary," I say, astounding myself.

“Thank you.” A gorgeous blush colors her cheeks as she inches backward, and I match her steps. “How do you know Italian?”

“Your brothers have been teaching me,” I reply and add, “Cheating in poker is a very dangerous game.”

“I thought it was brave of me.”

I give a tilt of my head, not admitting it’s sexy how she challenges me.

“Have I gained some respect?” she teases, being seductive, not holding back that part of her she had to when she was with Keano.

In a tiny whisper, I state, “Maybe just a bit.”

The corner of her lip kicks up, and she wags her finger at me, reprimanding me in the cutest manner. “It’s not nice to eavesdrop, by the way.”

“It’s not nice to be jealous when there’s no reason,” I counter.

She stops moving and so do I. Somehow, I want to set her at ease.

Mary mulls over her response and then she surprises me again, because I was preparing for an argument, when she utters, “Sorry. But she’s—never mind.”

Good. I don’t want to talk, and Jordana is no one of importance.

“I actually came to have a drink with Rosalia, so I should get back to her,” she comments unexpectedly, passing me and opening the door.

But I spin around, my arm shooting out to shut it again as I press my front to her back. “I’m not done with you, Montesi.”

At this point, there’s only one way to banish my wayward thoughts. I need to fuck her. Hard and brutal. I want her sheathed on my cock.

Her chest is heaving when she turns her head with infinite slowness as I rake my fingers down her arms, eager to feel her pussy this time. My blood is rushing down south at the speed of light while the contours of her backside mold into my groin.

I push firmly against her, her right arm trapped between her body and the door. My arm snakes around her waist, and I skim my palm up the inside of her thigh as she parts her legs, her head falling back against my chest.

Her breathing increases, and I lick a path up the side of her neck and suck her lobe, stroking her hip and bunching her dress up to the apex of her thighs, rubbing her panties in slow circles before nudging the material aside and exploring her wet, hot, almost-bare pussy.

Mary grips my arm that holds her around her middle, absentmindedly tracing my cross tattoo, her touch fucking turning me on. She's being dragged into my fantasy, briefly forgetting where she is, driven by lust as well.

"Kiss me, Mary." I nip her jaw, and when she turns her head, I claim her mouth, demanding entry that she has no choice but to give.

Pulling her against the rigid length of my erection, I ease a finger inside her, one inflexible thrust, and then my tongue invades her mouth. Massaging and tasting.

I groan as she opens her legs wider, and I graze her inner walls, plunging my finger in and out. Wild and rough. With a stiff cock pushing against her ass, my palm skims up to cup her breast, and I add another finger as she whimpers loudly and breaks our kiss. She watches me, and I want to demolish the goddamn intimacy she's creating, yet I don't want to stop.

"You love my fingers inside you. Have you fantasized about fucking me, baby?"

In reaction, she moans while riding my hand, and all the while, my cock is leaking.

Christ, I want to fuck her mouth, but this door's unlocked and someone could come in at any second.

Only, given that this room is soundproofed and no one outside of it can hear us, I willingly take an enormous risk. Because stopping isn't an option for me anymore, and my common sense has absolutely left me as I crave to release inside her mouth. But first, I want to bring her over the edge. To the brink of insanity. Since what we're doing *is* insane.

Desire explodes as we writhe into each other, and I drive my tongue inside. Teeth clash and I bite her lower lip, rubbing lazy circles over her clit as Mary breathes raggedly, arching her back, seeking more pleasure.

With a flick of my finger, I unfasten my pants and widen my stance to let my hips catch them. My cock is hard as steel, pointing at Mary as she glances down. I guide her hand to wrap around my dick, showing her how to pump me, and when she grips me with force, I growl while my mind churns with arousal. I slide a finger into her again, determinedly circling her with my thumb.

"Ah damn!" she groans, closing her eyes before she shudders, her pussy throbbing under the sensual onslaught my fingers evoke.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, baby,” I whisper, plunging into her and capturing her mouth again in a searing kiss.

Completely flushed, she reaches her peak and starts jerking my cock just as hard as I finger her. Her unrestrained passion is insanely sexy, and I reach for the highpoint with her.

“Oh, Henry,” Mary moans, as we grind into each other, throwing her head back while she continues to pump me and bucking against my hand as she surrenders to me.

“Suck my cock,” I order, forcefully tangling my hand in her curls and guiding her down. “Make me come, baby.”

Kneeling down, Mary licks the head of my erection as she looks up with sultry eyes, and I hold her hair at the roots, driving the length of my cock inside her mouth.

“Christ, your mouth...” I growl and hit the back of her throat while she wraps a hand around the base, pumping without restraint.

Need twists in my veins as my other hand shoots out against the door to steady me while I keep her hair in a tight grip and fuck her mouth with rough thrusts. Carnal pleasure overrides until I feel my shaft pulsing with an orgasm, and I release with a low groan while she sucks and licks. A shadow of primitive satisfaction sweeps through me. It’s dark and devilish, and yet I don’t give a fuck.

“Swallow,” I tell her, and she obeys as I guide her up.

Her lips curve up when I bend down to kiss her, but then we hear someone entering the adjacent security room. Thank god the door’s closed. I leap away from Mary, buttoning my pants as she rights her dress and runs a hand through her ruffled hair.

“Where are Henry and Logan?” I hear Adriano’s voice, and Mary’s eyes widen, so I yank her with me to the elevator in the office, which will take her to the first floor’s back entrance. When I press the button, it glides open instantly and she bustles inside.

Leaning in, I cup her face, giving her a brief, hard kiss. “Go out via the back entrance and text me when you’re in a cab.” Then I pull back, giving her ass a firm squeeze and whispering, “Next time, I’m going to lick your pussy, baby.”

As I slip out, the door to the security room opens and Adriano saunters in. Mary flattens herself against the inside of the elevator when Adriano crosses the room, so I move away from it.

My pulse is still pounding in my ears as he assesses me. “Where did you come from?” And he shifts closer to the elevator.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Mary standing like a statue, dead silent, as he walks to me, and I take two steps forward.

“Downstairs,” I reply. “I just needed to go over a few minor things with you.” The door closes as if I just got out, and he takes his chair, not noticing my frazzled state.

Fuck! That was a close call.

Adriano may not interfere in personal lives, but it won't go over well if he ever finds out I let his sister suck my dick in his office.

Nevertheless, it was well worth the risk. I've never waited to fuck a woman, but Mary makes this process much too enjoyable. She also never hounds me, calls me, or follows me like other women do, and it's making me crave her more. As my blood flows back to my brain, sanity and caution return, although concentrating on work will be impossible.

There's a trail of worry coursing inside me. I don't like her being alone outside at night, and when she doesn't text me as I instructed, it fucking bothers me much more than I want to acknowledge. That feeling only she awakens in me alarms me; however, I will take what I want – my cock is too preoccupied with this one woman not to.

CHAPTER 13

Mary

The elevator door swooshes open, and I go through the hallway that leads to the back entrance. Passing the double doors to my left, I hear the soft bass of the music from the club on the other side of them before they open and Jordana almost stumbles into me as she shoulders past me.

So I spin around, grabbing her biceps and turning her to face me and snarl, “Seriously! You want to go there now? Don’t passive aggressively push past me. We’re not in high school. If you have something to say, just say it.”

Her eyes widen a touch before I release her. “I have nothing to say. Henry will tire of you soon, and then he’ll come back to me.”

In reaction to her glare, I smile, making her nostrils flare. Turning on my heel, I throw back, “Don’t count on it, baby.”

When I reach the exit, I push down the door handle and a gust of wind cools my burning limbs as I step outside into the Chicago night.

I easily put Jordana out of my mind because I’ve witnessed that Henry doesn’t return her affection. Rounding the corner to access the main street, I cross it to hail a cab as people walk out of the front entrance of the club and a few cars blaze by.

I shiver, having the sense that someone’s watching me, and instinctively reach inside my dress pocket for my phone while scanning the area but don’t spot anyone. I quickly get inside the first cab I see, shaking my head and giving my address.

I’m just being paranoid.

In the meantime, I swear my core still tingles. Henry makes my body submit to his every command in an exceptional way, and I didn’t know this kind of all-consuming pleasure existed.

Yet I know Henry better than I care to admit, so I decide that I won't text or call him but instead, I'll let him come to me. While at first, I was adamant to not have sex with him, I'm not sure I'll be able to resist his seduction any longer. He's entertaining my advances now that I'm single, and I celebrate in the attention he gives me, wondering what kind of other pleasure he has in store for me.

I hope and anticipate that if I don't push him, he'll be drawn to me. Even though I know, as of now, he only sees me as a conquest.

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CHAPTER 14

Henry

After Mary left Adriano's office, she didn't text me like I told her to. Therefore, the minute I'm free, I'm darting out of the club to my car and speeding through the downtown Loop toward a glass high-rise where a certain beauty lives. This is the first time I've ever wanted to know how a woman's doing after I've had my way with her, sort of, and *she* brushes *me* off. The irony isn't lost on me.

I park in front of the skyscraper and am pissed that the building's front entrance door is unlocked. Apartments for these prices should have better security, and I'm not sure her brothers know about how badly her building is safeguarded.

I ride the elevator up to Mary's floor and when I reach her door, I take my wallet from my back pocket and slide out my credit card, placing it into position to force the bolt down. Jiggling the lever back and forth, I maneuver the card until it pops open.

She needs better fucking locks!

Quietly, I sneak inside. The apartment smells of her, a sweet perfume lingering, and is painted in lively colors of green and orange, just as vibrant as she is. From the end of the hall, her dog comes bounding at me and I see that Mary's bought her a bunch of toys that are strewn around.

Strawberry tries to sniff my leg, but I step backward and stare at her blandly. "You should be barking when strangers come into the apartment, little one."

She just lifts her rear and plops down as if to give me her version of the finger, and I can't help but smile.

A door is slightly ajar to my left, so I inch it open and enter Mary's bedroom. She's sound asleep on a framed bed with white sheer curtains that

are tied at the posts. Closing the distance, I watch her sleeping form. She looks so peaceful, lying on her stomach, her knee peeking out from under the blue covers. When I see that she's okay, my worry lessens.

Then I notice the dressing table filled with makeup and jewelry and a square mirror with scarves draped over the top corners. That's when I realize – I'm in a woman's bedroom for the first time. The reason I never go home with them is because I don't care to know about their lives or how they've decorated their private living spaces.

What the hell am I doing here? I'm thinking too much with my dick.

Momentarily freaked out by my epiphany and deciding to let her sleep, I turn around but halt dead in my tracks when Mary stirs, speaking in a throaty whisper, "Henry..."

My gaze lands on her again while I feel a grin pulling at my lips, and I'm motionless as she rolls over onto her back, the sheet pulling down to her hips. Her copper curls are fanned out on her blue sheets, and she's wearing a sheer, fucking sexy black nightgown that makes me forget all about how unnerved I was just moments ago.

Seems like Mary may be filled with that same inexplicable desire I am, and before I know it, I've situated myself on the edge of the bed and am combing her hair from her forehead with my fingers, observing her smooth, fair skin that's flushed from her dream.

Softly, I say, "Mary...Mary."

Her eyes fly open, and she shoots upward into a sitting position and tries to shove me, yet she's no match for me. When she brings her hand back for a slap, I capture her wrist, drag her up, and spin her around, trapping her inside her own crossed arms. She struggles and squirms, gyrating her ass against my crotch and making me groan.

"Jesus Christ, Mary! It's just me," I tell her.

And at the same time, she spews, "What the hell are you doing here?!"

CHAPTER 15

Mary

My legs are spread wide with Henry's thick, black hair between them as I clutch the strands, pushing myself against his tongue.

"Mary...Mary," a faraway voice calls to me, and I wake immediately, blinking at a shadow that's hovering over me.

I sit up and push against the intruder, trying to knock him off the bed, but the second he seizes my wrist and effortlessly flips me around so that I'm astride him, facing away, I recognize Henry's ocean fresh cologne.

"Jesus Christ, Mary! It's just me," he says, holding me trapped with his arms surrounding me.

"What the hell are you doing here?!"

His arms open as I turn around, and he goes to his full height, his muscles rippling through his deep purple dress shirt as he completely ignores my question.

"How did you get in?" I ask.

"It was way too fucking easy," he responds with bite. "You have the worst locks."

"That's not an answer," I counter, exhaling loudly and climbing out of bed.

Henry places his hand on my hip, dragging me toward him. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay. You didn't text me."

That's sweet. "You could've called or texted instead of breaking in."

Amusement twists his sensual mouth. "But then I would've missed your dream."

I look up fast, in shock, while his palm burns into my side, only a thin layer of satin separating our bare skin. His silver-grey eyes cloud with lust as he watches my throat when I swallow.

Shit, I was probably talking in my sleep.

When he dips his head, the scent of his soap floats into my nostrils. “What kind of dream was it, Mary?” he whispers, his lips skimming down the shell of my ear.

I’m beginning to breathe heavily as he snuggles my neck, but I remain quiet.

“Was it kinky?” he adds, and I can hear the smile in his voice. Slowly, he sucks the sensitive skin on my shoulder, marking me.

“No, not kinky,” I confess around a whimper.

Henry’s hand slithers up my back and into my hair before he forcefully pulls my head back, intensifying my already bursting desire for him.

He kisses the corner of my mouth and stays there. “I might do it if you tell me what you were dreaming about.”

Passion flares to life deep in my belly, and I concede, “Your head was between my legs.”

He shows me a half smile as my eyes collide with his, and he creates a lush prison I fear I’ll never be able to escape. “I was licking your pussy...like I promised you earlier.”

Shutting my eyes, I nod. “Uh-huh.”

“Since we’re confessing, I dream about fucking you with my tongue until you come and then watching your tits bounce while you ride my cock.”

My eyelids rise again, and I almost feel like I’m in another dream world as he continues to seduce me with his uncensored disclosures. “Soon I’m going to fuck you until you scream my name, baby. Feel what you do to me.” He cups my ass to pull me into him, easily lifting me up and grinding me over his swelling erection.

As I lock my legs around his middle, he slants his mouth over mine, kissing me ravenously before jerking my head back and tossing me onto the bed. I’ve never seen him act this carefree before. Normally, there’s an underlying hint of him not being in the moment, but not now.

His gaze trails up my body and he grips my ankle, rolling me over without difficulty and making me shriek as he covers my back with his front. He’s so big on top of me, and I relish being pinned underneath him as he unrestrainedly gropes up my sides. He braces one hand on each side of my head and drops his mouth to just below my ear, running his tongue along the delicate skin there. Then Henry kisses my neck, raking his teeth

down my spine toward the swell of my ass, biting me as he bunches my gown up over my thighs and waist before he removes my panties and parts my cheeks, skimming his tongue up my ass. It's illicitly dirty and makes my core tremble.

When I moan, he slides one of my knees up the sheet toward my stomach and bends his arm around my thigh that's cocked up, guiding me to lift a little, and ordering, "Spread your legs, baby." As I do so, he speaks hoarsely, "Now I have a fucking magnificent view of your pussy." And he bites my ass and smacks it once.

Then, without preamble, he begins to devour me from behind, giving my ass possessive squeezes as I hear him groan. Henry spans my left cheek before he grips it, spurring me on to lose all my shyness. There's no gentleness in his touch.

"Oh, fuck!" I scream, pushing back against his face. "Harder."

With that, Henry consumes me, trying to keep my bucking body somewhat still with his arm secured around my thigh, which proves to be almost impossible as I thrash, feeling as if my limbs are on fire. He tastes, then licks. He fucks me roughly with his tongue, sucking and biting, circling my clit, and it's absolutely intoxicating how he seems to instinctively know where to nip and suck.

"I'm going to come..."

"Take it, baby," he growls. "Come for me."

When I rasp his name and rotate against his mouth, I peak, quivering in bliss as Henry draws my entire clit inside his mouth and laps me up and down one last time before I go slack. With legs wide open, breathless and exhausted, I lie on my stomach on the bed.

I try to roll over, but Henry moves up my body and kisses my cheek. "Sleep, baby."

As he strokes my hip in soothing circles, I'm too sluggish to speak.

I'm so happy he's staying, is my final thought before I drift off with his scent cloaking me.

My eyelids flutter open. Relaxed and satisfied, I turn to my side but discover my bed is empty. And when I glance around, I realize that I'm completely alone.

Henry snuck out?! Emotions riot within me, mostly disappointment and utter sadness. Yet when moisture pools in my eyes, I blink the tears back, trying to remain strong.

Why does he always have to pull away, breaking my heart every single time in the process?

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CHAPTER 16

Henry

God damn...

I still taste Mary on my lips. As I lie here simply stroking her side and that ass I can't get enough of while she's dozing off, I know I should leave her bed, but my limbs don't seem to work. Surprisingly, her moans didn't get on my nerves like other women's usually do. They just spurred me on even more while her uncontrolled whimpers made me rock hard. And now that I've had a sampling, my hunger for Mary has multiplied.

Fuck!

It's certainly not her fault that my resolve weakens when I'm with her. That instead of wanting to sate my own lust, I'm only concerned with satisfying hers. That I'm captivated by her every move. By how she curls her toes and wrinkles her nose.

On their own accord, my fingers wind around a curl and I bring it to my nose. A sense of calm I haven't experienced in years descends upon me. I'm so used to being alone after a liaison that I forgot what this feels like. It's nice yet disturbing at the same time.

Sitting up quietly, I move to her makeup table, inspecting the abundance of scarves hanging there in vibrant colors that remind me of her. One of them catches my attention because it's the exact same copper color of her hair. Pushing the others aside, I tug it off and pocket it just as I'm pulled out of my thoughts when I glance out the window and catch a familiar shadow beneath the bright lantern across the street.

Swinging around, I kiss Mary's forehead, instantly taken aback by my own behavior. Yet I shake it off as I race downstairs and barge through the front entrance, infuriated.

Pinning my glare on Tara, I dodge a car, storming toward her and grabbing her arm, pushing her shoulder into her neck as I lift her slightly. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

She struggles to get free, so I let go, causing her to stumble backward. “You were supposed to call me.”

“I told you two goddamn days ago to give me a couple of days. How fast do you think I work?”

She ignores me and curtly inquires, “Do you live here?”

“Are you stalking me?” I answer her question with a question.

“Yes,” she replies, astonishing me with her admission. “Because I don’t think you’re being honest.”

“Well,” I retort, “if you want your money, you’ll just have to deal with it.”

Her eyes widen slightly; she didn’t expect that answer. Nevertheless, she continues to probe and mentions the one person who makes me let loose of the reins on my emotions.

“Is this attitude change of yours because of Mary?” she sneers.

Gritting my teeth, I try with all my power not to let her push my buttons.

“No,” I answer with fake calm. “Just stay the fuck away from Mary and me, like I told you, so that I can keep my end of the deal.”

Her brows climb halfway up her forehead. “*You and Mary?*” With a vengeance, her true persona rises to the surface and a malicious grin curves her mouth. “Oh, Henry, you just made this so much easier for me. I guess Mary doesn’t know I’m your wife, does she?”

“Say her name one more time,” I hiss, betraying that Mary means something to me. “And don’t call yourself *my wife*. I’d be careful if I were you. I’m not that boy you met seven years ago anymore.”

Gone is my innocence and gullibility. Instead, I’ve become a merciless man, the likes of whom she’s never met. I could get rid of her yet not before getting the one thing I need: a divorce.

When I was eighteen, Tara and I married. And although she cheated on me for two years, when I left her, she refused to sign the papers. In addition, she hacked my files at City Hall and made them inaccessible to me. Back then, I didn’t question her motives and didn’t see a problem with staying married as long as I never saw her. Until she contacted me again and has apparently done extensive investigating into Club 7.

Her throat works as she swallows and says, “Mary is your boss’s sister, and I bet neither Mary, nor your boss, nor anyone else even knows you’re married – why else would you need me to stay away from the club? And I think you like her, my husband. Fuck me over, and I’ll never unlock your files at City Hall.”

My hands are tied. Tara doesn’t realize just how big of a problem she really is to me. Personally, I don’t give a shit about the divorce. However, I’m a member of the Syndicate, and if they ever find out I have ties to a regular civilian that I lied about, then my life is over. This is how our world works. On top of that, I must protect Mary. The fact that Tara has the balls to show up here tells me that she’s in a volatile state of mind.

I hurriedly rethink my position. No matter what, I have to pay Tara off until I get my divorce and can deal with her once and for all. But in the meantime, I need this woman away from Mary’s apartment building. *Right fucking now!*

“No, they don’t know. And if they found out, they’d fire me,” I lie, playing my part and pretending to be outsmarted by her. “So if you want your money, keep your fucking mouth shut.”

A victorious grin forms on her face.

Grabbing my wallet, I wrench out two hundred-dollar bills and shove them into her hand. “I’ll wire you a thousand tomorrow, and I’ll contact you when I know more, but it’ll take more than two days, Tara.”

“Was that so difficult?” she jibes, and I clench and unclench a fist, refusing to let her bait me again.

“Leave. Now,” I state firmly yet as calmly as possible.

She evaluates me for a second but then sashays away.

I’ve underestimated Tara’s greed, and I grasp that I need to handle this situation faster than I anticipated. I must come up with a plan for Tara because there’s no way I’ll be able to get enough money to pay her off within a few days; I know she wants hundreds of thousands of dollars, and I don’t have that. I have to trick her into thinking she’s gotten her money so that she unlocks my files. And then I can handle her however I see fit.

As much as I’d love to spend more time with Mary tonight, my impromptu meeting with Tara has ruined my mood, so I decide to go home, needing some fucking space to assemble my thoughts.

CHAPTER 17

Mary

On Wednesday night, I'm lounging on my L-shaped sofa, comfortable in my red sweats and black crop top, babysitting Adam until Logan picks him up.

After two days of silence from Henry, I grumble, "Damn him."

Every time we grow closer, it seems he creates some distance between us. And I don't know if he's even aware he's doing it, but it annoys me that much more since I've already been down this road with Keano. In the beginning of our relationship, Keano would disappear and lie about it a lot – because he was also seeing someone else, the girl he cheated on me with. And due to my past with Keano, I keep wondering if I'm enough to hold the attention of a man like Henry. Yet I refuse to chase him.

"What?" Adam mumbles as he stands before the flat screen TV, absorbed in his favorite movie, *Cars*.

I purse my lips together, knowing I shouldn't cuss around Adam. "Nothing."

Luckily, he's distracted by *Cars*, and when Adam claps, Strawberry, whose wounds have mostly healed, barks and jumps around his feet. So Adam plops down on the floor, taking her into his lap.

"Not so rough, Adam, or else you might hurt Strawberry."

"Sorry," he responds, stroking her fur lightly.

Suddenly, my front door creaks open. In alarm, I jump off the couch, stepping forward to check the entryway as I shield Adam from view. Thank goodness, Henry darkens the doorway, freezing momentarily when he notices Adam playing on the floor.

"Henry, I'm watching *Cars*!" Adam exclaims.

"Hey, little man!" he replies as I tilt my head.

“Why, hello there,” I greet him, surprised because he’s dressed more casually than normal.

My god, he looks like James Dean in his washed-out black jeans and his biker jacket, complemented with a plain white tee, his spade tattoo peeking out from the collar.

“Is this a thing now?” I tease him. “You breaking into my house?”

“Probably…” He smirks, coming closer.

With a mere glance, he can make me feel naked and warm, but I remain in place, raising both brows.

“I wasn’t planning on babysitting though,” he says, staring at the exposed skin of my stomach beneath my short top.

“So why did you come?”

He bends down to whisper, “To finish what we started on Sunday.”

“Then maybe you should’ve called me.” I’m unable to hold back, and he snaps his gaze up to my curious stare. *Why did he leave that night?*

He utters, “Work came up. Sorry I left without a word.”

Wow, an apology from Henry. That’s a rare occurrence.

Slowly, I grin. “That hurt, didn’t it?”

He shows his teeth, but then Strawberry runs up to us and he commands firmly, “Stay,” right before she sniffs his boot.

Strawberry obeys, watching me, so I snap my fingers and point to her basket next to the sofa before murmuring to Henry, “Since I’m still waiting for payback for brunch, I’ll control my dog.”

“Oh, I forgot about that.” He smirks mischievously.

“Don’t get any ideas.”

“All I have are ideas.” He glances at my breasts. “But I should go; you already have company.” Then he swivels around.

Running past him, I place my palm on his chest. “Oh, no you don’t. You came to me, remember that,” I whisper, and his lips quirk up when I use the words he spoke to me when I always used to go to him. “You can have dinner with us.”

“Us?”

“Yes. We were just going to eat. Henry’s going to join us,” I let Adam know and he cheers.

“Yay! Strawberry’s hungry.”

Henry rubs his mouth to hide a smile and surrenders after Adam comes hopping up to him, so he hoists him up. “What does Strawberry want to

eat?”

Adam taps his chin. “Maccie.”

“No,” I pipe in. “We’re not eating McDonalds.”

Henry beams wolfishly. “You’re no fun, Mary.”

And Adam echoes, “You’re no fun, Mary.”

I pinch Adam’s little button nose. “No McDonalds. What else do you want?”

“Sushi,” he answers decisively, making Henry chuckle.

“How does this kid go from Mickey D’s to sushi?”

I shrug as Adam wiggles down Henry’s body to reach for his *Cars* backpack on the couch, unzipping it and dumping the contents onto the floor. As he rummages around his coloring books and crayons, he mumbles, “I’m going to make you something.”

Not sure if he’s addressing Henry or me, I let him make a mess on the floor.

Henry shucks off his jacket – the lines of his toned chest are noticeable as he moves – and takes his phone from the inside pocket. “I’ll order sushi.”

“What do you want, Adam? Do you also want—” But I don’t get to say *soup*.

“I want chopsticks,” Adam replies in all seriousness, drawing a circle on a blank piece of paper.

“I know what he likes,” Henry tells me as he holds up his phone in one hand, his thumb swiping over the screen. “I’ve seen what he eats at Logan’s. He just likes playing with the chopsticks, so I’ll get him sushi rolls.”

Henry doesn’t ask me what I want to eat, and before I can say anything, he informs us, “Ordered.”

Because of Adam’s presence, it’s not uncomfortable between us at all. He keeps chattering to Henry, drawing, then watching TV, and he’s so easygoing. So is Henry for that matter.

Going into my open kitchen, I reach into the white wood cabinet for some plates. I have to stand on my tiptoes to get them but accidentally push them backward with my fingertips, grumbling. Unexpectedly, a hand rests on my side as Henry’s familiar front presses against my back.

“I’ll get them.” He reaches up and easily takes three plates, setting them on the kitchen counter.

I wiggle my ass against him, and a low rumble resounds from his throat before I thrust him back with my behind, yet he doesn't budge. Instead, he gives me a fleeting kiss on the mouth just as the door buzzer sounds and he moves around the corner into the hall.

I bring the plates into the living room and place them on the oak coffee table, along with napkins and utensils. When Henry returns, he drops the bag onto the table and Adam peeks inside.

"You can take out the food," I say while Henry and I hunch down next to each other on the floor.

Adam snatches the containers out until he finds the chopsticks, and he's immediately distracted, wielding each of them like a sword.

"Sit down, pumpkin. I'll plate up for you," I instruct.

"I want the green ones." Adam points a stick at one container.

"Yes, here are your cucumber rolls." Then I see that Henry's ordered much more vegetarian sushi than fish. Plus a seaweed salad for me, which is my favorite.

Henry leans closer to me, and as if he reads my thoughts, he clarifies, "I know you wanted the salad."

He remembered that from the one time I mentioned it at Sunday brunch – my heart warms.

Devouring my salad, I observe Adam snickering when Henry throws a soybean in the air and catches it in his mouth.

Of course, Adam tries it too, but Henry leaps forward and catches it. "No! You could choke on it."

Unfazed, Adam giggles as he jumps on Henry while Henry tickles him. *So this is dinner with boys.*

They continue to wrestle, stopping once in a while to eat, and I'm stunned at this side of Henry. He's usually so commanding in a sometimes-distant manner, as if he constantly censors himself. But not now, with us. Or in this case, with Adam.

After we've finished dinner, Henry and I laze back against the sofa, and Adam shunts a drawing into Henry's hand.

A deep crease crosses Henry's forehead. "What's this, Adam? Aliens?"

Adam frowns, looking at him as if he's stupid, and I can see Henry hiding a smirk at Adam's adorable expression.

"It's us," he explains, leaning against Henry's shoulder as Henry winds his arm around his middle. His little pointer finger dances over the paper.

“This is you, and Mary, and me.”

“Oh, yeah, now I see it,” he concedes, grimacing at me and indicating that we’re truly unrecognizably drawn.

“These are your glasses,” Adam continues.

“Oh...My glasses.”

“Where are they?” Adam asks, touching Henry’s ears.

“I don’t have to wear them all the time. They’re reading glasses. I can see without them.” He reaches behind him to slide his jacket off the sofa and takes them out of the inside pocket. “But they’re right here. Should I put them on?”

Adam nods vigorously and then glances at me.

Henry repeats to me, “With or without glasses?”

“With,” I reply, because they suit him and make him irresistibly attractive. “Without the glasses, you’re not Henry.” *Not my Henry.* “Just like with Superman. Without the glasses, no one recognizes Clark Kent.”

The corner of his mouth curves up as he puts them on and winks at Adam, who situates himself in his lap, and Henry doesn’t seem to mind his cuddly behavior at all.

“You’re good with kids,” I blurt out, standing up to clear the plates.

“Don’t look so surprised,” he defends, tickling Adam’s neck.

“I thought you didn’t like people and prefer systems to them.”

“I do like petite people,” he replies with obvious innuendo, his stare drawn to me like a magnet as I enter the kitchen.

A hot sensation stirs inside my chest, and he makes it even worse by adding so quietly that I almost don’t catch it, “I love kids. I *am* his godfather.”

Wait. What?

“You are?” I muse aloud. “I didn’t know that.”

“Logan asked me a while back.”

Henry, Henry, be careful because my heart is powerless against a charming hacker who also adores kids.

This explains why Adam’s so familiar with Henry. He must see him more often than I realized.

At that moment, the doorbell rings, so I say to Adam, “That’s your daddy.”

He hops up and Henry follows him to buzz Logan into the building and then into my apartment, and once Logan gets inside, he scoops Adam up,

kissing his chubby cheek.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, little man. Did you have fun with Mary?” He peers at Henry.

“And Henry?”

Keenly, Adam bobbles his head. “I ate sushi.”

“Yum. Is your belly full? Are you ready to go home to Mommy?”

“Yeah, I miss Mommy.”

“Okay, get your things.” He sets him down on the floor, and Adam dashes into the living room, stuffing his crayons into his *Cars* backpack.

Logan looks back and forth between us. “So you two were babysitting him together?”

Henry shrugs as Logan smirks right before we hear Adam yell out, “Damn!”

My eyes widen while Henry chuckles, and Logan sends us a disapproving glance.

Then both Henry and I pipe in, “It wasn’t me.”

Henry’s gaze instantly lands on me, and he arcs a brow. “Really?”

I grin. “Okay, sorry. It *was* me. I didn’t think he heard it though.”

“Just don’t cuss around him,” Logan mutters. “He repeats everything nowadays.”

“I promise it won’t happen again,” I pacify him, stooping low to Adam when he returns. “Can I have a kiss?”

He smooches my cheek before he kisses Henry’s cheek as well; he’s such a cutie pie.

“Thanks, Mary.” Logan entwines their hands and opens the door.

“Anytime. Bye!” After I wave to Adam as they stroll down the hall toward the elevator, I shut the door, finally ensconcing Henry and me in privacy.

We lock eyes and remain motionless until we don’t hear their voices anymore. When he removes his glasses and pockets them, the tension that’s been crackling between us the entire night detonates.

He storms toward me, his palms framing my face as I’m pushed back against the door while he rasps against my lips, “Christ! I’ve been wanting to taste you since I first got here, Mary.”

He captures my mouth in the one kiss I crave, and I stand on my toes, clutching his nape and meeting every stroke of his tongue.

“You’re even sexier in your sweats,” Henry groans, biting my lower lip and letting his teeth graze the flesh as his hands travel down my sides.

With desperation, Henry yanks my crop top over my head and flings it aside. Pushing my breasts together, he nips the swell of one before he reaches around my back, and with a flick of his fingers, he releases my bra, letting it flutter to the ground.

Then he kneels, skimming his hands down my legs and taking my sweats and panties with them until I can step out, and my legs ease apart on their own volition. I’m naked while he’s still fully dressed, and his fiery gaze leaves a hot trail over my body before he places one of my legs over his shoulder and eagerly flattens his mouth to my flesh. The pressure of his lips is insistent on my core. Without a moment of hesitation, I submit to him, my back bowing with every flick of his tongue as I lean against the door.

“Henry...”

Sinfully wild, his tongue fucks my core and I glance down. Henry’s a starving man, eating me out as I rotate against him, his hands roaming over my hips and to my ass as his eyes meet mine. No man has ever looked at me the way he does, as if a war could break out, but he wouldn’t stop what’s going to happen next.

As his fingers dig into my behind, I explode out of nowhere, riding the tidal wave of pleasure until I feel limp. But Henry’s not finished and he rises, effortlessly lifting me up and guiding my legs around him.

“You’re completely mine tonight,” he growls.

I fall into his arms, pushing my tongue inside his mouth as he heads down the hallway, spins us around, and kicks open the bedroom door. He holds me up by my ass while I unbuckle his belt, but because we’re so consumed with each other, he gets off balance and bumps into the doorway. I smile against his lips right before he tosses me onto my bed. When he reaches behind his neck to pull his tee over his head, his gaze never leaves my body while I ogle his statuesque frame, along with the Celtic cross on his arm and the spade tattoo on his neck.

Henry’s unwavering regard makes me feel wanton, especially when he licks his lips that must still taste of me and grins in the most devilish way. He breathes harder as he kicks off his jeans and shoes.

While he stands at the foot of my bed, I get up on my knees and skim my hands over his rigidly sculpted chest and stomach. I hook my fingers

inside his black boxers, tugging them off as he watches me and strokes my curls from my face. Not for a moment during our ministrations do our eyes leave each other until, at last, we're both naked.

Henry pushes me backward and crawls up my body, one palm caressing a path up my legs, hips, and sides. Taking a nipple into his mouth, he sucks hard, and sparks flicker to life as I thread my fingers into his thick, black hair. His mouth finds the curve of my throat, his tongue teasing out to drag along the line of my pulse.

As I'm lying back in the center of my bed, he settles over me, nestled between my legs. I wrap my arms around his neck and rub my soaking sex against his hard length, stroking his shoulders while he allows me to explore him without words. Even though he's being astonishingly gentle right now, I sense he's holding himself back. For me. My heart slams in my chest as emotions tighten my throat.

Then Henry starts to come alive and moves a palm down my side, over my stomach, and down to my center, circling me with his finger and thumb in the most intense way. However, to my surprise, he eases himself off me and rolls me to my stomach to kiss his way down my spine and to my ass, where he bites me, like he's done before, branding me. Then he licks me once before steadying himself on top of me, but I turn my head to say, "Henry, I want to see you."

For a second, he doesn't move, and I'm afraid he'll reject me, but then he shifts me into my original position. Dragging me against him, he spreads my legs with his thighs so that I'm wide open when he teases the head of his erection at my entrance and sinks inside, inch by inch, growling while my flesh gives as he invades me.

"You're so fucking tight."

One of his hands comes around my middle, behind the small of my back, and the other grips my behind. I arch my body as he slides in and out and trail my fingers down his face, sneaking my arms around his neck and my legs around his hips as our lips meet. His tongue slips into the depths of my mouth, and we fuck in the same rhythm as we kiss.

Although our movements are slow and deliberate, there's a fraught hint to the way we touch each other. It's not purely fucking, but I bury that thought for now and focus on the present.

I can feel the thudding of his heart, sense its increase in tempo as I meet his thrusts with soft moans. My whimpers seem to urge him on. Both of his

hands cup my ass, and he slams into me harder, making me feel him in every nerve ending of my shaking body as I scream his name.

“I want you to come all over my cock, Mary,” he growls, giving me a hard kiss.

My limbs tremble. And before I know it, the tenderness is replaced with passion and he proceeds to show me pleasure beyond belief.

Henry jerks me upward, holding the base of his cock while I sit astride him as he reclines, my wetness allowing me to slide down easily. Curling his hands around my waist, he starts to move me up and down his shaft. We groan in unison, and he watches me as I ride him, cupping my breast with one hand while the other grips my ass.

“Fuck me harder,” he orders, then spanks the swell of my ass, snagging my wrists and securing them behind me, and entranced by him, I obey, taking him deep into me.

“You feel too good riding my cock, baby.” And he bucks upward, forcing me to move at his pace.

My body arches with every surge and withdrawal, and when he lets go of my wrists, I dig my fingers into his pectorals, scratching my nails down his chest as he skims his hands down my back, all the while gyrating on him and building toward another orgasm.

“Lean down here and let me suck your nipple, Mary,” Henry groans.

As soon as I bend forward, he draws me into his mouth as I round my hips and shatter magnificently. I throw my head back while Henry bites my nipple and guides my ass back and forth to prolong my orgasm. My peak splinters, and I fall against his chest, blissfully fulfilled.

This split second, when he embraces me so tightly and affectionately, he conquers another piece of my heart. I’ve only had sex with one person before and only one time. And the feelings it gave me were nowhere near as powerful as the sensations flowing inside me right now. This closeness ties me to Henry. I was already infatuated with him before I even had sex with him. But now I’m balancing on the brink of falling hopelessly in love.

After moments of catching my breath, Henry whispers, “I’m not done with you yet.”

CHAPTER 18

Henry

“I’m not done with you yet.”

Seductively, Mary rolls off me and onto her stomach, and I tongue my way down her spine, fascinated by her smooth, soft olive skin, before I roughly draw her up onto her knees. But instead of keeping her in that position, I sit back on my haunches and situate her so that she straddles my hips, her back pressing against my chest. Then I prod her wider by spreading my thighs and nudge the head of my cock against her pussy, plunging inside. Mary’s arms twine back around my neck as she arches her back, and I hold her waist, driving into her wetness as my lips graze up the side of her neck and behind her ear, taking her lobe between my teeth. My dick throbs with every thrust into her flexing and willing body.

“Come for me one more time, baby,” I drawl, my fingers finding her clit.

“I can’t,” she whimpers, bouncing on my cock and gripping my hair, so I cup her breast and circle her pussy faster, starting to feel her walls clench again.

“Please...” she begs, and I pinch her nipple and clit at the same time until she mewls loudly and thrashes through another climax before falling back against me.

Immediately, I move her off me. “Open that pretty mouth, Mary,” I order without changing my position.

She bends forward, takes my cock in hand, and wraps her lips around me, pumping the base as she sucks the crown. Her fingers are barely able to fold around my dick, and it’s exquisite torture to watch Mary’s passion that I’ve always suspected was there come bursting out.

I weave my hands into her copper curls and gather them into a ponytail, holding her head as she bobs up and down, sucking and licking. Then my release comes from deep in my groin. I pump wildly inside her mouth, and my cock swells before my seed coats the back of her throat as I emit a guttural roar, my orgasm scorching in its intensity.

“Swallow,” I demand as she releases my dick from her mouth with a pop while my uneven breaths slow down.

Her throat works when she does as ordered, and I tug her up by her hair so that we can share one more feverish kiss before I flop back on her bed, arms spread wide, from pure exhaustion. Mary collapses as well with her head on my chest, and I don’t move as she curls against me while I stare at the overhead canopy. I’ve never felt desire like this. *Inescapable. Explosive.*

Mary’s teasing has driven me mad, and after two days of not seeing her, I was unable to stay away any longer. Her bold yet graceful and innocent movements surprise me, attracting me to her more than I’ve been attracted to anyone in a long time.

“I wish you were my first,” she mutters softly, but I don’t respond.

Dangerous.

Christ, I need to go, even though it certainly isn’t Mary’s fault that I’m not fucking strong enough to resist her. However, she throws her leg over my hip and pretends she didn’t say anything since I didn’t react.

I feel like an ass and a little uncomfortable. Afterward, I usually bolt or tell them to leave.

She traces the lines on my arm that form the Celtic cross, which is a traditional cross but with a ring surrounding the intersection of the stem and arms, in the most relaxing manner, and I sigh in contentment. Then her fingers skim up my bicep and onto my neck, outlining the spade tattoo. *She’s weaving a spell around me instead of the other way around.*

Mary starts talking in the huskiest voice that betrays her satiated state, “Why did you get the spade?”

“It’s my lucky suit in cards.”

“I see...And the cross? Are you religious? Or is the Celtic cross a pagan symbol?”

“I’ve heard various meanings for it. Some do swear it’s a pagan symbol, and some even say it’s a phallic symbol turned into a cross. But I’m not religious – I don’t believe in God. I just liked the look of it.”

“Hmm,” she mumbles, making me curious.

“What does that mean?” I respond, anticipating that she’ll attempt to give me a lecture like most women do.

Yet she murmurs, “That sounds about right. It fits the *I prefer systems to people* attitude of yours.”

My gaze shoots down as I chuckle. “You sure aren’t afraid to speak your mind with me.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that.” She smiles.

And just like that, she’s eliminated the awkwardness I ordinarily experience right before I run out on a woman.

As her pussy presses against my thigh, I realize that my night has been the exact opposite of what I’d had envisioned. I’d intended to just fuck Mary out of my mind so I could concentrate on a plan for Tara, which I still don’t have, but Tara’s the furthest thing from my thoughts right now.

In silence, we simply lie in bed and stroke one another until my eyes begin to droop. Then I detect a snore, and a smile pulls at my lips. I can’t even remember the last time I had a date with a woman, but this has somehow altered into some form of a date, and now I’m considering sleeping over. Rattled by the intimacy she’s created, I ease out from under Mary without waking her.

After collecting my clothes, I comb my hair back with my fingers and watch her sleep peacefully on her stomach, the sheet resting low on her hips. Hesitancy pulls at me as I try to decide what to do.

Fuck it.

Turning around, I place my hand on the door handle and push it down. When I look back at her one more time, I’m mesmerized by the way the moonlight streaming through the window lights her copper curls, and I pause.

To stay or to go? Conflicting emotions fight inside me.

CHAPTER 19

Mary

I roll over, and again, I'm in an empty bed. After the evening we had, I'd hoped he wouldn't leave this time. Despondent, I sit up just as the bedroom door opens and Henry steps inside with a glass of water in hand.

I just stare at him, amazed that he actually spent the night, and he raises both brows. The sight of Henry standing there in his black boxers with bed hair, being at ease in my room, makes me forget how often he's pushed me away. He's attractive as hell, sex and sin embodied with that wolfish grin that's impossible to decipher.

"Morning," he greets, resting his shoulder against the doorframe while I ogle his hard calves, chiseled abs, and defined pecs.

"Morning."

Henry approaches me, gently combing my hair away from my face and handing me the glass.

"Thanks." After I gulp the water down, I set it on my nightstand. "Did you sleep well?"

He nods, and I add in a teasing tone, "I thought you'd left when I woke up."

His movement stops for a second, and he glances away. No matter the reason, I'm elated he's still here.

Since I don't have any classes today and tomorrow, I don't have any plans, so I get up to take a shower. But Henry stops me by my hips and runs his finger along the bite marks on my breasts before bending to kiss one and then the other.

"Hmmm." My arms loop around his neck as he straightens and picks me up by my ass.

I wind my legs around his middle when he pulls me into him, his shaft hardening through his boxers. With a groan, he walks us into the bathroom, attempting to kiss me along the way.

“No!” I purse my lips together and murmur, “Morning breath.” Then I slide down his body.

Chuckling, he tweaks my nipple. “I’ve licked your pussy and ass, and you’re entirely naked in front of me, but you’re worried about fucking morning breath?”

I swat his hand away from my breast and turn to face the mirror hanging over the sink, horrified when I see my disheveled state. I look thoroughly fucked with my curls in a mess, my lips swollen, and my skin marked by Henry’s touch. He presses himself against my back, kissing my neck as I bend forward to get my toothbrush and paste.

“Lover, we don’t have time for this,” I tell him, taking the cap off the tube of toothpaste.

“Lover?” he repeats with an arched brow.

“Yeah, it fits you.”

He grumbles, “Please just call me *Henry*.”

I laugh. “Maybe.” From the medicine cabinet, I get another toothbrush for Henry and hand it to him.

“But why don’t we have time?”

“We’re going to walk Strawberry.”

“Um, yeah, I might need to go.” He tries to turn around, but I halt him by his arm.

“No! You’re going with me.”

“You’re being very bossy again, baby.” He points his toothbrush at me. “I had other plans for you that definitely didn’t involve your dog.”

“We can still do that later today, but...for that to happen, you have to stay.”

Henry peers down at me with amusement. “Are you bargaining with me for a date?”

“Well, we haven’t really had a date,” I retort, and he’s lost in thought momentarily, retreating into himself, so I begin brushing my teeth as he squirts a dollop of toothpaste onto his toothbrush.

“Wouldn’t want to scare you away with morning breath,” he mutters around a grin, removing his boxers and brushing his teeth as he steps into the shower.

After he finishes shampooing, I join him, but he quickly vacates the stall to make space for me because it's too small for both of us. The way we move around each other is comfortable, even though I sense he's not used to this.

Hurriedly, I scrub my body clean, and after drying off, I slather on argan oil while a dressed Henry comes back inside the bathroom, rummaging through the containers on the counter to find some gel for his thick hair.

He holds up the bottle of oil, saying distractedly, "This smells good. Like you."

I'm loving this side of him. I'm loving that he doesn't run away from me anymore. "That's the argan oil I told you about."

"Ah, the magic oil for your skin."

Sliding open the drawer beneath the sink, I grab a pair of lace panties and step into them. "So you do listen to me when I talk."

"Unfortunately, yes." I catch the corner of his lip twitching. "Come on, I'm fucking starving, and I think your dog needs to do number two. She's already waiting at the door."

"Oh, is she? Let me throw on jeans and a shirt real fast." I pull my wet curls up into a bun and finish my morning routine.

Within ten minutes, I'm starting my day with my favorite man as Henry and I exit my apartment. The wind is getting cooler to mark the beginning of fall, and storm clouds darken the sky.

We cross the street to the park after buying coffee and doughnuts, and while we chat about ordinary things, Henry's remarkably open with me. Yet at the same time, he appears slightly on edge, repeatedly glancing around.

When I bend down to put Strawberry's leash around her neck, he comments, "I have to go, Mary."

My gaze shoots up in dismay. I was looking forward to us spending the day together.

In reaction to my obvious disappointment, Henry adds, "I just remembered that I have one thing to take care of for your brother, so you can come home with me if you want to."

Relieved that he still wants to hang out with me, I stand up, smiling. "Okay, I don't have any plans for today. Can I bring Strawberry?"

"Yeah, I guess the dog can come too."

Without thinking, I entwine my hand in his and he's motionless for a split second before he tangles our fingers, and after I run upstairs to get my

purse, we head to Henry's car to drive to his apartment.

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CHAPTER 20

Henry

I'm browsing through a document Adriano sent when it hits me that since I moved to the Loop four years ago, this is the first time I've felt comfortable enough with someone to have them present while I'm working in my apartment. But goddamn if Mary isn't sprawled out on my sofa behind me, watching TV and as relaxed as can be. Occasionally, she murmurs softly, laughs, or bolts upward when something exciting happens while she waits for me to finish my task. Even Strawberry is steadily sniffing around, apparently just as at ease here as her owner.

Still seated in my desk chair, I turn around and announce that she'll be the sole object of my attention now. "Done."

After throwing the remote onto the walnut coffee table, she stands up, approaching me. "So this is where you do all your hacking from."

I smile. "I don't just sit and program all day."

She waves my comment away, taking the Fedora from the corner of my desk and placing it on her head before perching herself in my lap and swinging us back to face the computer.

"Teach me something." She points to the hat and grins. "I want to be a black hat hacker too."

I chuckle at her, tilting the hat up with my thumb. "No can do. It requires a specific type of knowledge, skills, and creativity."

"I can be creative."

"I know," I whisper, pressing my front to her back as I log in to my network. "Hacking isn't glamorous, Mary. To be a good black hat hacker out to exploit data, you need to explore topics such as network ports, firewalls, and IP addresses. It's all boring programming stuff yet

exhilarating when you breach a system.” I look at her. “I can, however, do this. Tell me, what system would you like to access?”

She frowns.

“Is there anyone you want to track down? Or is there anything you want to know? Maybe something from your student records?”

Her eyes round. “Yes! They’re not announcing grades until Monday, and I want to know what I scored on my last art paper.”

With my arms around Mary’s middle, I instruct her, “Sign in to access your student account.”

“But they haven’t uploaded the grades yet.”

“If it’s going to be online on Monday, I’ll bet it’s already processed in the system but just not linked to your student account yet,” I explain, grinning at her when she types and mistypes her password twice. “Okay, I’m in.”

I slap her hands away from the keyboard as she laughs and rests back against me, and I find the portal the staff uses easily, breaching the firewall and gaining access.

“Oh, my god. I’ve never seen this screen,” Mary says in awe while I type her name.

“Here you go.” I laze back and read from the screen that she bombed the paper with a fifty-two. “An F, Mary?”

She smirks, not bothered. “I knew I screwed it up.”

“How?”

“I didn’t put any time into it. I’m not really enjoying my major. Let’s forget that.” She flings off the hat and rises. “We should go back to my place. Then we can watch *Narcos*. I’m still at episode five. I haven’t watched any more since the last one we saw together...”

“Neither have I,” I confess. I was getting used to following that show with her. “We can watch it here.”

“We can?”

“Yes, my technically challenged lover. You can just watch it on Netflix on my TV.”

She cocks her hip. “If I can’t call you *lover*, then you can’t either.”

“I have many more words I’d like to call you...” My eyes sweep over her.

Her smile is my reward, but she snaps her fingers in that enticing, bossy manner of hers. “Focus. *Narcos*?”

“Right. Okay, so I have an even better idea. Want to watch it on the big screen?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a projector.” Gesturing to the blank white wall to her left, I show her where we can display it.

“Oh, like *movie theater* big? Yes!”

“To do that, you need to sign in to Netflix on my laptop.” I reach behind me for my laptop and get a cable from the desk drawer and set them on the table as Mary drops down onto the couch again. Then I take the projector from my desk, arrange it on the corner of the table, and connect it to the laptop. Mary signs in to Netflix while I switch on the projector, and the laptop screen appears on the large wall.

I sit down next to her, and as I slide my finger over the mousepad on my laptop to start episode six, I unexpectedly feel her stroking my neck and it’s turning me on.

“This is awesome. Why have we been watching it on my tiny TV? I’m impressed.” She positions a pillow at the far end of the sofa and reclines against it.

Disregarding her question, I counter, “I’ve been doing something wrong if *this* impresses you.”

She stifles a chuckle, cocking up one knee, utterly relaxed. “This isn’t the first time you’ve impressed me and you know it.” Her foot moves toward my cock, but I catch her ankle, ignoring her words.

“I’d rather be doing something else than watching *Narcos*.” Sliding her to me, I place one leg over my thighs and bend down to nip the corner of her mouth, right at the beauty mark.

Then I cup her chin and stroke her lower lip with my thumb, briefly dipping it between her lips before I remove it and put it in my mouth, her chest rising and falling. And I think she’s getting turned on herself, but unfortunately, she pushes me away. “We can do that later. You need to learn to just *do nothing* once in a while.” Without waiting for a response, she leans back.

Fascinated by how perceptive Mary is, I smirk. She’s quite pragmatic about our lives, and her carefree ways are rubbing off on me. So as the opening credits start, I take Mary’s advice, lying behind her and pulling her close. While I spoon her, I recognize that something in me is changing, and this friendship is altering into something bordering on a relationship.

Somewhere deep down, I feel guilty for not informing her about Tara, because I get the sense that she's much more trustworthy than I initially thought and that if I'd told her in the beginning, she would've kept it to herself. But I simply can't take the risk that she might tell one of her brothers one day. Moreover, Mary would be upset if she ever found out, which is something I desperately want to avoid.

Since I don't want Mary to be alone in her apartment with its lack of security and Tara knowing her address, she stays over, and before I realize it, we're watching episodes back to back. It *is* freeing to take a break from working, or scheming, or being busy in general.

So we spend a long weekend binge-watching *Narcos*, living in a world of our own making with takeout and a TV series. I even manage not to be on my phone or behind my computer constantly.

However, I should've never let things slide with work, not even for a weekend, because others are now one step ahead of me. And I discover it in the worst way possible.

CHAPTER 21

Mary

This entire week, I've been on cloud nine because Henry and I were together all last weekend. For two whole days, we didn't leave his apartment and he showed me a side of him that he usually keeps to himself. Although I saw glimpses of a caring man before, now I'm positive that he isn't just someone who fucks around for fun. It took a while to find the chink in his armor, but I've penetrated it. He's letting me in, letting me see the man he is behind the façade of a hacker. That man isn't just tech savvy; he's also gentle, sometimes even tender, like when he caresses the birthmark above my lip.

While Rosalia and I are walking along the curb in the downtown Loop area on Friday night, my daydreams are interrupted when my phone vibrates in my jeans pocket. As I reach inside for it, a teenager darts past me, almost knocking me down.

Henry: I'm tempted to watch Narcos without you.

Mary: No! You can only watch when we're together.

Henry: Fine...because you're the boss.

My heart warms as Rosalia peeks at my screen.

"Well, well, well, you and Henry seem to be chummier. Has it happened?" she asks, her eyes crinkling.

"It happened, and it was so good." Biting my lip, I hesitate to share my faux pas yet continue, "But I said the stupidest thing. I said out loud *I wish you were my first.*"

"Ooh, no...That sounds like something I'd blurt out," she teases as we halt at the stoplight to cross the street.

"I know! I was thinking that I'm not usually as blunt as you are."

"How did he react?"

“How do you think?” I retort.

Around the widest smile, she says, “That there’s a Henry-shaped hole in your door where he ran out.”

I throw my head back, laughing. “Actually, no. He stayed.”

“What?!” Her gaze shoots to me as the light turns green, and we continue.

“I swear. He kind of let it slide, or he didn’t hear it. But he didn’t mention it at all, and it wasn’t uncomfortable between us either. Quite the opposite.”

“Hmmm, interesting that he didn’t bolt. But I still suggest you be cautious and not fall in love too quickly with a man like Henry.”

Rounding the corner, I admit, “Um, too late.”

“Oh, babe. That’s quick.”

“Well, we’ve been dancing around each other for a while. And the better I get to know Henry, the more new things I discover about him. He’s just very private because he’s used to being alone and working with computers and data. Anyway, I love the way he’s opening up to me.” Abruptly, I stop and seize Rosalia’s arm. “This is the place.”

She grimaces, evaluating the shady hole-in-the-wall bar. “Should we do this? Logan’s going to flip if he finds out. And I’m guessing Henry won’t be too happy with us either.”

“Well, they’re not here, and the rumors of the dogfights haven’t abated. They say one’s being held somewhere in the area.”

We shuffle inside to find the place filled with people, the smell of beer in the air. It seems more like a frat party with an older crowd, and I notice how sticky the floor is as we make our way across the room where I see some men disappearing down the hall.

“Rosalia.” I gesture toward them. “Look, they’re all going back there.”

Hurriedly, we pretend like we’re part of their group as they go down a flight of stairs in a narrow, poorly lit passageway, following them to a metal door that’s guarded by a bulky man.

The guy at the front says, “They’re with me,” motioning behind him without looking back, and the guard pushes down the door handle, granting the entire group, including Rosalia and me, access.

A commotion on the other side of the door has the bodyguard leaving his post, so Rosalia and I hurry inside but stop as we’re greeted with the

pungent scent of smoke and sweat while the cheers of a few dozen people assault our ears.

Rosalia grips my hand as her gaze rests on the same scene that I'm witnessing straight ahead. A square cage with a low fence of a few feet wide is set up in the center of the windowless room, and two pit bulls with crazed looks on their faces are being riled up and baited to attack each other by an audience.

I gulp, appalled. As I thought, this is the illegal dogfight. It's demented, horrific, and worse than anything I could've ever imagined. More dogs are chained in the corner of the room, abused and howling in pain. Some of them are emaciated and stare into the distance with miserable eyes that'll haunt me forever.

Rosalia mutters with a tremble in her voice, "I didn't expect this. Mary, wipe the shock off your face and let's get out of here."

"Oh, my god." My vision blurs and I flinch when the animals bark as we head toward the exit. "We can't just do nothing!"

When we reach the door, only seconds from escape, we turn to each other. Sweat forms on my palms and Rosalia's eyes are also filled with tears. "But we need to go before someone realizes that we don't belong here. What do we do? Call the police?" she grumbles with a disappointed glance, knowing they have even less power than we have.

"Well, it's either that or call Adriano, and then Logan will know I dragged you into this with me. But I can't leave. I-I just can't. We need to call the police, but neither you nor I can call it in and give our names with our Syndicate connection."

"We could give an anonymous tip?" she suggests, twisting her fingers together in nervousness.

"I'm afraid they won't act quickly then, and if what I've heard is true, they constantly find new locations, so this will be gone after tonight. Fucking lunatics. This is our chance for the police to bust them." I'm unable to allow this kind of brutality to carry on.

Warily, I peer around to make sure no one's watching us when a familiar tall brunette slips through the throng, approaching Rosalia and me and scolding me with a dubious look.

What the hell is Tara doing here?

CHAPTER 22

Henry

“Goddammit!” I fling my glasses onto my desk after checking my bank account.

I’m increasingly frustrated with trying to figure out how much I can give Tara to satisfy her and get my divorce, and I just keep coming up blank. Because although my Syndicate payments are starting to roll in, I only have twenty thousand dollars in my account, not nearly enough to pay her off.

At a time when things are finally getting better due to the Syndicate, due to Mary, something from my past has to come and threaten it, and it’s beginning to fucking piss me off.

Furthermore, I still don’t know the identity of Anonymous – the person who tried to hack into Club 7’s computer system – which is my main current assignment for the Syndicate. And I’m also not positive they aren’t somehow connected to Tara’s return.

Granted, I’ve been preoccupied with a petite beauty who’s managed to worm her way into my life ever since I lost the battle to keep her at a distance, and now it seems impossible to say *no* to her. So much so that she’s become my favorite diversion these days. She’s the only one who can pull me out of my thoughts and worries so that I can *do nothing*, as she calls it.

Without thinking twice, I drive toward the West Loop, eager to escape my life for a bit while I more thoroughly explore Mary’s body, a body that fuels my lust. She gives me what I need, yet I always want more.

Arriving at her apartment, I let myself in, as usual. Even though Mary hasn't given me a key, she's never given me shit about constantly breaking in. The door clicks open after I wriggle my credit card to get the bolt to unlock, and I'm surprised to find the entryway dark as Strawberry sprints toward me, barking loudly until she recognizes me and quiets down.

"Your greeting is getting much better." I continue into the living room where there's light coming from the table lamp, calling out, "Mary?"

I'm met with silence, glancing into the kitchen before I move to her bedroom with Strawberry on my tail, but she's nowhere to be found.

"Are you alone?" I ask the dog, fishing out my phone to dial Mary and bringing it to my ear.

Then I shake my head, realizing that Mary's rubbing off on me. *I'm talking to her dog!*

I clench my jaw when the call goes straight to voicemail, which is odd since we texted each other not even an hour ago.

"Dammit, Mary!" I roar aloud, gripping my device so hard my knuckles turn white.

Dread like I haven't experienced in years blisters through me, shadowed by anger. For a second, I'm livid that I possess this raging desire that seems to be turning into an obsession for this woman. It's after eleven, and the one woman whom I need to always answer her phone manages to be unreachable, and here I am, hanging on the edge of true madness.

Where the motherfucking hell is she?

CHAPTER 23

Mary

Cheers erupt, and I flinch inside this hellhole as Tara moves toward Rosalia and me with her brows furrowed.

“Do we know each other?” She nervously tucks her brown hair behind her ear.

Clearly, I didn’t leave an impression on her.

Rosalia widens her eyes, telling me to hurry. “Yes, we saw each other at Club 7.”

“Oh, yeah,” she mentions idly, biting the inside of her cheek and appearing to be upset as well. “What the hell’s going on here?”

Did she also sneak in?

“You’re not part of this?” I grimace, ready to get away from this sickening place as dogs bark.

“I’m too damn curious for my own good,” she grumbles with a quiver in her tone.

It seems as if she’s just as horrified as we are. However, before I can consider it further, a huge, scary-looking man who’s walking past us looks straight at Rosalia and me, and I grasp that we need to leave ASAP. Tara may be of use though.

“One of us needs to call the cops so that they can catch them before they have time to get away.” I hope Tara will make the call, yet she doesn’t even move a muscle.

Sliding my hand inside my pocket, I take out my phone, and thank goodness, I’m in luck. Holding it up, I say, “I’m not getting service down here.”

Fortunately, Tara takes hers out of her black purse that’s hanging off her shoulder and checks it. “I am.”

Without giving her time to think, I pull her to me by her wrist as Rosalia opens the door we came through that's still unmanned. Pacing down the hallway and back upstairs, we cross the threshold and I inhale a deep breath of the chilly wind as we escape the murky bar and cross the street to where a few people are out and about, feeling safer with others around us.

"Call 911," I suggest to Tara, and she presses her phone to her ear with a nod.

"There's a dogfight at the bar called *Buddy* down on Jackson Street... Yes... Um, I'm Tara P—"

Rosalia yanks my arm, so I swivel around to her without hearing what Tara says as she asks, "Who is she?"

"She's a friend of Henry's," I explain. "I don't know her."

"They'll be here soon," Tara informs us.

I should be relieved, but I'm stuck in a state of shock. Quietly, we wait until we see a police vehicle coming down the street. Thank god.

"We need to go," Rosalia urges, pulling me with her by my hand.

"Yeah, um." I glance at Tara, who observes me kindly enough, but there's something about her stare I don't like. Regardless, I'm glad she also can't tolerate this kind of cruelty, so I ask as sincerely as possible, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm a bit shaken up though. I'm going home too. I'm Tara by the way."

"I'm Mary." Then I point next to me. "This is Rosalia."

Rosalia smiles weakly and insists to me, "We need to go. Thank you, Tara."

After I dip my chin to Tara, Rosalia tows me with her to her car that's parked one block away.

Both of us are still rattled when Rosalia drops me off at my apartment.

"Don't tell anyone about where we went, okay, Mary?" she instructs me right before I step out of her car. "They'd go crazy if they found out."

"I won't," I reply absently and shut the door, moving inside the sanctuary of my building, wanting to feel the security of my home.

The images are vivid in my memory, and the smell of sweat still perforates my nostrils. A lone tear rolls down from the corner of my eye as

I shiver. Swiping it away, I push my key into my front door and enter, closing it and leaning back against it.

All of a sudden, Henry barges from the living room into the entryway, his manner irate, and stops halfway, perusing me from head to toe. Then cool rage underlines his clipped words, “Why was your goddamn phone off? And where the fuck were you?”

Shit! What do I say?

I can't drag Rosalia down with me, yet I can't lie to Henry. I always expect honesty from him, and I don't want to make up a story.

My stomach tightens as our gazes collide. His silver-grey eyes are like shards of ice as he prowls toward me, more infuriated than I've ever seen him before.

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CHAPTER 24

Henry

Within fifteen minutes, I've lost all grip on my emotions and my patience is running thin. With Mary's phone being off, I can't even track her, so going home isn't a viable option. But waiting is driving me nuts.

Eventually, I decide to call Adriano because the sheer anger firing through me trumps anything else. Her safety is most important. Taking a deep breath, I yank my phone from my pocket and tap Adriano's name, but just then, the front door creaks open. Ending the call before it rings, I stride into the entryway, letting out a frustrated sigh as I scan Mary from top to bottom for injuries.

"Why was your goddamn phone off? And where the fuck were you?" I charge ahead, towering over her when I stop directly in front of her.

Her posture screams anxiousness, like she's been caught doing something wrong. She stares at the floor, so I cup her chin, forcing her to look up, yet she acts like she's out of it.

"Mary!" I bark, and she rears back. "I've been going fucking crazy with worry. Talk to me."

"Why are you here?" she mutters as if she's a million miles away and she just now comprehends I'm here.

Suspicious, I respond, "What do you mean? It's after midnight. Where have you been?"

Mary's hesitation to answer has my heartbeat drumming in my ears. Where was she? Why is she acting so strange? Cynicism that's inherent to my personality has me questioning everything.

She doesn't meet my eyes. Not even when I seize her arms and shake her. "Mary. Jesus Christ!"

"Stop shouting. Please," she implores.

“Then tell me where you’ve been!” I demand as she struggles to break free.

“You’re just going to get mad!”

“I already am,” I counter, releasing her and raising a brow. “Why can’t you just fucking obey orders? Do you even realize how dangerous it is when we can’t reach you?”

“Oh, my god! Obey? You hang out with Adriano too much. Calm down. As you can see, I’m fine.”

I wave my hand, indicating that I’m still waiting for an answer.

She sighs heavily. “I found out where a dogfight was being held...and I went there,” she murmurs, and I go off.

“Are you fucking kidding me! Where was it? And you went alone?”

“It was in a bar, downtown.” She pauses and scratches her eyebrow.

“Mary,” I prompt, clenching my jaw. “Did you go by yourself?”

Her gaze meets mine cautiously. “Um, no. With Rosalia.”

“Logan was also with you?” I’m going to kill him.

“No, only Rosalia and me. He doesn’t know, so please don’t tell him. We’re both fine.”

“Goddammit, Mary! You two went alone?” Now it’s starting to make sense. “Did Rosalia rope you into this?”

“No, we both wanted to go. It was just so much worse than what we expected. It was horrible.” She clutches her hair and tries to walk past me, but I inch sideways to block her path, making it clear that she needs to answer all my questions first.

“What exactly happened at this bar?” I ask, my chest rising and falling more sedately now that I’ve confirmed that she’s unharmed.

“We discovered a back room where the dogfights were taking place, and we knew we had to leave immediately, but we wanted to make sure to call the cops so they could bust them. I want to check the local news to see if anything’s mentioned.”

“We can do that in the morning,” I inform her while I continue my interrogation, simply because I need to for my own sanity. “This still doesn’t explain why your phone was off.”

“I didn’t have any service down there and my battery died just now.” She palms my cheek, going up on her tiptoes. “I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad.”

I grip her hand, holding it still. “I’m fucking furious that you went alone, Mary. This isn’t the first time we’ve had this discussion, and you promised Adriano and me that this wouldn’t happen again. Are you being honest? Is that all that happened?”

A line wrinkles her forehead. “Why would I lie? You already caught me being out late.”

My gut instinct tells me she’s telling the truth. “Never leave your apartment without your charged phone. Do you understand?”

She fumbles with the top button of my shirt. “Yes.”

“Mary, I’m not budging on this. I need to always be able to reach you, day or night.”

“Okay. I’ll make sure I charge it more often,” she assures me, amazing me by being so agreeable but at the same time, scaring the shit out of me with the strong pull I feel toward her. “Those smartphone batteries suck though.”

“I know, but promise me,” I order.

She holds my gaze as I look into her hazel eyes that captivate me. “Promise.”

And as we stare at each other, I can see her retreating back into herself, like when she first got here and was a million miles away, and then a tear rolls down her cheek as she blurts out, “It was hell to see the dogfight. Those people are crazy.”

I dry her tear with the pad of my thumb, and the combination of her earnest face and the fact that she’s being honest helps me to get over my anger. On top of that, knowing how much Mary loves dogs softens me, so I wrap my arms around her middle and inhale a deep breath now that she’s back. When she grabs my shirt, clinging to me like a lifeline, my irritation slips away. She lays her cheek on my chest, and I kiss the top of her head but pull back when Strawberry chuffs from the living room.

Mary walks into the other room to her dog lying on the couch, and she rubs her head distractedly. Then she wipes away another tear as I move toward the kitchen to get her a glass of water.

As I turn on the faucet and hold the glass beneath the stream of water, Mary comments, “Oh, someone you know was there too, by the way. Tara.”

I whirl back around so fast my head spins. “What? Tara was at the dogfight?” Panic fills me. However, if Tara had told Mary who she legally is to me, I definitely would’ve heard about it from Mary.

Then fury returns with a vengeance as I turn off the faucet and set the glass on the kitchen counter.

Mary sinks down onto the sofa with Strawberry in her lap. “Yes. But she wasn’t involved in it though. Tara recognized me, and when I talked to her, she was just as shocked about the dogfight as I was. She’s the one who called the cops, so Rosalia and I didn’t have to.”

While my blood is boiling, I probe in a level tone, “What did she say?”

“Not much. We only talked for about five minutes,” she replies, seemingly frank. “Who is she *really*, Henry? Someone you dated?”

Evidently, Tara didn’t tell her she’s my wife. “Yeah. But that was a long time ago.” I’m incapable of lying to her face, so I leave it at that.

“Oh,” is all she says, resting her head back, oblivious to the storm raging inside me. Running after the facts isn’t a position I enjoy. I knew my concern over Mary was justifiable because there’s something that ties me to her. Somehow, I felt that she was in danger.

I’m livid at Tara and have to find out what’s going on, yet I’m torn since I don’t want to leave Mary alone. Needing to unwind, I sit next to her as Strawberry jumps into her basket. When Mary cuddles into me, I lie back sideways on the sofa and arrange her halfway on top of me as we hold on to each other, limbs entangled. I stroke her cheek, running my hand through her curls, while silence stretches on around us.

For a long time, I stare at the ceiling until I feel Mary relaxing into me as sleep descends upon her. Standing up with her in my arms, I carry her to the bedroom. She rouses when I strip her down to her panties, and as I sneak underneath the covers with her, she nestles into me. I need this too, so I spend the night with Mary while I plot how to take care of the problem from my past.

What the hell is Tara’s game?

She’s pushed me too fucking far, and there *will* be consequences.

CHAPTER 25

Henry

The following night, I'm seated on a worn-out futon inside Tara's apartment, aware that she's on her way up. In the dark, I cross my ankle over my knee, my elbow resting on the armrest and my Smith & Wesson dangling from my grip. When the door screeches open, she steps inside and locks it instantly, letting out a sigh with her back to me.

"You're no safer in here than you are out there," I announce and she spins around, switching on the lights next to the doorframe.

"Jesus Christ, Henry! What the hell are you doing here?" she yells, freezing when she sees my gun.

In my mind, I'm choking her for even talking to Mary. "I told you to stay away from Mary."

Her eyes round. *Did she not expect Mary to tell me?*

"I just happened to see her there," she responds in that arrogant goddamn tone that's been aggravating me ever since she started blackmailing me.

I rub my hand that's holding my gun over my mouth. "I don't believe that."

"What is it with her? Who cares if we helped some dogs?" She cuts me a seething glare, but winces as I leap up and move forward.

"I care," I retort, forcing her backward until she hits the door with a loud thud and hissing in her face, "I warned you once, and I don't like repeating myself. You're on my shit list now, and trust me"—I trace the barrel of my weapon down her temple—"that's one place you don't want to be."

Her throat works as it flies through my mind how easily I could kill her and dispose of her body as if she never existed. She has no idea who she's

messed with. But I need my files at City Hall unlocked first.

“I swear to god, go near Mary again, and the entire fucking deal is off.”

“Are you threatening to hurt me, Henry Pierce?”

“Yes, I am. Did you not get that? And stop calling me Henry Pierce just to remind me that you’re Mrs. Pierce.”

Her brows pull together as she concedes, “Fine. I just want my money.”

“I know that, and I may have found a way to alter Club 7’s financial data and steal small amounts monthly without compromising the security system,” I lie, causing her eyes to twinkle with dollar signs through her nervousness.

I’ll give her everything I earn just to get her away from here before she ruins my relationship with the Syndicate.

“How?” she inquires softly.

Slowly, I grin and step back. “No. That’s not how this works. I want my files at City Hall unlocked and the signed divorce papers from you. I can get you a shitload of money this month, but you’re not getting a penny until you give me my divorce and leave the Loop forever.”

Tara bites the inside of her cheek, mulling over her options, and then proposes tentatively, “I need some insurance too. I’ll give you the divorce papers now and take care of your files later – when you give me the cash. I want two hundred thousand, Henry.”

“Give me the fucking papers,” I command, and she fumbles inside her purse that’s hanging over her shoulder and fishes out a manila envelope, which I yank out of her hands, peeking inside to see her signature.

Studying her, I realize she’s smarter than I’ve given her credit for. She knows she has the upper hand. I would’ve been better off getting my files unlocked, and then I’d be able to hack into the system and change my marital status myself.

Although I’m irritated because I acted before I came up with a solid plan, I’m resigned to the fact that at least I’ve made some progress in ending this faster. Two hundred thousand – I might be able to get that much for a couple of hours, just to hand over as she unlocks my files, and then I’m going to eliminate her.

“Give me two weeks, until the last Friday of the month. Then you’ll change my marital status before I hand over the cash.”

“Okay.”

“But”—I edge forward and she skids backward against the door again, jumping out of my reach, scared—“all bets are off if I hear that you’ve been around Mary.”

She nods unsteadily. At least, I made her fear me more. Jerking open the door, I storm out, slamming it shut behind me and returning to my car to head to Mary’s since she’s alone in that shitty building.

I’m not sure whether this Tara situation is making me crazy due to my Syndicate connection or my relationship with Mary. The lines have blurred, and it seems that my life has begun to revolve around keeping one woman safe and in my bed, preferably seated on my cock, as opposed to keeping my job.

Maybe I’m thinking too much with my dick?

After entering Mary’s bedroom, the first thing I do is find her trench coat and hide a tracker the size of a rice grain in the inside pocket.

Then I strip my clothes until I’m naked and climb into the canopy bed, waking her by softly calling her name, “Mary.”

Rolling over, she mumbles, “Hey. I was hoping you’d come.”

I lift the sheets to find her in her panties and a tank top. “I couldn’t stay away.”

Her lips twitch as she observes me as if she senses my inner torment. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I couldn’t stay away because your fucking locks are the worst, Mary,” I grind out, preparing for an argument.

Yet she surprises me by lifting my arm so she can settle herself in the crook, commenting, “I don’t believe it’s just because of my locks. Seems like someone’s starting to warm up to people.”

“Not people. Only you,” I admit, closing my eyes while the heat of her lush body seeps into mine.

Again, she shocks me by saying, “Well, I’m warming up to you too. I won’t do these things and lie to you anymore, Henry...But promise me that you’ll always be honest as well. From now on, don’t push me away or disappear on me. I went through that with Keano, and I always had the feeling he was lying to me; that’s the most awful feeling in the world, and we shouldn’t do that to each other. I like you...a lot.”

With that comment, my eyes fly open and I stare at her in amazement. In the space of a few agonizing heartbeats, time is suspended while we watch one another, having found some common ground. Until now, she's never called me out on my lack of trust in people and how I've pushed her away in the past.

Neither of us moves, and as I lie there, I'm barraged by an undercurrent of assorted emotions. How is this woman able to see right fucking through me? She's been honest and deserves the same from me, yet I can't do it because she's my boss's sister. I can't tell Mary about Tara since she could inform Adriano, and that can never happen. But I'm still unable to stop myself from wanting to possess her, completely.

I cup her chin in a greedy grip. "Then prove it, baby. Give yourself to me fully." But I don't allow her any time to think, diverting her as I avoid answering her question. Instead, I guide her hand downward.

"Henry," Mary's husky voice drawls. "You're hard..." The pad of her thumb circles the head of my cock.

She touches me with the same hunger I feel in my soul. A low growl escapes my lips when she explores the dark line of hair leading to my dick.

"Make me come, Mary." I let out a deep, guttural groan when she pumps my shaft while inspecting her own movement. "Faster." My eyelids fall shut again as she increases her speed.

She lays her head on my chest, creating that prison of intimacy that scares me less and less. I'm distracted by her ruthless strokes that send my senses careening through the ceiling and drive myself up into her hand, my breath coming harsh and fast.

I can't help but rest my palm on her back, descending and digging my fingers into her ass while she jerks me off, and I feel the climax bearing down on me. Nevertheless, the need to brand her is painfully overwhelming. I take what I want without considering the ramifications anymore, so I seize her wrist to stop her movement.

"Come here." I sit up and hold out my hand, guiding her so she's kneeling and leaning forward slightly, her stomach against the top of the upholstered headboard.

"Grab the edge, Mary," I say while I rub my palm down her spine toward her behind and spank her once. "Your skin is always so soft."

Then I push my finger between her ass cheeks and Mary responds with a groan as I slither lower to her pussy, spreading her open and circling her

wetness before moving back up. Mary's seemingly photoshopped skin has enthralled me from the day we met, my rough hands against her perfectly smooth flesh inciting sensations I've never experienced before with a woman.

Pressing against Mary's back, I glide my cock against her pussy.

"Christ, you're so fucking wet." I fondle her breasts, dropping a kiss on her shoulder.

"I want you *inside me*," she groans.

I grin, intending to take every part of her, and tangle my fingers in her curls at the back of her head, directing her to the floor on her knees and feeding her my cock while I'm seated on her bed.

"Take my cock, Mary."

As I fuck her mouth, there's nothing gentle about the way I handle her, and she welcomes my assault eagerly because we both want it. I choke her on my cock and slide out, leaking pre-come that dribbles down the shaft, and Mary catches it halfway down with the tip of her tongue, tracing the path all the way back up to the source.

"Fuck!" I tug her head back because I don't want to come in her mouth.

With urgency, I arrange her in the same position on the bed as before and guide her to bend forward as she clutches the top of the headboard while I nose my way down her spine. And without any hesitation, I taste her pussy.

"Ah! Henry," she whimpers, bending lower to give me better access.

She loves to have her pussy eaten, and her absolute faith and submission to me has me concentrating on her pleasure. She makes circles with her hips, teasing my mouth with her core as I lap up to her ass, alternately licking and pushing the tip of my finger inside, and she clenches her ass in response.

"Don't clench, baby. Relax."

She takes a deep breath, and I can slip my finger in, preparing her.

"Ow!"

"Shhh..." I cement my lips over her pussy while I finger her ass.

When she screams out her orgasm and is dripping wet, I move up, still kneeling behind her, and nudge the head of my dick against her ass, sliding it up and down to spread her wetness, whispering into her ear, "When I said give yourself to me fully, I meant it..."

She hesitates, but at this point, she's so worked up and under my spell that she submits. Angling forward slightly, she grips the headboard. Then I shift toward her, ever so slowly, while holding the base of my cock.

"Relax, Mary."

She surrenders and exhales, unclenching so I can ease myself inside. As her flesh gives, I grunt. It feels fucking incredible, and I have to tense every muscle to keep from shooting my load before I even get started. With my chest against her back, I secure my arm around her and begin to explore her slit with my fingers.

"Oh, my god," Mary breathes, overwhelmed by sensations while I let her adjust to my length buried inside her sweet ass.

"You're so tight, baby. I can't go slow, so hold on."

Her head falls back against my chest, her face a mixture of pleasure and pain as I grind my hips and rub her clit.

Then I place my finger against her lips and she parts them. "Suck it."

As I push my finger into her mouth, my other hand skims over her stomach, palming her pussy. I rotate my middle finger and push it in while my cock glides in and out of her ass.

"I feel...full."

Smirking against her cheek, I lodge my arm around her again to hold her tightly, and I thrust all the way into her ass, bottoming out. When I slide out, I plunge my finger into her pussy. Then I get a rhythm going and Mary arches magnificently as I fuck her.

Her arm comes back to hook around my neck while she grips the headboard with her other hand. Violent passion bursts out, and I keep up my brutal pace until our skin shines with a thin layer of perspiration.

"I'm going to come so fucking hard in your ass," I breathe hotly against her ear, and out of nowhere, she begins to come, her muscles taut. I can feel each loud cry of her orgasm deep in my groin as she whimpers and writhes, shuddering and trembling.

I pound inside her, and as Mary leans forward again, I grasp the sides of her waist and hammer into her. Vicious. Animalistic. I shove in deep once more, gripping her hair and tugging while I groan, my hips bucking, and then I explode superbly. I don't think I can quit coming because it feels so fucking good, so I continue my pumping until I release the last drop.

Quickly, I ease my cock out of her, and we both collapse on the bed. Slick bodies pressed together, limbs entangled while we return back to

earth. Thoroughly spent. Thoroughly depleted.

Thoroughly aware that by getting more involved with Mary, I might be creating an enormous problem for myself – if I don't handle Tara sooner rather than later.

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CHAPTER 26

Mary

I wake with a warm, hard body spooning me, and it's as if I have a furnace in my bed. Henry's arm is locked around my waist, keeping my back to his front, his breath caressing my nape. Careful not to wake him, I slowly roll over and watch him sleeping peacefully, noticing how big he is next to me.

I'm sore everywhere yet without any regrets. I gave myself to him willingly, wanting to plunge into his world of passion. Although I have no idea where we stand, I sense him becoming as attached to me as I am to him. He might not speak the words, but his actions betray a lot. A warm feeling pools inside as I trace his unshaven jawline, and he rouses, nuzzling my throat.

"Morning," I say.

He grunts in reaction and drags me closer to him while I stroke the side of his face. For several minutes, we stay in this idyllic position, and in this moment, I recognize that I'm irrevocably in love with Henry. He's the man who makes my heart skip a beat with the attention he lavishes on me.

"Morning. What time is it?" He shifts onto his back and reaches for his phone on the nightstand.

Seeing his clothes scattered on the floor, I smile, liking that he's a part of my life. I adore how Henry comes to me at night.

All of a sudden, he cups my chin. "What are you thinking, Mary? You were a million miles away."

I want to ask what we are, but I'm not that bold. And I don't want to push him too much. I let him know last night that I just want us to be honest and not play games, which is step one.

"I was thinking that you sleep here a lot and you haven't even taken me on an official date," I pipe in, winking at him, but he releases me and his

dark brows dip, his eyes narrowing into deep impenetrable slits.

Crap! Did I say too much?

I can literally feel him pulling away – again. But at this point, it’s beginning to annoy me, especially after the progress we made last night.

Henry rubs a hand down his face and sits up, apparently at a loss for words. He gets out of bed and calmly starts collecting his clothes. “I need to go.”

Seriously? I’ve let him set the pace for so long, and this one comment spooks him? After I let him fuck my ass? He needs to give me something too, some kind of commitment. However, this time, I don’t speak. Instead, I watch him rush to get dressed before he unexpectedly bends down and places a kiss on my lips.

“Stop shooting daggers at me, Mary. You’re even sexier when you’re mad.” Then he swipes the sheet down quickly and sucks a nipple before I roll over, laughing, and he smacks my ass, hard. “Go shower and be ready in an hour, okay?”

I feel a smile pulling at my lips as I nod, and he strolls out. Elated, I jump out of bed, trying to think of something nice to wear while I head toward the bathroom to shower.

Exactly an hour later, I’m checking my phone to see if there have been any reports about the dogfights in the Loop, and I find an article in the *Chicago Tribune* about how several men have been arrested.

That reminds me that I need to text Rosalia.

Mary: I had to tell Henry where I was because he was at my apartment. He knows you were with me.

Rosalia: Shit! He’s going to tell Logan, and Logan’s gonna be pissed!

Mary: Then distract him so he forgets why he was mad.

Rosalia: Yeah, that might work with Henry but not with Logan. You need to persuade Henry not to tell Logan.

Mary: I’ll see what I can do.

Rosalia: Work your charm on him!

My front door opens, and I walk into the entryway just as Henry closes it. When our eyes lock, both of us freeze. I’m in a plum wraparound dress

with flats, and he's smokin' hot in charcoal slacks and a vest over a sky-blue dress shirt. And his thick hair looks like he just got out of bed, a perfect mess.

"You look beautiful, Mary."

"Thank you. You look very handsome."

He holds out his arms. "All for you."

I close the distance between us and he has to bend down to meet my kiss. "God, I love it when you don't wear heels." And he hooks his arms around me, picking me up.

Chuckling, I give him a hard kiss, knowing he's got something planned for our date. "So where are we going?"

"We're just going to watch *Narcos* today, right?"

I pull back, and he lets me slide down his hard body.

"What?" I retort, momentarily disappointed.

"Just kidding." He holds open the door for me, and I entwine my hand with his. Before we exit, he whistles once and Strawberry comes running to the door. "Come on, girl. You're coming with us."

"I'm very curious to see where we're going." I'm a sucker for a good surprise.

As if he reads my thoughts, he replies, "I know you love surprises, Mary. Carmine mentioned it once. He hates them."

"It's true. Adriano and Carmine loathe surprises, but I fucking love them."

As he tows me toward the elevator, he smiles, and it's that lighthearted smile he shows more and more when he's with me.

After Henry parks the car, he steps out and opens my door. "We'll be right back, so Strawberry can wait out here."

As I peer around, I notice a vet across the street before Henry tugs me along with him, and we enter through the revolving doors where a receptionist greets him a bit too enthusiastically, "Mr. Pierce, you can continue to exam room two."

"Thank you," he replies, glancing at me and expertly ignoring her flirtation while remaining courteous.

“Mr. Pierce, what did you do...” I whisper with anticipation as we stop at room number two and from behind me, Henry opens the door, revealing the veterinarian with a few of the pit bulls who are in a much better state than they were in yesterday.

Henry mutters into my ear, “I knew you were worried about them. The dogs were rescued after the cops apprehended a dozen people; the organizers are in jail.”

I turn my head sideways to peck his cheek. “Best surprise ever.” I’ve peeled down the layers of Henry, and the man beneath is even better than what I imagined. I always sensed that there was a considerate man hidden behind the distant hacker he ordinarily portrays. And it seems like Henry knows me quite well these days too. “I read in the article in the *Tribune* that they were arrested.”

“Hey, Dr. Jameson,” Henry greets him.

“Henry, welcome back.” Then he addresses me, “You must be Mary.”

“I am.” I step forward to shake his hand before he continues assessing one pit bull lying on an examination table.

“Well, you saved these dogs, Mary. Some had severe internal wounds, and I only had to put one to sleep.”

“Oh, no,” I mumble, stroking one dog who seems a little lethargic. “Did you give this one medicine?”

“Yes, he was scratching open his stitches, but they’ll heal soon.” He looks behind him at three dogs in a basket who are all trying to climb out. “They’re doing much better.”

Henry pulls me over to them. “Shall we take these out for a walk?”

“Yes. Thanks, Henry. They could use some fresh air. They’ve been cooped up inside. But not too long in the sun; maybe bring them back after lunch.”

“We will.” Henry stoops low and hoists one pit bull out of the basket, and the others with less severe injuries jump out as the doctor hands me three leashes which I secure around their necks.

“They’re all pretty calm,” I note, having thought these dogs would be more vicious. Last night, they seemed brutal.

“These three are young, and I don’t think they were trained to fight yet. Or at least not for as long as the other dogs, whom I had to contain because they tried to attack my assistant and me.”

“What are you going to do with them?” I question.

“That depends on if they can be taught to trust humans again. If that doesn’t happen, they’ll have to be put down.”

“That’s so sad.”

“It is. The owners don’t comprehend the repercussions of what they’re doing.”

“They don’t care about the dogs, only about money,” Henry comments, and the doctor nods in agreement.

In awe, I stare at Henry, who absolutely avoided dogs a few weeks ago, now being more at ease around them. That’s my influence on him, and I revel in it.

Ready to take the dogs out for their exercise, Henry leads the way back outside without telling me where we’re going.

Thankfully, I wore black tights underneath my wrap-around dress because the chilly fall wind is strong enough to cool my cheeks as Henry and I saunter along a garden path at Oak Street Beach.

There’s almost no one else around when we reach the shore, where I release the leashes and all four dogs – three pit bulls and little Strawberry – sprint down the beach in excitement.

Henry picks up a wayward stick and flings it far away, letting the pit bulls run after it. Strawberry’s much slower and tries to keep up, causing us both to laugh at her.

I rush to get ahead of Henry and turn around, walking backward. “You can’t deny anymore that I’ve rubbed off on you.”

A crease forms between his brows. “How so?”

“You like dogs now,” I reply before I swivel around when he leaps forward. “Always too slow...”

I hear him bark out a laugh, so I stop and he stumbles against me, effortlessly steadying me by groping my behind.

“Want to race?” he whispers.

I shove his hands off me and grin daringly at him. “I’m afraid you won’t be able to keep up.”

He gives an answering twitch of his lips. “I’ll give you a head start, shorty.”

“Oh, so arrogant,” I remark and spin around, taking off toward Strawberry.

As I glance back, Henry breaks out into a run and is on me within seconds.

“Urgh! I need an hour head start with your giant long legs.”

Chuckling, he lifts me off the ground, but when I struggle, we topple backward into the sand and Strawberry jumps around us, barking at Henry while I’m on top of him on my back.

As I flip over and plant my elbows next to his ears, I notice him smiling at her.

“She’s protective of you.” He lifts his head, and as I shift my fingers into his hair, he grazes his lips over mine, whispering, “Thank god, because I can break into your apartment much too easily.”

“Not one word about my apartment, please. It took me forever to convince Adriano to let me move into one that I can afford after I graduate. My brothers pay my rent, you know.”

“That’s why you live in that building and not in the Astoria?” he probes.

“Yes. I don’t want them to have to pay so much for me.”

“But what would be your dream house?”

“Huh?”

“If money wasn’t an object, what would be your dream house?” he asks, curious.

That’s easy. “Luca’s penthouse is my dream house, but I’ll never be able to afford that. Or Astoria also has the most exquisite apartments, but they’re way out of my price range. I’ll never make as much as Adriano or Luca.”

He makes a noise like a grunt and appears to be a little upset or lost in thought, although his expression is unreadable. However, the moment is interrupted when barking reaches our ears, and we both look at where the dogs are splashing and chasing each other.

Henry groans when I stand up, adjusting his pants as I tease, “Our dogs need attention before they run off.”

The corner of his mouth kicks up. “Only one dog is yours.”

“Maybe I should adopt another one?” I muse aloud as I swipe the sand off my dress.

Henry stacks his hands behind his head, grinning. “If you get more dogs, then I don’t think you’ll have space for me anymore in your apartment.”

Strawberry's circling me, trying to get me to play, so I edge toward the shore with her, saying to Henry, "I'll always have space for you, and you know it."

A lopsided smile eases all the way up to his silver-grey eyes before I turn and trail Strawberry to the ebbing water.

For over half an hour, I entertain the dogs, the sensation of utter freedom they give off infectious. Only animals can make me feel carefree like a child again, and as grown-ups, it's nice to be taken back to our childhoods every once in a while.

And even though I sense the heat of Henry's gaze on me the entire time, it never makes me uncomfortable. When I glance over my shoulder, he's observing me with an affectionate look. So I wink at him as he sits up and takes out his phone, beckoning me to him while he dangles the leashes from his finger.

Then I see two guys coming from the direction we came, approaching Henry. He gets up to meet them halfway, and after he hands over the leashes, they dip their chins to me.

Oh, they're Syndicate soldiers.

Henry walks up to me, rubbing his hands up and down my arms. "You're completely flushed. Let's go. They'll take the dogs back to the vet's and Strawberry to your apartment. Give them your keys and they'll meet you at the entrance of your building later to give them back."

"Okay. And what are we doing?"

"We're not done yet, baby. Now our date starts."

"More surprises!" I exclaim, biting my lip, and his eyes follow the movement closely. "I'm impressed."

"I felt like an ass for not taking you on a proper date before now."

"Wow! Henry feels guilt over how he's treated a woman?"

"You're not just *a* woman," he retorts and tangles our hands, leading me back toward the garden path.

We retrace our route along the shore to an area that's separated by a stretch of picturesque lawn and contemporary buildings leading into an open garden. By now, it's midday and the sun is hanging high in the clear blue sky.

The real world invades us as other people go about their lives around us, and of course, two women gawk at Henry. I smirk at how he ignores them,

but as they pass me, all long and lean, I feel very short and a little plump, more so than normal.

“What’s wrong?” Henry questions, since I’ve apparently betrayed my emotions with my facial expression.

“Nothing. I just felt a little plump next to those skinny girls.”

His brows shoot up. “Plump? Why? You’re just as skinny as they are.”

I send him a blank stare. “Um, no. I have *Betty Boop* hips and ass.”

“Trust me, not one guy I know prefers a flat ass over your delectable behind,” he teases, groping my ass with a possessive squeeze.

“So that’s why you seem to always be with model-like types? For example, bartender girl, Jordana,” I point out and instantly regret not holding back.

Yet he throws his arm over my shoulder and kisses my temple, uttering, “No. That’s why I was with her only once, but you’re in my arms almost every damn night.”

Then he folds his hand around my neck and angles my head up to capture my mouth, thrusting his tongue inside once, twice. Kissing like this drives women to sin, and I take it. All of it. With pleasure before he pulls back.

As we reach the garden, Henry guides me to a white, fenced gazebo with branches running up the posts into a braided roof. The inside benches have ivory cushions, and I notice a platter of scrumptious food without any meat – only cheese, roasted vegetables, fresh bread, and a wide array of strawberries and grapes.

Henry takes the two steps up to the entrance, holding out his hand for me. When I look up, I gawk at his gorgeous profile as his hair is highlighted by the sun and he wears a smile he only bestows on me – I hope. And with that, he conquers another piece of my heart.

After I place my small hand in his large one, he escorts me inside. “Did you arrange all of this in the hour you were gone this morning?”

He nods and sits down, taking me with him and placing his arm behind me on the wooden structure.

“Oh, my god,” I blurt out dreamily, “no one has ever done anything like this for me.”

“Really?” he asks, a wrinkle in his forehead.

“Really. My dates usually take me out for coffee or dinner,” I remark, picking a grape from the cluster and holding it up for him before, lightning

fast, he bites my fingers and steals it, keeping my fingers locked between his teeth.

Amused, I try to yank free. “You’re hurting me.”

Immediately, he opens his mouth. “Fuck, sorry.” And he lifts my hand to inspect the mark.

I snicker. “Just kidding. What kind of wimp do you take me for?”

He nips the corner of my mouth. “Not a wimp. You’re just so petite that I need to be careful not to break you.”

“You fuck me senseless – in my ass, I might add – and now you’re worried about breaking me?” I counter huskily, and he laughs loudly.

“That, I know you can handle.” He looks down, our eyes meeting. “And you like it when I fuck you senseless.”

“That I do,” I admit right before I hear voices, and then a couple strolls into the garden.

Henry gives me a devilish smirk, his hand skimming up my thigh, so before he opens his mouth, I say, “No! People will see us.”

In reaction, he grins wider and brings up his palms. “I didn’t say a thing.”

“Oh, please. We both know what you were thinking.”

He shrugs, tossing a strawberry into his mouth. “Your delicious ass brings it out in me. My brain can only focus on one thing.”

“Well, tell your brain to save it for later.”

“I will if you let me lick your pussy when you suck my cock later,” he whispers around a wicked grin.

“Fine,” I compromise, needing to stop him before I let him seduce me right here, out in the open.

Adjusting his slacks, he pacifies jokingly, “Ah, that works. Later then, baby.”

Henry stretches his legs as I break off chunks of bread and feed us. We finish the platter in record time since we’re both hungry, talking and relaxing for over two hours before Henry announces, “I guess we better get going. I need to go home to change and stop by the club. Then I’ll see you tonight.”

I relish how he comes to me every night, without question, and that we’ve had this routine ever since we first slept together. “Okay. I’ll probably be watching Netflix.”

“Don’t watch *Narcos* without me, Mary,” he warns me with a smile as he rises.

“I wouldn’t dare,” I retort right before we return to the car for Henry to drop me off at home.

As we pull up to my building, I remember something. “By the way, can we keep it between us that Rosalia was with me the night of the dogfight? Logan will go off on her if he finds out, and I promise we’ll never do anything like that again.”

Henry narrows his eyes. “Only this once, Mary. And you two owe me.”

“Thank you!” I smile at him as I step out of his vehicle.

When I get up to my apartment, I hurriedly get Strawberry to take her out for a quick walk at the park across the street. It’s busy, as usual, for this time of day, but as I wander around, I notice the same man twice. He’s wearing ripped jeans, and both times, he’s smoking a cigarette.

To make sure I’m not being paranoid, I turn around and go back the way I came, passing him again. Then as I continue, I refrain from glancing backward until Strawberry pulls the leash toward my right and I get a chance to peek sideways, catching him behind me one more time.

This is weird, and I’ve promised my brothers and Henry to be more aware and cautious. So when three joggers move past me, I rush forward, tugging Strawberry with me, hoping to disrupt his line of sight while my hands get sweaty and nervousness rakes up my spine.

Who is he and what should I do?

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CHAPTER 27

Henry

When I check my rearview mirror, I see my own smile. My life, which has been an endless string of bad luck since I was born, has finally changed, due to the Syndicate and due to Mary. It's been such a long time since I felt so connected to a woman, and I think I might actually be happy. Yet until I've sorted out my problem with Tara, I refuse to risk whatever this is. I should've told Mary about Tara, because if she ever finds out now, it'll hurt her that I didn't trust her enough. But this feeling of guilt, which up to now has been a foreign concept for me, is nagging at that small part of my conscience because Mary never pushes me, never questions me, and trusts me blindly. She's kept everything between us private, not telling her brothers about us for my protection – she's wrapping me around her finger, and on a certain level, this entire situation frightens me.

So regardless of what happens with Tara, protecting Mary is most important to me. I want this between us too much. Maybe I've even reached the point where I need it?

Deep down, I always knew I wanted more than one-night stands. Only, Tara crushed that dream when she became my wife and cheated repeatedly, but Mary's bringing it back to life, much faster than I would've ever imagined.

Eager to return to Mary right away, I veer into the left lane as my phone interrupts my thoughts, and I answer, putting it on speakerphone, "Yeah?"

"Henry," a *Capo* greets, "Keano escaped from the warehouse where we were holding him."

"How?" I bark, hitting the gas toward the intersection and speeding through a yellow light to make a U-turn while I ignore a honking car that I've cut off.

“He managed to overpower a soldier who was taking him food.”

“When?”

“Two hours ago,” he replies.

“And you just now call me?! Wasn’t he cuffed? And beaten-up?” I demand in a low voice.

“The soldier had uncuffed him. He has multiple injuries, and I can’t imagine he’ll get far. He ran into the woods, so I sent three soldiers to scour the area.”

“Find him. NOW. And inform Carmine,” I order before I cut the call to contact Mary, gripping the steering wheel and hightailing it to the West Loop when she doesn’t answer.

“Goddammit, Mary!” I snarl to no one.

How many times do I have to emphasize to her that she needs to obey me and always answer my calls. Trying to call her three times while I skate through red lights, I park halfway on the curb at the front entrance of the glass high-rise where she lives, jumping out without locking my car.

Tearing past the reception area, I press the button for the elevator forcefully. It swooshes open, and I ascend to the tenth floor within seconds, leaping out and toward the left, once again opening her door with my credit card.

“Mary?” I shout, glancing inside the empty bedroom before I sprint through the entryway into the living room that’s empty as well. “Christ. Where did you go?!”

Without hesitation, I decide to call Adriano. Her safety is now my fucking priority.

Rushing out of her apartment and into the hallway, I press call but end it when the elevator pings and slides open, revealing Mary with Strawberry.

“I’ve been calling you!” I run up to her when she steps out, cradling her ashen face. “Are you all right?” My hands brush her curls from her forehead.

“I think someone was following me,” she explains with a shiver. “Are you okay? You look frantic.”

“Why didn’t you answer my calls?” I practically bellow. “How many times do I have to tell you that? You can’t ignore my calls, Mary! It drives me crazy.”

She frowns, reaching for her phone in her jacket pocket. “Oh, shit. It was on *silent*. Sorry, I really didn’t do it on purpose this time. I was just

trying to get home as soon as possible.”

I grind my teeth in agitation, grasping that my worry for her is borderline obsessive. The second I can't reach her, I seem to lose it. There's a need inside me to protect her always, and the essence of that emotion might have nothing to do with Tara or guarding my position within the Syndicate. Just one minute ago, I was ready to give up what I've worked so hard for and call her brother. It concerns me how reckless I'm becoming – because of her, yet I'm powerless against it. Nevertheless, I have to get a grip.

“Who was following you? And where were you?” I ask.

“I was at the park. And I kept seeing the same guy, like he was watching me.”

“Did he see you enter this building?”

“No, I made a detour to check to see if he was still behind me and didn't see him after that.”

Impressed with how fast her mind works and that she kept her promise and wasn't naïve in handling the situation makes me feel better – slightly.

Then she continues, “And if it was a Syndicate soldier who was simply guarding me, Adriano would've told me. Is something going on with the organization?”

I inform her, “Keano was being held at the warehouse and he escaped.”

Her hazel eyes widen until the whites are visible. “When?”

“Over two hours ago.”

“But if it was Keano following me, I would've recognized him. Do you think Keano's escape is connected to that guy?”

“I don't know.” I plow a hand through my hair in frustration.

What the fuck's going on?

Mary's being followed, Keano escaped, Anonymous hacked into my computer once and disappeared, and Tara's also in the Loop. This is becoming a goddamn clusterfuck!

Wanting Mary away from this compromised address, I tell her, “Pack some clothes. You can't stay here.”

Amazed, she straightens. “But this is my home. I don't want to stay at my parents' or brothers'.”

“You won't. You'll stay with me,” I answer, motioning toward her apartment. “Get your clothes while I think about what to do.”

“Okay. Hold Strawberry.” She hands over the leash and I wait out in the hall.

Unfortunately, I don’t have a plan but refuse to let her remain here. I’ve been so distracted by Mary and this attachment to her that becomes stronger every minute of every day, and at the same time, I’ve been trying to handle my past, yet I haven’t sorted out anything.

“Let’s go.” Mary returns with a bag in each hand, which I take from her so that she can lock her door, and after she picks up Strawberry, we hurry to the elevator and go down.

When we exit the building, I scan both ends of the street – seeing nothing out of the ordinary – and nudge Mary to get into my car, storing her luggage in the trunk. Then I choose the quickest route to my apartment and we’re on our way as the sun is setting on the horizon.

Inside my apartment, I dump Mary’s bags on the couch as she sets Strawberry on the floor. Quietly, she regards me, probably wondering what my strategy is, yet I have no course of action.

Sinking down onto the sofa, I lean back. “I need to go to the club. Adriano or Carmine will call you when one of them hears that Keano escaped. If we tell them that you’re going to stay here, we’ll get a shitload of questions.” Questions I’m not ready to answer. As soon as they know I’ve slept with Mary, the Syndicate will watch me more closely, and I don’t need that as long as Tara’s around.

But Mary catches me off guard by saying, “Then we tell them.”

Since she’s never pushed me for more before, I didn’t expect this.

“You’re not concerned about them knowing about us?” It won’t go over well if they discover we’re fucking around.

I merely stare at her, and her entire demeanor changes to suspicious as her eyes get thinner, making me feel like an absolute ass because she’s right to distrust me.

She hesitantly continues, “Why would I be? I can’t understand why we kept it a secret before we made lov—slept together.”

Jesus Christ! She’s talking about *love*; the one thing I’ve avoided for so long. I’m not even sure I know how to.

Tell her the truth about Tara and how it can affect your position in the Syndicate and even your life. You can trust her.

I mull over being honest with Mary as I look up into her upturned eyes that I'm drowning in, entirely confused like I've never been before. The harsh bitterness I've harbored inside ever since my fucked up marriage with Tara isn't easily overcome, and I have no idea what this is between us, but I have this uncontrollable need to keep her from harm. On the other hand, now that she's with me and I can think clearly, the hacker and trained Syndicate member takes the reins again.

I shut the discussion down, anticipating that she won't push me any further. "I don't want anyone else interfering between us, baby." And I stand up to kiss her, but she skids backward.

"Are you sure it's just about that?" she asks point black, yet I disregard her question.

Instead, I command, implying that this conversation is over, "I need to go. If you can help it, don't answer Adriano or Carmine's call until after I've spoken to them. If one of them contacts you, just text them that you're having dinner with a friend or something and that you'll call them later."

"But what's the plan? Am I going to stay here or not? Because it seems like you're backing out," she accuses me, standing tall.

"I'll let you know as soon as I know something for sure, Mary," I mutter and stride to the door, realizing that I'm exasperated with myself and taking it out on her before yanking it open. "Lock it." And as I shut it, she throws up her hands in annoyance.

Satisfied that she's safe in my apartment but without a strategy, I head to Club 7 to talk to my boss. Somewhere along the way, this day has gone from perfect bliss to an impending disaster.

"When did Keano escape?" Adriano roars, surging up from behind his desk in his office. "And why did no one bother to tell me about him sooner?!"

"I told the *Capo* to inform Carmine," I reply, standing across from him as Carmine and Luca enter.

"He called me and I came in immediately," Carmine explains while Luca joins Adriano. Aggravated, he continues to Adriano, "Call our sister because she isn't answering my calls."

Adriano's glare intensifies as he snatches his phone from his desk, relocating to the adjoining security room. Much to my chagrin, I can't hear what he says to Mary, but he's talking heatedly, so she answered her phone.

Fuck!

Carmine, who's just as impatient as I am, paces toward the adjacent door, but Adriano returns as he hangs up and points his device at Carmine and me, "You two should've ended Keano when you had the chance. Fix this! Mary stays with me or Mom and Dad until Keano's caught."

No! What did she tell him?!

Although, on second thought, this does work out because now I won't be forced to spill the beans that I'm fucking their sister and explain why she's at my apartment. Yet I hate that I won't be able to go see her at night.

Carmine tells Adriano, "I already have an entire team searching the woods. He can't get far in his dehydrated, beaten state."

Adriano appears slightly calmer after his conversation with Mary. "You two take care of this before I lose my shit. We're talking about a boy who managed to escape my warehouse. I presume you fired the soldier who caused this, Carmine? Henry?"

Carmine answers, "I did. The other soldiers have been ordered to contact me or Henry when they have any updates."

"Fine." Adriano waves his hand to dismiss us. "I'll wait for Mary here."

Despite the fact that I have more questions about Adriano's precise plan regarding Mary, I don't want to raise suspicion or mention anything that might conflict with the story she told Adriano, so I stride out, going down the black staircase and through the club that's half full.

I want to call Mary, but not knowing what she worked out with Adriano – meaning she could be with a soldier – I decide to text her.

As I get my phone out, a hand rests on my arm from behind me and someone purrs, "Hey, Henry."

I shake them off, quickly reading my texts from various soldiers informing me that Keano's still on the loose. Then I type a message to Mary.

Henry: What did you say to Adriano? Are you still at my apartment?

"Do you want to go for a drink, Henry?"

Glancing up, I notice a brunette standing in front of me, coming much too close. I grunt in annoyance but ignore her as she chatters on.

“...are you still single?”

Distractedly, I simply say, “Yes.” And then send my text.

When I glance up again, the woman’s still standing before me. “So, a drink?”

Now I recognize Jordana, or *bartender girl*, as Mary’s dubbed her. “What? I’m busy. Leave me be.”

Getting a waft of a scent I’d recognize anywhere nowadays, I swivel around to find Mary coming up behind me and wearing a shocked expression. I frown as she clenches her jaw and spins around, heading in the opposite direction.

What the fuck just happened?

I crane my neck, hissing to Jordana, “Don’t talk to me anymore. Just stay away from me.”

Her face falls, but I don’t give a fuck about her and march toward the back entrance to catch Mary. I won’t allow her to run away from me.

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CHAPTER 28

Mary

My phone beeps as I'm balanced on the armrest of Henry's couch. This time, it's not Carmine calling me but Adriano. Even though Henry told me not to, I need to answer him, or else they'll go crazy.

"Hey!" I try to sound cheerful.

"Where are you, Mary?" Adriano responds.

I bite my lip and lie, "At dinner with a friend."

"Where?"

Thinking quickly of a restaurant in this neighborhood, I reply, "Little Mexico."

"We have an issue. Keano escaped, so I'm sending a guard to you now."

"Oh, okay...or I can come to the club after supper?" I'd rather stay here and continue my talk with Henry when he comes back.

"No, Mary. Don't fight me on this," Adriano warns in his brotherly tone. "A guard is coming to pick you up. Stay there. And don't ignore any more of Carmine's calls, okay? He worries about you."

Guilt fills me, so I concede, "Okay. I won't."

"I'm sending David; he'll be there in fifteen minutes. And I'll wait for you at the club." With that, he ends the call.

Now I need to run like hell to Little Mexico, which thankfully, is located only four blocks from Henry's apartment.

Christ, Henry! The things I do for you.

I really hate to leave without talking to Henry, because I'm worried that he's going to pull back from me again. It also bothers me that he wants to keep us a secret from Adriano, which could possibly mean that he still just sees me as a conquest while I'm already on my way to falling in love. And I hate leaving Strawberry behind, but I don't have a choice.

Leaping up, I grab my purse and red trench coat before bending low to stroke Strawberry while she's playing with her chew toy. "Henry will take care of you, my baby."

She pays me no heed, too engrossed, so I rush out the door and sprint through the blustery weather to the restaurant. The sun has set, and gratefully, the breeze cools my flushed cheeks when I open the glass door of the restaurant where a hostess awaits.

Before she can speak, the door opens again and I'm confronted with David. Luckily, I was here in the nick of time.

"Mary, are you ready to go?" he asks.

"Yes," I reply as he steps aside, waving his arm to usher me outside.

Unbuttoning my coat because I'm so hot from the run, I walk out again and get into the passenger seat of his black SUV.

I follow David, who's navigating his way through the mass of customers in Club 7, but stop dead in my tracks when I pass the bar and see that damn Jordana chatting with Henry. He's looking down at his phone with his back to me, and she's right in his face.

I halt behind Henry just as she asks, "...are you still single?"

"Yes," he answers, shocking me and simultaneously breaking my heart. *Aren't we dating?*

Since Henry fucks me ten ways to Sunday, I don't see myself as single. And it's really shady for him to still tell people that *he's* single – I didn't expect that from him.

Suddenly, Henry's gaze shoots up, and as he turns his head, his brows pull together when he meets my glower.

Not able to confront him here and seeing that David is continuing on, I pivot around and stalk off toward the back entrance. Pushing through the heavy doors that lead into the empty hallway, I'm grabbed by my arm within seconds.

"Mary. Stop!" Henry shouts.

I wrench myself free and face him. He straightens, but his eyes fill with confusion and he reaches for me again, yet I step back.

"You're single? Then what have we been doing?" I demand. My vision blurs, so I blink back looming tears.

“What?” He frowns, folding his fingers around my upper arm again in a gentle yet steady grip and refusing to let go.

Why can't this guy make up his mind? He lets me fall for him and goes to extreme lengths to protect me, but then he tells some girl that he's single. I thought he was mine, or at least that he was becoming mine.

I clench my jaw, pointing irately inside. “She asked you if you were single and you said yes.” For a second time, I shake him off and shift backward until I almost hit the wall.

“I wasn't even fucking listening to her,” he throws back in an irritated tone, holding up his phone, screen facing me. “I was texting *you* because I wanted to know what Adriano said to you. He didn't tell me.”

My glare softens a bit. “But—”

“No buts, Mary. I only replied to Jordana to shut her up.” He shoves his phone into his back pocket, raking his hands through his hair.

He gives the impression he's remorseful, so I'm inclined to believe him. Still, jealousy is a bad advisor.

“I'm sorry I overreacted. It just hurt my...feelings. She's always eye-fucking you,” I grind out and he lets out an irked sigh, but then the doors fly open and David comes through them.

Henry turns around, expertly creating distance between us, both literally and figuratively. He retreats a step, and I sense him shutting down on me, pulling away because he's so bad at relationships. Because he's aggravated since others keep interfering, and because he still doesn't want my brothers to know. *Maybe they threatened him?*

“Mary! I thought you were behind me.” David glimpses toward the end of the hallway. “We'll take the elevator up to Adriano's office.” Then he throws out his arm, expecting me to precede him and disrupting my argument with Henry.

While upset that we weren't able to finish our conversation, I get into the elevator as Henry watches me, my disheartened gaze glued to his until the door closes and breaks our stare.

Traveling one floor up, the elevator opens into Adriano's black and white office where I go left to his desk and David returns downstairs. As I plop down into the padded chair, I fling my purse aside, wondering where the hell I stand with Henry.

My musings are interrupted when Adriano and Carmine appear from the security room and visibly relax at the sight of me.

Shaking off my sadness about Henry, I speak in a cheery tone, “Brothers, you summoned?”

Carmine rests his hip against the desk, crossing his arms over his chest. “Ignoring my calls, sis? Should I be worried?”

Is he hinting about Henry and me?

After the Keano incident, Carmine witnessed how close Henry and I are, yet he’s never asked me about it, which I appreciate. Carmine’s treating me more like an adult these days.

Regardless, I play dumb. “I just didn’t hear it because it was on *silent* when I was in the restaurant.”

“Don’t put your phone on *silent* anymore unless you’re in class,” he orders with a glare.

Since I’m used to their commanding attitudes, I nod and lean back.

Adriano slides open his desk drawer and takes out his keys. “I have men looking for Keano, Mary. Until we have him, you can’t go home. Do you want to stay with me or at Mom and Dad’s?”

I’ll have more privacy in my old bedroom at my parents’. Privacy I need because the second I’m alone, I’m going to call Henry. “I’ll stay at Mom and Dad’s. Some stuff is still in my old room. But how long will I have to stay there?”

“I hope that my soldiers will catch him soon and it’ll only be for tonight,” Adriano explains. “However, he seems to have gotten out of the woods, so it could take longer. It’s best you sleep at the Astoria until we have him. This is one reason why Carmine and I didn’t want you to buy that apartment, Mary.” He angles his head to the side, showing me an *I told you so* look.

“Yes, yes.” I rub my palm across my forehead. “Let’s not have that discussion again. I’ll never be able to afford the Astoria.”

Carmine shakes his head. “You need to learn to accept our money. I want to spend it on you. Who else am I going to spend it on?”

I wave my hand in frustration. “We’re getting off topic. What am I supposed to tell our parents?”

Carmine and Adriano both simply stare at me and then exchange a glance as Carmine comments around a smile, “Good question.”

And we all chuckle.

Before they decide I should stay with Adriano instead, I suggest, “I’ll just say I forgot my apartment is getting painted. I’ll text Dad now. Maybe

he's still awake."

"Okay," Adriano approves, gesturing for us to move out. "Let's go."

After receiving a text from my father that he's about to turn in and it's fine for me to sleep in my room, Adriano and Carmine drop me off and go to their own apartments while I use my old key to get in.

Changing into a pink nightgown, I topple backward onto the sapphire duvet of my queen-size bed. My old bedroom still has most of my furniture, including a white desk that's pushed against the heavily draped window where, as I stare at the clouds veiling the moon, I think about what a whirlwind of emotions this day has been.

It started out on a promising note with our date, but now I feel like Henry and I have taken ten steps back. I'm mixed up and saddened that I'm teetering precariously close to the edge of cloud nine and the real world is invading the world I've fashioned with Henry where he comes to me at night, a routine I've become accustomed to.

Grabbing my purse lying next to me, I locate my phone, bringing it up to my ear after I dial the number.

Henry answers on the first ring, "Hey."

"Hey, I'm in my old room at the Astoria. My parents are already asleep."

"I know – I tailed you guys. Did you tell Adriano about the suspicious man at the park and that you were at my apartment?"

"No, I definitely didn't tell him I was at your apartment, and with everything that's going on, I actually forgot about that guy. I'm not even sure if he was following me, so let's not worry Adriano more. I'm safe now."

"Okay."

We're both quiet for a few seconds. I'm not sure what else to say since we've just had our first argument, and then I hear him releasing a deep breath. "I need to see you."

I expected that in order to avoid finishing our disagreement, he'd prefer not to see me any more tonight. Overjoyed, I say, "So do I, but how?"

"Open the front door quietly – I snuck past the receptionist."

I jump up and tiptoe down the hall, inching open the door to find Henry lowering his phone and cutting the call.

He's still in his charcoal slacks and vest over a sky-blue dress shirt that doesn't hide his powerful physique. A physique I've been fixated with from the beginning. Yet I want more. More from him than just his body.

Together, we silently tread to the shadows of my bedroom where only a small lamp is on, and our eyes meet as we stand opposite each other, both knowing we're at a crossroads.

"Are you mad at me?" he asks in a calm tone.

I comb my curls over to one side, nervous about making myself vulnerable. "No. I'm confused. It was deceitful when you said you were single after all these weeks, and last night, and our date this morning."

His gaze is pinned on me as he retorts, "I didn't even fucking hear her, Mary."

I'm not sure why, but moisture pools in my eyes, and I let the words tumble out before I lose the courage, "But do you consider yourself single?"

His brows climb halfway up his forehead. This is the first time I've asked him a straightforward question about *us*.

Henry glances away, undeniably uncomfortable.

"Wait! Do you? Because I-I don't see myself as single."

He remains quiet and sits down on the edge of my bed, dropping his head in his hands, grasping his hair. He might not be used to talking about feelings, but we're having this conversation. Now. I won't allow my heart to get more invested without answers. Yet his silence sends doubt coursing through me like lightning.

"I've been very patient, Henry. I let you pull back so many times. I let you do everything to me last night. If I'm just one in a string of women, then this is over. You don't get to order me around and protect me and then tell bartender girl you're single," I whisper-shout.

He looks up with a piercing glare, his nostrils flaring. He's not used to having his weaknesses pointed out to him. But when my tears roll down my cheeks, he leaps up and cradles my face, swiping them away with his thumbs.

I can see him struggling to open up, and I lean back against the desk, out of his reach, not letting him off without any resolution.

He runs both of his hands through his hair. "You're not one of my conquests. Don't fucking say that. But we're in an unusual situation. Your

brother is my mafia boss. I don't know if I can give you what you want."

"You already do. You come to me almost every night, and I know you're letting me in more. Or else you would've already bolted out of here. But if you're adamant about keeping this a secret for now, you also have to give me something. You demand honesty and that I give myself completely to you, but I also want more from you, Henry. I'm not interested in being just a fuck buddy." I can't let him set the pace anymore.

He scowls at me when I say *fuck buddy* before looking away, and emotions tighten my throat.

Is he going to end this?

Uncertainty pierces my soul, yet I'm in love with Henry, and love doesn't follow the rules of reason and logic.

Without thinking, I confess in a soft tone, not wanting him to reject me, "You must know that I-I've fallen in love with you."

He blinks and blinks, eyes blazing with turmoil as insecurity grows inside me while he doesn't speak the words of love. I let my shoulders sag in defeat, turning my back to him.

Then, all of a sudden, I'm pulled back around by my arm and Henry reveals, "You're not and never have been just a fuck buddy."

My heart settles down. Without waiting for permission, he clasps my face with both hands and tilts my head back, slanting his mouth over mine and thrusting his tongue inside feverishly as I clutch his shirt.

My fingers sift into Henry's thick hair when he gathers me close, lifting me up into his arms and carrying me to the bed without breaking our kiss. While he lies on top of me, situated between my legs, his kiss becomes gentle, serious, promising that he might love me one day as his forehead rests against mine.

Neither of us speaks any more, and he doesn't try to seduce me, seemingly careful not to treat me like a fuck buddy.

In turn, I cling to the belief that Henry's not leading me on and remind myself that at least he doesn't make any empty promises. Quite the contrary, he makes time for me and protects me like a man who's infatuated with me. And I love him enough to wait for him, to give him some extra time until he can also tell me how he feels.

Nonetheless, doubt remains, and for a very good reason, I learn sooner rather than later.

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CHAPTER 29

Henry

“Henry, wake up,” Mary grumbles while I spoon her, pushing her ass into my groin.

During the night, I shed my clothes and my cock twitches as I nuzzle her hair, content in this peaceful position.

We doze off again, and after I don’t know how long, I hear a creak while I keep my arm secured around Mary, my eyes flying open and widening in shock when I see her mother standing in the doorway. Thank fuck we’re under the covers as Mary wakes too.

“Mom,” she speaks in a throaty tone, apparently not uncomfortable.

“Sorry. I didn’t know you had company.” Her mother smiles with a glance at me before she shuts the door again.

Mary shifts to her back, and I stare at her.

“This isn’t how I wanted to meet your mother. Why the fuck aren’t you embarrassed?!”

Her lips twitch as she rubs the sleep from her eyes. “First, I’m not even fully awake yet. And second, why *are* you? We’re not teenagers who got caught. Don’t worry.”

“Your mother saw us!”

“She saw us lying in bed with the covers up to our necks, Henry.” She smirks at my stunned expression.

Rolling on top of her, I tease, “I’m embarrassed for *us* then.”

“Don’t be. My mom is really chill; she won’t tell anyone if I ask her not to. She’s probably happy it’s not Keano.” Mary strokes my hair in the most comforting manner and I grunt into her neck before lifting my head.

“How often has she found you in bed with a guy?”

A crease forms on her forehead. “What? Never.” And then she shows her teeth. “Henry, are you jealous?”

I arch a brow. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” she admits and braces my neck, pulling me close until her breasts flatten against my chest and her adoring gaze is all I see.

As I tangle my fingers in Mary’s soft curls, it strikes me that my world is starting to revolve around her. Her touch soothes my demons of distrust spawned by Tara, which is disconcerting yet also the one thing I seem to crave.

I’ve never been this careless just to spend the night with a woman like I do with Mary, but she’s the first one I’ve known who sees more than my physical appearance and is genuinely interested in *me*, the guy beneath the disguise of a hacker. And while her outer beauty is what attracted me to her at first, her inner beauty is what’s tying me to her. So it bothers me that she thought she was a fuck buddy last night. I know she’s more, but what exactly, I have no idea. I can’t define it because I don’t even understand it.

A few weeks ago, I would’ve been livid to be in this kind of situation, to be questioned about my behavior. However, instead of sending me running, Mary has pushed that sentiment out of my mind. But I can’t tell her I love her, not until I’ve dealt with Tara and figured out exactly what this emotion is. Of course, I lust for her. But love? It’s been such a long time, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to give her what she wants – I’ve been honest about that.

Now, because I’ve become so deeply involved, I have to eliminate any threats to this relationship. I need to take care of Tara once and for all and also get rid of Keano – I can’t have anyone who might harm Mary walking around in the Loop. At this point, I’ll be damned if either of them messes this up. Mary trusts me, and I don’t deserve it, but I’ll take it.

I peck the tip of her nose, surprising myself at the sweetness of the gesture, before I jump up. “I have to go to work.”

“Okay. Go shower and I’ll lie here and get woken up.” She rolls onto her stomach, pressing her face into the pillow, and when I spank her ass, she lets out a muffled shriek.

After a turbulent day yesterday, she manages to remain lighthearted, and it’s definitely rubbing off on me. Somehow, we’re both unfazed by the mayhem that surrounds us as long as we’re together – that indisputable pull I have toward her has tightened.

More relaxed, I take a quick shower, and after twenty minutes, I'm dressed while Mary's still sprawled out in the bed.

Stepping into my shoes, I ask, "Has Adriano told you if you have any guards? I don't want you on campus alone, Mary."

"Yeah, David's going to pick me up from here, and he'll drive me where I need to go. I know the drill."

The fact that she'll be out and about with a guard makes these circumstances easier. A normal civilian would worry and fight me tooth and nail with the way I monitor and somewhat control this aspect of her life without giving her a specific reason, but she understands that it's all to keep her safe.

And Mary is anything but normal or ordinary.

Leaning down, I kiss her lips. "Answer your phone when I call you."

"Yes, boss." She mock-salutes me, and I squeeze her ass before turning around and exiting her bedroom.

Deciding it's time to get my priorities in order since I've been consumed with Mary lately, I place a determined knock on Tara's door. I'm supposed to contact her on Friday, which marks the two weeks we agreed upon, but I'm done trying to scheme and plot to conjure a way to get access to a shitload of money. I have my loaded gun and am prepared to torture her as much as needed to force her to unlock my files in City Hall's system. This is who I am now – fuck the consequences to my psyche. I'm not a black hat hacker anymore, I'm a mafia black hat hacker, meaning I'm a man who murders just as easily as he hacks these days.

When she doesn't answer, I push the door open with ease yet freeze as I step inside. The room is empty; no bed and no futon, and when I enter the kitchenette, I discover that everything has been cleared out.

Infuriated, I slam a cabinet closed. "Goddammit!"

Realization dawns on me that Tara must've had another strategy from the beginning. She was merely stringing me along, because why else would she disappear before getting a cent from me? That bitch has bested me.

What the fuck is her endgame?

I'll never waver in decision making again. In this cold-blooded world, it's a mistake I can't afford anymore, because now I'm fucked.

Barging out of the studio apartment, I attempt to assemble my rampant thoughts. How do I find Tara right fucking now? But my mind keeps wandering to Mary. I absolutely won't tolerate for her to get stuck in the crossfire.

With Tara's disappearance on top of Keano also being on the loose, Mary can't go back to her apartment – ever. Unable to focus without ensuring Mary's safety first, I decide to talk to Adriano.

Inside Adriano's office, after he's told off a *Capo* for not being able to locate Keano, I relay my concerns to him just as Carmine comes in with three cups of coffee.

"I need to talk to you about Mary," I say to Adriano, making a choice that will change our lives drastically, and I'm not sure Mary won't hate me for it. Yet my need to protect her is currently governing my actions. "Do you know how badly her apartment is secured?"

"We've had this discussion with her," he answers. "She fought me about buying a more expensive one."

"And you allowed it?" I reply, and he throws me a feigned glare.

Carmine hands me a cup. "It's black."

"Thanks." I accept it, taking off the lid to let the hot brew cool off.

After stirring his own coffee, Carmine explains, "Mary promised us she'd get new locks, but clearly, she didn't." Then he looks at Adriano. "I'm with Henry, and I suggest she moves back to the Astoria. The apartment beneath your penthouse is for sale. Janey can contact the realtor and make an offer on it. It's fully furnished and I think it's already been on the market for a while, so she could probably get the keys soon."

Seems like Carmine is in my corner, since I'm positive he knows Mary and I are more than friends.

Adriano sends him an exasperated glance. "I'm not going to order Mary to move back home. She'll fight us every step of the way, Carmine. We also need to give her space to live her life. I don't want her to become too involved with Syndicate business while she's still so young."

"I think it's too late for that," I tell them, and Carmine nods. "She's involved in our group."

Carmine sets his coffee on the desk. “You and I can buy the apartment for her. If she’s reluctant, then we’ll let her pay rent or something else so she feels independent. I’d prefer having us all living at the Astoria anyway.”

Carmine’s idea is perfect. There isn’t a safer place for Mary than the Astoria.

Adriano looks away, chewing over his brother’s proposition. “But we need to steer her a little to make her own decision so she doesn’t feel as if we’re arranging her life. I’ll talk to her and remind her that with Keano being such a big threat, it’s shown us that she’s too vulnerable in her current apartment.”

“Now that she knows much more about our Syndicate life, I don’t think she’ll be as reluctant to accept,” Carmine informs, adding around a grin, “And by the way, I can also simply buy it. That way, she can’t refuse it.”

Adriano’s expression turns amused. “Then you can be the one to tell her she *has* to live in the Astoria.”

“No. You’re the oldest.”

I chuckle. “You two are afraid of your little sister?”

Adriano merely shrugs. “You’ve never encountered her temper. When Mary’s mad, you better run.”

Carmine grins. “She’s like a mini Sophia. Just as feisty as our mother. They don’t get mad quickly and seem so sweet, but don’t get on their bad side, because then they’re scary. Italian women...”

I bark out a huge laugh. Mary is even sexier when she’s mad. I experienced it firsthand several times when I used to flirt with her and then didn’t call her.

Suddenly, I understand how conniving these two men are in orchestrating other people’s lives without them even realizing. And I’ve seen how Mary looks up to them and learns from them; that’s probably why she can be pragmatic about this lifestyle. These siblings have a true familial bond. It’s something I envy, being an orphan.

Maybe that’s why I’m so attracted to Mary and her ways?

“We’ll have dinner with Mary tomorrow night, Carmine.” Adriano takes his suit jacket from the back of his chair before addressing me, “Carmine and I have to go. Will you be here all day?”

“Yes, I’m going to look at the camera feeds from the warehouse to see if there’s any trace of Keano.”

“Okay. Carmine, let’s go,” Adriano tells him, leading the way as I nod goodbye and enter the security room.

Closing the door behind me to ensure no one will come in unannounced, I claim the seat behind the large screen and log in to the system.

Immediately, I get an alarm that someone’s trying to breach the firewall.

“Gotcha, motherfucker!” I exclaim out loud, guessing this must be Anonymous trying to hack into Club 7 again, so I quickly switch to *offline* mode so he can’t see I’ve logged on too.

Then I grant him access, letting him think he’s cracked my new settings. I watch him going through personnel files and attempting to change financial data, but I block him by programming right alongside him, keeping him busy in his efforts. In the meantime, I’m also energetically typing on the second keyboard to pinpoint his IP address. This time, I manage to locate him at the School of the Art Institute.

What?! That’s Mary’s school.

I roll the chair to the left to find Mary’s location by checking the GPS tracker I hid in her coat, and she’s on campus property. Though I don’t know the layout of the college, so I search online for a campus blueprint and confirm she’s in the library where there are presumably computers, and it’s also Anonymous’s exact whereabouts.

Fuck! Is it possible that Mary is Anonymous?

Confounded, I stare at the screen, my brain going into overdrive as clashing sensations bombard me, and I storm out.

CHAPTER 30

Mary

I print out my essay, which I wrote in a rush, and log off the school computer. Feeling a prickle at my nape, I look up and around the rows of desks in the library. It's very busy and no one seems to be paying attention to me except David standing at the entrance. Grabbing my purse and the documents from the printer, I slide them into an envelope as David opens the door for me.

"I need to drop this off on the second floor," I say as he trails me out, his watchfulness setting me on edge.

Keano's been on the loose for a day now, and who the hell knows where he is. I'd come back to exact revenge if I were him, and he's definitely that kind of man. I completely misjudged him; the fact that he hit me proved that already.

After I hand in my essay just before noon, I tell David as we exit campus, "I need to get my dog from Henry's apartment. He gave me a key." I had to leave her behind last night when I went to Little Mexico in a hurry.

"We'll pick her up now," he answers, repeatedly stealing glimpses around us while we cross the lawn to his SUV.

"But I have to walk her, David," I implore, cuddling Strawberry in my lap in the passenger seat. "We'll go to the park across from my apartment for ten minutes tops. Come on. I can't keep her inside all the time. She needs fresh air."

"Fine," he relents since I've been trying to persuade him for over fifteen minutes as he parks the car on my street.

After I fasten Strawberry's leather collar around her neck, she jumps out of the SUV eagerly, tugging the leash. With David hovering around me, I follow her toward the dog walking area and let her do her business, tying the belt of my trench coat since the mild temperatures of fall are coming to an end. When Strawberry continues to tow the leash, I release it, keeping an eye on her until she runs off, and I whistle, but she ignores me. Sprinting forward over a wide stretch of grass, I careen through trees and masses of people, commanding her to stop again, and luckily, she does so, excitedly returning to me.

Stooping low to my knee, I scratch her behind the ears. "You were cooped up inside for too long, weren't you?"

Then unexpectedly, I feel something poking into my back as someone kneels behind me. "Get up and don't you dare scream. I'll fucking shoot you right here in broad daylight."

My head spins around and I'm confronted with Keano, his outraged eyes rimmed with dark circles and his jaw dusted with a scruffy blond beard.

I swallow as I look over his shoulder, but I don't see David in the area where I came from anymore.

"Your bodyguard won't help you," Keano hisses, aggressively pushing the barrel of his gun into my back and motioning for me to rise.

As steadily as possible, I stand up straight with Strawberry in my arms, and he shoves me forward, pressing up against me with his gun hidden beneath his jacket. He grips my arm as we reach the bricked path and go toward the parking lot, yet I know I can't get into his car. I refuse to surrender to him.

Panic flares and sweat beads across the top of my lip as I peer around nervously. When we turn a corner and are secluded for a few feet, I try to run but am smothered from behind.

My eyelids droop until everything goes black...

My own heavy breathing thunders in my ears while all I see is darkness. Pitch black. My hands and feet are tied together in front of me, and I'm seated on a cold concrete floor, hunched over with my wrists secured to my ankles.

Suddenly, I hear a creak and shriek from the sheer dread gushing through me. Trembling in fear, I gaze into nothingness and hear a chuff.

“Strawberry?” I cry right before a yellow light turns on.

I blink profusely as my sight adjusts, and a shadow shifts in front of me, causing me to scream.

Keano rests on his haunches before me with Strawberry in a tight grasp in his hand as her barks ricochet off the walls in this empty space.

“Shut the fuck up!” he yells at me, pointing his pistol at my forehead as I purse my lips and my little Chihuahua grumbles.

“You should’ve told Carmine and Henry to kill me when they had the chance,” he speaks with malice, tracing his gun down Strawberry’s tiny ear.

“Where am I?” I snarl. “What do you want from me?”

His movement stops, and his vicious eyes scrutinize me as a muscle ticks in his jaw. “I want you to pay. You, and Carmine, and most of all, Henry. Do you know what they did to me?! They locked me up and gave me just enough water to survive while I went stir crazy in a three by four cell!” In a flash, he hurls Strawberry aside, and she scoots over the floor before hitting the wall with a thump.

“Stop!” I yell. “My dog has nothing to do with this.”

He yanks my head back by my hair while terror claws at me as he bellows, “I don’t fucking care! Just like you didn’t care when they beat me up. And you’re such a stupid bitch; you ruined my plans when you kept fucking Henry.”

My throat is stretched as he spits in a venomous voice, “You and Henry made a lot of enemies. And he isn’t nearly as smart as everyone thinks he is. Once he was distracted by your pussy, you made it easy for us.”

Us? Who is us?

“What the hell are you talking about?” I scream, yet he digs the barrel of his gun into my temple.

“Don’t you fucking dare yell at me, bitch. You ruined my life!”

Acute horror has me biting back my retort. The madness in his tone and his ranting shows me he’s gone over the edge of sanity and will probably kill me.

Keano then crudely drags me across the floor by my hair. With my hands and feet tied, my back scrapes over the concrete as excruciating pain stabs my scalp.

“I had it all planned until Henry interfered by seducing you!”

“Ow. Let me go!” I shout but am helpless in this bound position as Strawberry regains her footing and starts to bark, coming at us.

Keano lets go of me a few feet in front of the door, and the back of my head bangs against the ground. Searing pain radiates through me as I topple to my side, completely unbalanced. I see Keano kicking Strawberry aside, and my anguish pours out, because witnessing this hurts more than my physical pain. “Stop it!”

“Fucking dog,” he sneers as she struggles up from the corner, and then he glances at me cruelly before aiming his weapon at her.

“NO!!!” I cry at the top of my lungs, my stomach turning in a nauseating flop.

Keano pulls the trigger and Strawberry goes slack immediately as I blink like a crazy woman, disbelieving the predicament I’m trapped in for a millisecond until my rage explodes.

“You goddamn psychopath!” I bawl, curled into myself, my face pressed on the cold floor while tears scald my cheeks. “You’re fucking crazy!”

“And you’re fucking pathetic, crying over some dog! You care more about that dog than you ever did about me.”

Infuriated, I take an encouraging breath. “Because you’re worth less than a dog, asshole!”

Again, he grips my hair and threatens, “Too bad it took you so long to figure out. This is your own fault. You’re so trustworthy and dumb. I never wanted you, but you got me into Club 7, and that’s all I needed from you.”

He’s right – I’m going to die here because of my foolishness and some unstable ex-boyfriend. I knew I couldn’t trust him with the way he was MIA so often and how odd our relationship was when he didn’t want to break up with me, yet we rarely saw each other. We never had a bond or a spark like I have with Henry.

And how ironic is it that while I’m part of a mafia family with numerous enemies, I’m going to die here due to my own stupidity. Glancing sideways at my little Strawberry’s unmoving paws, the will to fight abandons me.

Abruptly, Keano releases me and I fall to the side again, howling. He towers over me with his weapon directed at my head and fishes out his phone before glaring at me.

You can’t trust anyone in this messed up world!

His thumb slides over the trigger, and I squeeze my eyes shut before I hear a bang and scream. Then my eyes fly open, and I realize I haven't been shot. Looking up, I see Keano and another person who's blocking the doorway bustle out without a backward glance at me.

In the distance, I detect more noises, and with all my power, I try to roll onto my back, but I'm exhausted and terrified. Footsteps come closer before two people darken the doorway, both raising their arms with a pistol in hand.

I yell in fear, "No!" And look down on instinct, every muscle in my body hurting.

"Mary! It's me." I recognize Henry's voice, and my gaze shoots up again.

I'm dazed and panicked, sobbing as he caresses my head and unties my feet and wrists. As soon as I'm free, I sit up, but my head spins and I reach for my side because of the throbbing in my spine. Henry shifts behind me and lets me lean back against him.

"Mary, what happened?" he urges and commands the other guy, "Stay at the door."

I inhale deeply and pry his hands loose, crawling to my pet and wiping my nose, weeping, "He shot her!"

"Who?" Startled that the voice is right behind me, I crane my neck and see that Henry's standing at my back with an empathetic expression, yet his posture is coiled tight as he hunches down and palms my cheek.

But when I notice blood on my hands, I fire upward, irate in my grief. "Keano did this!" Then I meet the other man's eyes. "Did you catch him?"

The guard shakes his head while he aims his gun outside the door, and I push past him.

"No! Mary. Goddammit!" Henry shouts as I tear down a lit, narrow hallway to another door at the end.

"Mary, don't go outside!" he orders, yet his imposing tone doesn't stop me like it usually does.

Elbowing through the door, I discover we're in an industrial area and it's already dark outside. Several cars are parked in front of the brick building, and one more comes to a screeching stop as I pass a BMW.

And I demand to know from the first guard I reach, "Did you get Keano?"

"Not yet—"

“Where did he go then?”

When he glances left but tries to grab my arm, I burst past him, across the street where I see more men sprinting toward other buildings.

“Mary, stop!” Henry growls, and all of a sudden, I’m lifted off the ground from behind, kicking my feet in the air.

“Stop. Dammit!” he repeats against my hair as I struggle against him. “Calm the fuck down. Please.” The tremble in his voice and forceful grip have me going slack while we both breathe harshly. Henry kisses my temple, saying in a more gentle tone, “Calm down, baby.”

I sob and place all my weight against him when he sets me on my feet, hugging me firmly around my waist.

“He didn’t have to kill her.” I rest my cheek against his chest as he nuzzles me.

“He’s fucking crazy. And we’ll get him, baby. I promise. But I need to know if you’re all right. Did he hurt you?”

Henry loosens his hold while I shiver from a gust of wind, biting back the pain in my head and spine. Only, now I notice Adriano, Carmine, Luca, and two guards standing behind us. Henry whirls around as Adriano arcs a brow.

Carmine hurries forward, framing my cheeks. “Are you okay?”

I shake him off. “No! Keano killed my dog, and how did he get away again? I thought your soldiers were smart, but Keano keeps escaping. Now look what happened!” Clutching my hair, I grimace from the sting in my scalp.

“Lower your voice, Mary,” Adriano states, scanning me from head to toe. “Are you hurt?”

I touch the side of my head. “I have a bruise and my back hurts, but I’m okay.”

Adriano brushes his hand over my curls in a comforting manner. “You were gone for hours, Mary. We were worried sick. We’ll get him. I have an entire team hunting Keano down.”

“I want him dead,” I snarl, furious.

“I’ll burn him alive,” Adriano promises, and I wind my arms around his middle, sobbing into his chest as Carmine strokes my hair, both of them calming me.

“Strawberry’s inside there, dead,” I cry.

“We’ll bury her, okay?” Adriano assures me, and I nod before I rear back, trying to pull myself together.

“Where’s David?”

“We haven’t found him yet,” Carmine answers while Henry’s being strangely quiet, as if he’s a million miles away.

I reach inside my trench coat pocket to grab my phone but come up empty. “Where’s my phone?”

Adriano explains, “Keano destroyed it and a soldier found it in a trash can at the park.”

I pin my gaze on Henry. “So how did you find me?”

“Your coat has a GPS tracker,” he explains, like it’s the most normal thing, so I reach for my side, but he adds, “Inside pocket.”

Opening the top of my coat, I check the inside pocket and touch a small, round object. “Who did this?”

Adriano shakes his head in denial, and everyone’s glancing at each other as the guards return to their cars.

“I did,” Henry answers without shame.

Saddened, fuming, and confused, I glare at Henry while he stashes his gun in the back waistband of his slacks.

“What else have you done without telling me?” I mutter.

He flinches, yet Carmine interrupts, “Go easy on him, sis. If he hadn’t bugged you, we wouldn’t have found you in time.”

“How long was I gone? And how did you guys discover that I was missing?”

“Four and a half hours,” Henry replies. “I called you and your phone was off. Via the tracker, I located this area; we’ve been searching here for over half an hour.”

Adriano inquires, “What did Keano say and do, Mary?”

I’m staring at the ground, trying to recall everything he said, as I relay, “He chloroformed me at the park and I woke up here. I thought it was still afternoon. He was ranting about how he used me to get into Club 7. That’s why he didn’t want to break up with me; he wanted access to the club. But why? Almost anyone over twenty-one can get into Club 7 by simply paying the cover and walking through the front entrance.”

Adriano replies, “But as your guest, it wouldn’t appear suspicious for him to roam around, probably forming his strategy on how to hack us.”

“Keano’s a hacker?”

“Yes, he’s apparently a small-time black hat,” Henry responds, and I frown when Adriano and Henry glimpse at each other.

“What’s that look?” I prompt, not wanting to be left in the dark anymore. All these men around me organize my life while I don’t have a clue what the hell’s going on.

“There’s a hacker who attempted to get into Club 7’s computer system weeks ago and again today, and Henry managed to pinpoint his location to somewhere at your school,” Adriano says. “Keano *is* that hacker. He was there at your school today, attempting to hack us, while he was also watching you.”

“Oh, I just remembered something – there was an accomplice with him right before he bolted out.”

Henry’s eyes widen, and he demands, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I saw a shadow and heard a voice.”

“Male or female?” Adriano asks.

“I don’t know; it was hard to tell because it wasn’t very loud, but I think it was female.” I rub my neck as I study Henry clenching his fist.

When he catches my attention on him, he loosens it. There’s something about his behavior that concerns me.

Then, out of the blue, seemingly displeased, Adriano asks, “So...let’s talk about what’s going on between you two.” He points at Henry before pointing at me.

Uh-oh, this is why Henry’s so on edge. Have my brothers forbidden him to be with me?

I know damn well that Henry dislikes answering for his actions, and he’s going to flip since he’s been put on the spot. However, while I’m racking my brain about what to say to get us out of this, he shocks the hell out of me when he flanks me, winding one arm around my middle, and simply responds, “We’re dating.”

And it’s the most treasured I’ve ever felt. His admission of our dating is Henry’s form of a commitment – I hope.

All eyes redirect to Adriano, and Luca goes to stand beside him as Carmine evaluates my every move.

“Dating...” Adriano echoes darkly. “Is this true, Mary?”

“Yes,” I confirm, letting Henry decide again when to take the next step in our relationship.

In reaction, Adriano says to Henry, “I don’t like it when members *date* my sister.”

“It’s not just dating,” he retorts.

“Please don’t grill us right now,” I plead. “We’re adults and he’s good to me.”

Adriano’s unreadable, and I’m not sure whether or not he’s pissed. “Since it’s been a long day, Carmine will take you home, Mary. I need to talk to Henry. Alone.”

Henry and Adriano examine each other, both composed and forbidding.

“No. I’m not going to let you threaten him away from me. I—”

“Go. With. Carmine,” Adriano repeats, and Henry palms my cheeks, kissing my forehead.

“It’s okay. Let Carmine take you to Dr. Calderone to make sure you don’t have a concussion.”

Mixed up about everything and just wanting to be with Henry, I whisper, “I’m scared. Don’t go with him, Henry.”

“I have to, but I’ll be okay,” he answers, yet it doesn’t come out as if he truly believes that.

Regrettably, we’re interrupted when Carmine holds my shoulders and pries me away from Henry.

“No! Don’t hurt him, Adriano!” I beg, then I stare at Carmine with tears filling my eyes.

He wraps me up in a hug. “Stop it, Mary. Let’s go. You need to be checked by our physician.” And he hauls me with him to his car.

In a daze from everything that’s happened, I get inside the vehicle with Carmine’s help, watching Henry until we pull onto the street, so afraid that Adriano might do something to him, because I know how ruthless he can be.

Two hours later, I lie in bed in my old bedroom in my parents’ apartment. Although I’m fine physically - the Syndicate doctor just gave me painkillers for my pounding headache – I quietly sob into my pillow for Strawberry while my thoughts fly wild.

The worst moment of my life happened today. I feel grief for Strawberry, my first pet, who was innocent in all of this. I feel hate for

Keano and crave retaliation.

However, the thought of losing Henry strikes a fear in me so great it undermines every other emotion. I feel so much love for this man who seems to always look after me – albeit in a much too controlling way by tracking me without informing me. Nonetheless, his confession to my brothers proves that he’s at least trying to open up more and meet me halfway.

While I’m worried sick about the man I love, sleep is impossible. Desperately, I pray he isn’t being harmed.

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CHAPTER 31

Henry

“I asked you weeks ago if there was something going on between you and Mary,” Adriano sneers at me before Luca, who’s standing next to him, mutters something into his ear.

“And I was honest.” I don’t cower under his glare as a shiver goes through me from the icy wind of the evening. “Back then, we were only friends. It started after she broke up with Keano.”

He clenches his jaw. “If you’re dating her, then I don’t want to see you with other women anymore. And you better take good care of her.”

“You haven’t seen me with anyone for a while already, Adriano. And everything I do is to protect Mary. I planted the tracking device because you warned me that she can be irresponsible, but I also did it because I need her to be safe for my own fucking mental well-being.” There’s a moment of reflective silence, so I press on, “Mary told me she didn’t trust Keano. And I think I’ve figured out his plan. I checked the school records and Keano was never a student. He only went there as a way to meet Mary, the sister of the owner of Club 7. She’s a much bigger target than we realized due to the success of the dance club. It has nothing to do with the Syndicate; Keano has no idea about the Syndicate. With Mary, he got inside the club and tried to find anything he could use to, most likely, blackmail you as the owner. Only, he didn’t get far because I blocked him the first time he tried to hack into our system, and after that, his entire plan went haywire when Mary broke up with him and Carmine and I locked him up in the warehouse. Also, he’s not operating alone, obviously – from what Mary told us.”

Then, at last, I piece the puzzle together. The person working with Keano could be Tara. Yet I wonder who initiated this plan. Keano or Tara? The reason is crystal clear though; they’re both flat broke.

Luca urges Adriano backward with him while they talk heatedly. As a precaution, I extend my arm, reaching around for my gun, not being able to ascertain Adriano's mood. He scrubs his hand over his mouth while Luca speaks to him, and his eyes cut to me as Luca steps forward again, raising a brow as he glances at my hand on my gun.

"*Calmare.*" Calm down. "I, for one, am pleased you bugged Mary, which is something I'd do with Fallon too. And Adriano would lock Cam up to protect her if he could." Luca smirks as Adriano throws him a feigned glare, and I finally relax.

"Jesus Christ! For a second, I thought maybe you were going to kill me." I let out a loaded breath.

"Perhaps for a second, I also wanted to," Adriano points out, yet his scowl is gone. "But Luca has made me understand how this works in our favor. Mary seems to listen to you. And you seem to have a good, calming influence on her, which she needs. But, Henry, if you break her heart, I'll shoot your dick off."

I hold up my hands as Luca buttons his suit jacket to leave, since we can't keep standing around here, and adds, "How are we going to keep Mary safe now? Speaking of which, Janey is already in contact with the realtor to purchase the apartment at the Astoria; she'll arrange everything within a couple of days per our request."

"We've underestimated how easily Mary can be taken and how crazy Keano is. She definitely can't go back to her own apartment," I state resolutely.

"I agree." Adriano evaluates me before he shows me a slow grin. "You owe me for not informing me right away that you're dating my sister, so you tell her."

My brows shoot up, yet I smile, pleased that he's listened to Luca and isn't angry about Mary and me. "Fine. But this makes us even," I counter, and he dips his chin.

To ensure Mary's safety, I'll endure her wrath, because I know damn well that she's not happy with us telling her what to do, but I refuse to be negligent or allow myself to get distracted again.

Adriano concludes, "And, Luca, tell the *Capi* that if Keano isn't caught ASAP, I'll start firing them. I want every soldier working tonight to search for him. Mary's right. How the hell can that boy keep slipping through our grasp?"

He won't anymore, not now that the scenario of his strategy has materialized in my mind. Anonymous is Keano, and I bet he followed Mary to school this morning but couldn't get to her there and then was trying to hack from the library this afternoon. Tara must be somehow working with him; maybe she's helping him hide and that's why she disappeared? These two wanted to take money from Club 7, not realizing they'd be stealing from the mafia. Though this is just conjecture at this point, I can verify my theory, but I need my laptop. Moreover, if Tara's mixed up with Keano, it's even more important that no one discovers her involvement with me.

"I'm going to check the feeds from the security cameras around here to see if I can determine where Keano's gone," I tell them the truth, partly.

"Okay. And the *Capi* need to tell the soldiers not to kill him until we know who his accomplice is. I want this handled quickly, dammit. And you"—Adriano directs his finger at me—"take care of my sister."

I nod without hesitating. That's my number one priority these days. I thought I was suffocating when I left Club 7 and her phone was turned off as I arrived on campus.

I need to set things in motion to bait Keano and Tara; therefore, I can't be with Mary at the moment, even though I'm outraged that Keano hurt her and ended Strawberry. I'll gut Keano when I find him. I'm part of this organization, this family, and now Mary is becoming a part of me.

I'm fucking done playing nice.

Back at home not an hour later, I switch on one computer, accessing Keano Mathews phone records from since before the summer. I scour the history back to the night of the poker game when both Tara and Keano were present at Club 7. If they knew each other, they must've talked that night. Then I notice one number that was contacted at three a.m. Only once though, so I call it with one of my burner phones, and to my surprise, my call is answered.

"Where are you?!" Tara screams, and I laugh mockingly into the receiver.

"I'm looking for you," I reply, and it's deathly quiet for a few seconds before she spews.

"Fuck you, Henry!"

“No, the time of fucking with me is over. Now I’m going to fuck with you. I know you and Keano are working together. You were expecting his call and are wondering where he is, aren’t you? He’s a dead man walking. And you better start running too—”

Of course, she cuts the call right before I can trace her. Swiftly, I check the location of the phone, but she’s turned the location settings off, though I *have* discovered she’s still in the Loop.

They don’t know when to fucking give up and run.

And Mary’s been through enough. I will protect her with all my power from now on since our dating is out in the open anyway. Suddenly, I grasp how much I long to comfort her after the clusterfuck of a day she’s had.

After grabbing my glasses, I program an alarm on my computer that will call my smartphone when Tara’s number turns on location settings so that I can get to her quickly. Then I grab my keys from the desk to go to the only place I want to be.

“Just call the apartment. She’s awake,” I exhaustedly order the receptionist.

He sends me a disgruntled look but complies, picking up his phone. “Good evening, Miss Montesi. I’m sorry to bother you so late. I have a visitor for you. Mr. Henry Pierce. He says it’s urgent...Okay.” Then he addresses me, “You can go up, sir.”

Upstairs, as soon as the elevator door opens, I see Mary waiting outside her parents’ apartment. She’s dressed in a white nightgown that gives her an angelic glow and is wearing her curls in loose waves that surround her heart-shaped face, and as always, her beauty never fails to enthrall me.

Closing the distance between us with determination, I snake my arms around her waist as she clutches my nape and sobs into my chest, “I’m so glad you came.”

“I knew you didn’t want to be alone, baby.” I kiss the top of her head while she holds on to me like a lifeline, and I revel in it.

The fear of losing her was unbearable, and being deprived of consoling her earlier pissed me off. Her vital presence in my life makes me *feel*, makes me want the intimacy she keeps offering willingly.

But while she’s given me trust, I’ve given her lies in return. Yet I’m a selfish man, and my desire for Mary overrides the need to come clean. I

won't allow anything or anyone else to mess with us. I'm going to start settling scores once and for all. And I'll be damned if I lose her in the process.

Mary mumbles as I guide her to her bedroom, "I was careful and stayed with David, and Keano still got to me!"

"He's a dead man, Mary. And I *will* make him pay for killing Strawberry."

"She was so sweet," she snuffles, resting against my chest as I sit down on the edge of the bed with her astride me.

For several minutes, I let her cry while I stroke her hair and breathe in her familiar, sweet scent. Eventually, she inhales, lifting her head up, so I place my palm on her back to prevent her from toppling backward, gently swiping my thumb down her cheek to dry her tears.

"How are you feeling?" I ask. "What did the doctor say?"

"I'm fine, got some painkillers. I'm mostly in shock – I can't believe it happened."

"You've been in more danger than we thought. We underestimated Keano."

"So who's his accomplice?" she questions out of nowhere. "We don't know, do we?"

We don't know. *I* do.

Yet I don't want to outright lie to her face. For her protection, until I get this all figured out, I skirt the truth a bit. "No. We don't." And I run the back of my knuckles down her cheek as her gaze meets mine, her hazel irises bursting with unconcealed trust when I tuck her curls behind her ear.

I don't fucking deserve you, but you make me need you.

The words remain stuck in my throat as she moves aside, sneaking beneath the covers with a tremble.

"Are you cold?" I strip down to my boxers.

"A little. You're my furnace." A small, sad smile tugs at her lips. At least her vibrant spirit wasn't killed by that asshole.

Impressed by her inner strength, I lift the sheet and join her as she faces me, snuggling against me.

"Hmm...you're always so warm," she murmurs, throwing an arm and a leg over me.

I return her slightly suffocating embrace by winding my arms around her neck, fingers weaved into her hair.

“Why did you decide to tell my brothers about us tonight?”

“We couldn’t deny it anymore, Mary. They saw how close we were. I went crazy when I couldn’t get in touch with you. I ordered everyone together and didn’t stop until we found you.”

She glances up, angling her leg higher up my hip. My cock twitches when I feel the warmth of her pussy through the fabric of our underwear.

Fuck! She can make me hard in a split second with one touch.

“I’m sorry you were worried,” she puts in sweetly, although it isn’t her fault whatsoever.

I massage the back of her head and capture her mouth in a feverish kiss, pushing my tongue inside her mouth forcefully – a claiming. Tasting and memorizing her soft sighs, feeling the contours of her curvaceous body against mine. We merely kiss, yet this is the most intimate moment I’ve ever experienced. Memories of her challenging me back when we were just friends dance in my mind while I groan, pulling her into me. For a long moment, we drown in it and then I press my lips against her forehead. Somewhere along the way, making Mary mine has become more important than anything else.

“Sleep, baby. You’re tired and too much has happened today.”

Too much I failed to protect you from.

“Okay. But FYI, I’m not happy you put a tracking device on me without telling me; however, I *am* thankful because it saved me.”

“I’m fucking thankful you’re all right,” I whisper.

“So am I. Just no more lies, okay? I hate that. It makes me anxious.”

I could tell her. My instinct tells me I can trust her, so I begin, “Mary...”

She looks up, her eyes red rimmed, and I’m unable to speak the words and add more agony to her current grief.

“Sleep,” is all I say, which she accepts as tiredness pulls at her.

Thank fuck I’m with the one person I crave to be with every night, and I won’t give her up.

“*Ti amo,*” she utters softly. “Will you stay with me?”

“For as long as you need, baby,” I promise against her hair and fold her tightly into my arms, the place where she belongs as I kiss the top of her head repeatedly, wondering when I’ll be able to say the words.

Do I love her? Maybe I do. It’s something very similar to it; I can no longer deny nor negate it. And for that reason, the people who have endangered her must account for their actions.

Unfortunately, what I don't realize at this point is that I should've told Mary everything on this crucial night because a trail of destruction has started with Keano's escape, and I'm already too late to stop it.

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CHAPTER 32

Mary

In life, people come and go. Some you forget, some you remember once in a while, some become friends or lovers for a time. Only, one day, someone will cross your path who always seems to be there during pivotal moments, who leaves a mark on your existence that establishes an unequalled invisible bond. That mark was left when Henry first fucked me and it deepens every time he protects me.

For several days and nights, Henry stays with me while I'm stashed away inside my bedroom in my parents' apartment where, from the first day when Keano shot Strawberry, I'm suspended in a state of utter shock. The second day, my anger starts to take over, especially since Keano's still out there while I have to be cooped up inside, and meanwhile, David hasn't been found either. I haven't asked my brothers what the status is with Keano, knowing they won't answer. And Henry's been ignoring my questions, telling me not to worry, yet that's impossible. Even Henry's doting behavior hasn't stopped my fury from growing.

But as mad as I am at Keano, I'm glad that day pushed Henry and me closer together. I sense deep in my heart that he's truly attached to me. But I still feel a certain distance. Whether or not that's anxiety about Keano, I'm not sure.

In the long run, being confined gives a person too much time to think, so I'm excited when, on the fifth day, Henry tells me to put on my shoes because we're going out. Feeling a little less gloomy, I dress in my jeans and a lilac sweater that hangs off one shoulder, and after I have dinner with my parents, Henry knocks on the front door to escort me to the elevator, but we go up instead of down.

“Are we going to Adriano’s?” I ask, disappointed, as Henry wraps his arms around me from behind. “I thought we were going outside.”

“We’ll go outside too. I know you’re going crazy in there.” He nips my earlobe. “Even though I love having your body all to myself to fuck every night.”

I bite my lip, hiding a smile and adoring the way he’s expressing his emotions more – especially his crude words that turn me on to no end. In his own way, Henry’s been my ray of light during these dark days, and without him, I’d be wallowing in grief.

I’m jarred out of my thoughts when the elevator opens, and Henry guides me onto the thirty-ninth floor, the one beneath Adriano’s penthouse where there’s a door on each side for two apartments.

“What are we doing here?” I probe when he knocks on the left door and it’s opened by Carmine.

“Hey, sis,” he says, “right on time,” turning down the wide hallway that leads into a spacious living room with floor-to-ceiling windows and an indoor terrace. This is the same floor plan as my parents’, the only difference being the ten-foot ceiling and the massive, state-of-the-art black kitchen with an island where Adriano’s shutting the fridge door, popping something into his mouth.

My gaze shifts back and forth among all three men. “Adriano, what are you doing here? Who lives here?”

Carmine and Adriano glance at Henry, who stops in front of me.

He looks very big all of a sudden, more so than usual. “Mary, we need to talk about *your* living arrangements. As I’ve told you, your apartment has shit security, and in light of what’s happened, it’s too dangerous for you to live there from now on.”

My mouth drops open. “This is about *my apartment*?” I hold up my palms in defense, and then I point toward my brothers. “I’ve had this conversation with them already. I can’t afford anything else. Why are you telling me this now...” My words trail off as understanding dawns. “Is this apartment for me?”

“Yes,” Henry answers calmly.

So many questions and emotions barrage my brain. Mostly, I’m stunned. “Who bought it?”

“We did,” Adriano and Carmine respond in unison, standing beside Henry, whose commanding presence is different, more imposing, like he is

when he's with the Syndicate men.

Being up against these three men – while I'm already in a vulnerable place of anger and grief – downright unhinges me. I clutch my hair in disbelief, gazing at the grey wall that holds a fifty-five inch silver framed TV. The entire room is furnished elegantly, yet I'm incapable of enjoying any of it. Somehow, it bothers me that Henry arranged this, along with bugging me and ordering me around. Yet he hasn't even told me he loves me. I might feel it, but I need him to say it too and stop organizing my life with my brothers.

I state to Henry, "So you plan my whole life behind my back. With them." Then I address my brothers, "And you two are no better. You spring this on me now? This week?"

"Because now is the only time you'll accept it," Adriano points out without a hint of guilt, and all three of them tower around me, making my head spin. "Mary, it's simply for your safety. You're getting more involved in Syndicate business. Moreover, with the success of Club 7, you're obviously becoming a target for thugs like Keano. And I won't rest until he's dead. But even after that, I need to protect you the same way I protect Cam and Amalia." His tone softens as he palms my cheek like only a brother can, a loving touch that promises he'll watch out for me.

"Whose idea was this?"

"Mine," Henry answers, being unusually quiet and studying me as Carmine takes my hand in his.

"You'll be happy here, sis, and you'll have your freedom. It's not as if Adriano and I hang out with each other every night. And don't worry about the money. If you must, pay us rent, we don't care. We got the apartment much faster than expected, and all the furniture is yours if you want it. We can also move all of your stuff here."

Their uncompromising faces with looks of genuine affection moderate my temper. "I don't mean to be ungrateful. It's just that this week brought about a whirlwind of emotions. I don't know what I feel. I-I'm upset that everything's being done without even discussing it with me. You guys need to trust me more. I'm not a teenager anymore. If you would've told me this *before* you purchased it, I would've probably agreed with you. But now you've managed to shove it in my face and you put me on the spot."

I send Henry a disillusioned glance, and he flinches for a second before masking his expression.

“Be upset all you want but accept our gift,” Adriano declares, and he kisses my forehead, muttering, “Consider it a very early graduation present.”

When I hear a vibrating noise, Adriano takes his phone from his pocket, turning around and motioning to Carmine, who moves to him so that they can both read a message.

Henry inches forward but doesn't touch me as our eyes meet and he cups my jaw, a little more forcefully than usual. There's something about his dominating manner that troubles me; why does he do these things behind my back?

So I ask him, “Why now? You've been coming to my apartment for weeks. I've lived there for months.”

“Because after Keano took you, I went fucking crazy, and I won't allow him to hurt you again. If you can't do it for your brothers, do it for me. I can't work knowing you might be in danger once you go home.”

“Something's different about you,” I blurt out.

Still, his admission melts my heart – a heart that's been conquered irrevocably by him. Though a tremble of uncertainty fissures through me. If we want to be together in this Syndicate, he can't repeatedly keep me in the dark. I'm fully aware that puts me in more danger.

“Is something else going on? Do you know more about Keano? We promised, no lies, Henry,” I remind him with a frown.

His eyes round, and he clenches his jaw – I don't get his conduct at all. Maybe he's more affected by the Keano situation than I thought? Maybe I'm underestimating the threat lurking at every corner? What's happening with Keano and being with Henry has sucked me deeper into this Syndicate world, and I do know it would be smarter to live here.

And with that realization, I wonder why the hell I'm complaining, because as I look around, this is a dream apartment with a killer view of the Chicago River. Also, there's one major perk: I get to be closer to my niece, Amalia, and visit her as often as I can since they reside one floor up.

Before Henry gets a chance to answer, Adriano interrupts, “Mary, don't overthink this. Stay here tonight or go to Cam.” He then tells Henry, “We need to go.”

“Is there news about Keano?” I probe, but Adriano ignores me and strides to the hallway, waving his hand, commanding Carmine and Henry to follow.

Henry cradles my cheeks, pressing a hard kiss on my mouth. “Will you stay here?”

Not wanting him or my brothers to worry while they’re obviously going to do something Syndicate related, I concede, “Yes. For you.”

A devilish half grin pulls at his lips right before he kisses my nose, whispering, “Then I’ll reward you later.”

“*Ti amo*,” I babble and mentally face-palm myself because this is the third time I’ve said it, knowing I need to stop and wait for him to say it as well, so I continue hurriedly, “I really want to get out, even if it’s for just ten minutes. I’ll have the guard downstairs go with me to get a coffee at the Starbucks that’s two blocks away.”

He sends me a stern look, implying he’s about to order me to stay inside, so I plead, “Please. I need to go out.”

“Okay, only for coffee and stay with the guard, baby,” he insists in a low tone.

“Yes, boss.” I wink at him, wanting him to leave on a positive note since he does all of this for me.

Luckily, he smirks before disappearing down the hall. I truly believe Henry means well and we’re heading toward a committed place.

Pacing around my new apartment, I walk to the window to stare at the full moon, which seems bigger way up here on the thirty-ninth floor. In truth, I need a fresh start and begin to look forward to bringing my stuff here. Before I exit, I check out the three gigantic bedrooms and the bathroom with a marble Grecian tub.

“I’m so getting a king-size bed,” I murmur to myself, treading down the hall and seeing that Adriano’s left a set of keys on a dresser next to the door.

Grabbing them, I head downstairs to the reception area where a buff, dark-haired Syndicate guard is already waiting for me. As he trails me out of the building, we turn left, and when the wind hits my cheeks, I lift my face to the sky and inhale the crisp scent of an impending winter.

“Let’s get a vanilla latte,” I suggest as my guard inspects the street and steers me sideways when people pass us.

“Okay, but afterward, we return immediately, Mary – Henry’s orders.”

“I didn’t expect anything less,” I mumble.

After rounding the corner, we dodge a car to cross the street, landing us right in front of the coffee shop. We step over the threshold and once we’re

inside, it's just as busy as you'd expect it to be on a Friday night. I order two coffees and inch to the side along the bar counter to wait.

Noticing that there aren't any stirrers, I ask my guard, "Can you get a spoon and a napkin for me?"

He nods and zigzags through the other customers as I watch the barista who's tending the coffee machine when I hear from behind me, "Hello, Mary."

Swiveling around, I'm met with Tara. Her smile is pleasant, but there's something sharp about her face that her grin and a layer of foundation can't hide.

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CHAPTER 33

Henry

I exit Mary's new apartment, relieved because I expected her to put up more of a fight. But I'm damn pleased this hasn't turned into a battle. I could tell that she understood this was the best course of action and was able to tamp down her initial reaction of anger toward us for organizing her life, once again, impressing me. Though I did plan to discuss it with her *before* her brothers bought it, but Adriano's realtor succeeded in rapidly finalizing the paperwork. When you swim in money and can throw it around, everything gets taken care of faster.

However, there was one disturbing moment during our talk, and I'm beginning to think that Mary can actually see through me – I guess my poker face wavers when it comes to her. The way she was evaluating me and asked me directly if I was honest with her gutted me for an instant. Of course, that damn pesky guilt regarding my lies resurfaces, but I'm in so fucking deep that there's no way out anymore except by finishing this.

While Adriano, Carmine, and I make our way downstairs and outside, Adriano informs me, "Logan texted me that a soldier spotted Keano on Edendale Road."

I'm about to ask what his plan is when the alarm on my phone chimes in, warning me that the location settings on Tara's phone have been turned on for the first time in five days. I need to check it out, so as I yank the car device from my pocket, I suggest, "I can go home and look at the footage from the security cameras in that area from my laptop. Are you two on your way to Edendale Road?"

"Yes," Adriano replies, "Carmine and I are going to scour the area ourselves. Call me as soon as you know more."

“I will,” I assure him and stop at my vehicle as they nod at me, continuing on to Adriano’s silver convertible parked behind mine.

I jump into my car and fire up the engine, steering left with one hand and blocking a honking car to pull out of the parking lot and race home.

Seated behind my laptop, I track Tara’s phone to Abraham Street, which is a side street of Edendale Road – I bet Tara’s with Keano.

“Now I’ve fucking got you!” I surge upward, flinging my glasses onto the desk.

Within seconds, I strip my clothes and hurry into the bedroom to grab jeans and a t-shirt and throw them on. Running out, I take my biker jacket from the coat rack and step into my boots. Inside my jacket, I feel for my Smith & Wesson and check to make sure it’s fully loaded.

Edendale Road is crowded on this stormy Friday night as I recognize several soldiers searching the area. I’ve texted Adriano and Carmine that I didn’t find anything on the public security cameras on this street.

Dashing between two high-rises, I dive around the corner until I come upon a residential building that stands out due to its old bricked construction. According to my tracker, the phone is in there.

Unluckily, the entrance is locked, so I wait until I see someone exiting the building and then run in behind them before the door closes again.

After going down a scant hallway, I hike up the stairs to the third floor and stop at the first brown door to my right. Pressing my ear to the surface, I hear someone cursing inside as I grab my gun with silencer from the inside pocket of my jacket and knock once.

Immediately, the door is pulled open.

“Where the hell have you been, Tara?!” Keano snarls right before he sees me and attempts to slam the door in my face, but I place my foot in the doorway and shove him inside.

Clutching his throat and placing the end of my pistol against his temple, I spit, “We’ve got to stop meeting like this.” And I kick the door shut, hurling him backward onto the creaking, worn-out floor. The apartment is

tiny with dingy, yellowed walls, and I notice a desk and computer in the corner.

He scrambles up and I kick him in the jaw, sending him flying back again. “That’s for kidnapping Mary.” I pin him down with my boot at his throat, and with my aim on him, I demand, “Where’s your accomplice?” Then I push down hard with my foot, choking him for several seconds as he wraps his hands around my ankle. “And that’s for killing Mary’s dog, motherfucker!”

Keano coughs, stammering, “I-I don’t know where she is.”

“But I know you’re waiting for her and that her phone is here, so she’ll come.” I lift my foot but keep my aim on him as he gulps a breath. “I’ll just wait with you, and in the meantime, you can clarify some things for me. I want Tara, and if you help me now, I’ll let you go before the owner of Club 7 turns up here, because he’ll gladly torture you.”

He grunts from pain and glares at me. “Fuck you! You’ll just shoot me after I talk.”

“That was my initial intention, yes. But I’ve reconsidered because I think you’re just a pawn in Tara’s game. Isn’t that correct?” Lowering my arm, I let my gun dangle from my hand. “I was you a few years ago. She’s used me to do her dirty work as well.”

His eyes narrow, and I can tell he’s wondering if I might really let him go, so I continue, “Tell me what she’s planning and what your part is in it, and I’ll let you leave the Loop – alive.”

I step back as he evaluates me with suspicion, standing up slowly.

“You don’t have long to think about it,” I pressure him.

Hesitantly, he inches sideways, and I don’t move a muscle but sigh in agitation. “If I wanted to kill you, I’d have done so already. I want Tara. Other men are on the way, and once they get here, it’ll be out of my hands. Tell me how the fuck you met her and what she intends to do!”

He glances away yet answers, “It’s been all her plan from the beginning. Tara and I met at a restaurant downtown. We got to talking, and after we each got a few drinks in us, we talked some more and discovered that we were both hackers. She convinced me that we could take money from Club 7, and she hoped my black hat skills could get us into your system. I’d been unemployed for over a year, so I agreed.”

“How long ago did you meet?” I ask, knowing he met Mary six months ago.

“About six months ago.”

“And?”

“And within a week of meeting Tara, she informed me of her plan. It all started with Mary. So I went to her school, posing as a student, and met her. But one month later, Mary became friends with you, so I had to keep her away from you while Tara tried to get her hooks into you. I was able to hack into Club 7’s system once, on her command, and your computer too. But after that, we weren’t able to bypass your firewalls again. She just wanted to keep you distracted to ensure you wouldn’t suspect us or our connection.”

“So you used Mary from the start?”

Does he know I’m Tara’s husband?

“Yes. But then Mary ended it with me, and you and Carmine locked me up. When I saw my chance to escape, I took it. I stopped at the first town I came to in the dead of night where I called Tara and she picked me up. She forced me to take Mary and was supposed to give me money to leave the Loop.”

This guy is fucking pathetic, putting all the blame on Tara to save his own ass. “And what’s your plan now?”

“Nothing. We’re in over our heads. I get that, but Tara doesn’t.”

Thinking quickly and needing this problem gone, I shift forward and signal toward the computer in the corner, directing my gun between his eyes as he holds up his palms, shouting, “I gave you the truth! What more do you want?”

“I believe you, but I want my files at City Hall unlocked, and something tells me you can help me with that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you know how Tara locked my files, and can you unlock them? If so, I’ll let you go with enough cash to leave the Loop right now.”

“I’m not sure...She did tell me she put some programming codes in a document. That’s her computer.”

I jerk my barrel toward the desk, ordering him to move it, and he jumps into the chair as I press my gun to the back of his head. “I suggest you think hard about what she’s told you. Unlock my files. Now.”

The keyboard clanks and I see Tara was stupid enough to keep a City Hall tab open. He accesses City Hall’s system, and I watch carefully what he does, seeing he’s stumbling upon the same issues that I did – not being

able to alter my file. But then he opens a *Word* document and copies and pastes the code into the system and it unlocks immediately.

“Hurry the fuck up,” I command, shoving my weapon against his scalp. Tara will be here any minute and I need to end this before Adriano or a Syndicate member locates this place. “Change my status to *single* and delete the history and marriage certificate.”

He types for a minute with trembling hands. “Done.”

At long last, I’m divorced and Tara isn’t linked to me anymore.

Then, all of a sudden, a loud bang has Keano swinging up from his chair as we hear a commotion coming from the hall.

Lightning fast, I hook my arm around his throat and push my pistol into his side while he struggles. “Do you honestly think I would let you live after you took my girl and killed her dog in front of her, motherfucker?! You’re going to burn in Hell.”

“No!” he yells, and I pull the trigger while releasing him, letting him topple sideways with a loud thud.

Determined not to make the same mistake twice, I take care of one problem forever. Rolling him over with my foot, I shoot him in the chest, and he lies there, dead, with his eyes open. Hurriedly, I search his pockets and stash his phone in my jacket just as I look up to find Tara’s tall form darkening the doorway.

We both freeze for a split second before she turns to run, and I leap toward her, trying to seize her arm, yet she shakes me off and collapses forward. Stooping low, I manage to grab her ankle and yank her inside, smothering her mouth when she screams while I sit astride her hips to hold her captive, my gun pointed at her temple.

She struggles for breath as I grin slowly. “I know everything.” And I lift my hand from her mouth.

“Son of a bitch! What the hell did you do? Did you kill Keano?”

“Yes, I did. And you’re next,” I tell her, and her movement stops.

“What? No. I’ll unlock your goddamn files. Who the hell *are* you? You killed a person, Henry!” she whispers in disbelief, and acute fear blisters across her face.

“I told you that you never knew me, and you have no idea who you tried to scam. Club 7 is the Chicago Syndicate.”

Her eyes widen so that the whites are entirely visible.

“I warned you not to mess with us. And I don’t need you anymore; Keano unlocked my file.”

In the distance, I hear male voices while Tara begs, “No! Henry. I’m sorry. I don’t want to die!”

And when they get close enough for me to recognize, I end this once and for all. This is my only choice, and I’ve worked too damn hard to secure this position and Mary’s trust.

“You should’ve thought about that before you abducted Mary.” I pull the trigger, and the bullet perforates her brain, blood gushing out as I rush to get up.

Stealing her wallet, I make sure neither of the corpses have any other ID and swipe the back of my hand over my mouth, feeling nothing but a sense of victory. This is who I am. I take lives to protect the one person I’m attached to. Does that make me an immoral person? Undoubtedly, it does, but because they murdered Mary’s dog, I don’t care.

I look up as footsteps come closer from down the hall and Adriano peeks inside, directing his weapon through the space in the open door.

“Henry, you okay?” he asks, surveying the room as two other men stop behind him.

Thank fucking Christ the scene makes it appear as if we fought and I killed these two in self-defense.

While breathing raggedly, I nod. “They attacked me, and I had to end them both.”

He frowns. “She was the accomplice? Who is she?”

“His lover, apparently. She doesn’t have any ID, so I think she’s simply someone he picked up. It looks like just the two of them were working together.”

He steps inside and makes one trip around the cramped apartment before stashing his gun in his ankle holster and saying, “Good riddance. This entire situation needed to be dealt with anyway. Have the soldiers clean this place and burn the bodies at the warehouse, and check his computer for any vital information before you destroy it. Then go to Mary’s to tell her it’s over.”

I place my gun inside my jacket. Finally, everything has been handled. Every roadblock has been eliminated.

“Okay. I’ll take care of it,” I reply, and anxious to get to Mary, I start ordering our men when Adriano strides out.

I pass the guard at the Astoria reception area and demand, “Did anything happen?”

“No, sir. Mary and I were back from the coffee shop within twenty minutes. She’s in her own apartment.”

Of course, I have a key, so after going up to the thirty-ninth floor, I unlock the door and find her in the living room, gazing out the floor-to-ceiling windows with only the light from the chandelier above illuminating the room.

In a much more serene state than I was earlier, I stop behind her, winding my arm around her waist and pressing a kiss to her hair, inhaling her sweet scent. “We’ve got Keano, baby. He’s dead. It’s all over.”

Stoically, she observes the dark sky. “One problem down, but it seems we have another one.”

“What do you mean?”

As she turns toward me, I release her and she wraps her fingers around my wrist, pulling back my sleeve and touching the wedding ring on my leather wristband that I’d forgotten all about. Then she looks up despondently. “Having a wife is a problem to me.”

My blood fucking boils when I have to see the distrust in her vibrant eyes that have captured me entirely, her glare hitting me in the heart as if she’s shot an arrow straight through it.

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CHAPTER 34

Mary

“Hello, Mary.” Tara stretches her arm out as the barista hands her a coffee. Glimpsing at me, she says in a rush, “I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while.”

“Why?” I stand straight because she’s so much more poised than I am.

Her expression turns icy as she narrows her eyes, which are rimmed with a perfect cat eyeliner, muttering, “Because you don’t know Henry like I do.”

I arc a brow, surprised at her audacity, making me feel the need to be wary about her. Just because we rescued those dogs that one time doesn’t make us friends.

“Really?” I retort and proceed to defend the man I love, “I know him well enough to realize that he won’t like some ex bothering his current girlfriend.”

She sends me a seething glance. “Ex? Is that what he told you? I’m not his ex, sweetheart. I’m his wife.”

The world around me slows until my heartbeat resonates like the bells in a church tower, and a shiver of suspicion alerts me as she shows her teeth, making my insides twist into a knot.

“You and all the other women are just fillers until I take him back.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I demand.

“Henry and I have been married for six years.”

I all but howl, “That makes no sense. You’re lying.”

“Do you know that black wristband he wears?” she hisses. “It has a silver ring looped into it; that’s his wedding ring, sweetheart. Be thankful that I’ve warned you. The way he’s playing you is kind of sad.”

A stone drops to the pit of my stomach while the room starts to spin. This can't be true.

When I look to the side again, she's gone and my guard has returned.

"Mary," the barista calls, and the guard leans over the counter to take our two steaming coffees.

"Let's go," the guard comments, leading the way outside.

My coffee tastes like ash while a ton of questions whirl through my brain, and my palms are clammy, even though it's a chilly night and thunder roars in the sky.

Has Henry been lying to me? Has he used me for...something? Every question raises more doubt, and doubt only weakens a relationship.

Utterly bemused, I'm in my apartment, staring at the rain spitting against the window when the front door opens and Henry appears from down the hall. I study him in the reflection of the glass as he stops behind me. His thick, black hair is in disarray, and there are blood spatters on his t-shirt that are revealed as he zips open his biker jacket. When he circles his arm around my middle, his ocean fresh cologne reminds me of the memories we've made.

He begins, "We've got Keano, baby. He's dead. It's all over."

Relief fills me, and not an ounce of regret accompanies it. Keano deserved to die because of his mistakes and for killing Strawberry. This is his own fault, and I refuse to allow any sorrow to seep in. But despite the fact that I don't want to believe Tara, I keep hearing her words over and over in my thoughts, and my body is coiled tight.

Looking up to meet Henry's stare in the window while I'm praying she was lying, I say, "One problem down, but it seems we have another one."

His brows furrow. "What do you mean?"

I swivel around, and his arms drop from my waist. Taking his hand in mine, I hold it up. Slowly, I slide back the sleeve of his jacket to expose his wrist and turn the black leather wristband with the ring upward before I read the inscription on the silver ring: *Tara. My wife, my love.* Then I gaze up at Henry with moisture in my vision.

His eyes fall closed for a moment in a silent admission of remorse.

"Having a wife is a problem to me." I let go of him as if he's burned me.

Henry's eerily calm. "Did she talk to you?"

"Yes, your wife informed me about who she was when I ran into her at Starbucks."

"Don't call her my wife!" His control snaps and he turns his back to me, clutching his hair. No one's ever appeared guiltier.

"That's what she is. Tell me what's going on! What kind of game are you playing?"

"I forgot about the fucking ring!" he grinds out, pivoting back around. "What did she say?"

Is he mad at me?

Anger takes over, so I ignore his question. "No! You need to tell me why the hell you're married?"

"What did she tell you?" he echoes in a low tone.

Hoping my answers will prompt his, I explain with excessive hand gestures, "Tara spoke to me for a minute and then left. She said, and I quote, *I'm his wife*. And that it's kind of sad the way you're playing me, so that's why she told me."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

Forcefully, he cradles my face and bends down since he's towering over me. "Listen to me. I'm not playing any game. We're married because she won't divorce me. She always wants money from me."

I attempt to pry off his hands. "She won't divorce you?"

"No, she won't. And I can't do it myself because she locked my files."

"She's a hacker?"

"Yes."

I try to shake him off, but he won't budge. "Why do you still have your ring? And how long have you been married?"

"I simply forgot about the ring. We married when I was eighteen, but I've wanted a divorce for four years. She only used me and cheated on me relentlessly."

"Is she the reason why you were such a manwhore when we met? Did she break your heart?"

"Yes, but that has nothing to do with us."

I throw my hands in the air in disbelief, finally able to shove him away, yet he merely takes a steady step back. "It has everything to do with us. She's the fucking reason why you're such a commitment-phobe." Every

encounter between us during the last few months flies through my mind. “Who else knows you’re married? Do my brothers know?”

“No one knows,” he replies.

I palm my forehead while the truth slams into me, and my eyes cut to him. “And you don’t want your boss to know you’re married to a civilian, do you? I’m not as stupid as you seem to think...” I say as another upsetting thought arises. “She’s the reason why you don’t trust me. You didn’t trust me enough to confide in me!”

He glances away. “No, that’s not it. It was because she threatened you. Keano and Tara...They—”

“They? What do you mean *they*?” I glower at him before adding, “Were she and Keano working together?”

When Henry hesitates, I prompt, practically stomping my foot, “Tell me the truth for once, Henry.”

His jaw clenches. “Yes, she was his accomplice.”

“Oh, my god.” I start to pace the room. “What have you been up to?”

“I’ve been trying to protect you, goddammit,” he objects, his hard stare following my every move.

Memories barrage me. So many signs and gut feelings I disregarded. Henry’s always evasive when it comes to answering my questions. He frequently distracts me with sex. He’s sometimes a million miles away. Oftentimes, I sense that he’s hiding something from me. Although I wasn’t prepared for a bomb of this size.

“Were you trying to protect *me* or *yourself*? Your boss doesn’t know you’re married, and you just happened to fall for me right when you got closer to my brother. And you didn’t want to tell him about us until after my kidnapping happened, by which time, we were already outed. Do you even love me or have you simply used me to secure your position? To get into Adriano’s good graces!”

“No,” he bellows. “Stop jumping to conclusions. Dammit!”

“Wait a minute! She wanted money from you, so you have to see her to pay her? Do you fuck her?”

With a chilling grunt, he approaches me, grabbing my shoulders. “Of course I don’t fuck her. I didn’t pay her, and her plan failed when we caught them both, and they’re fucking dead now.”

“Her plan? What plan?” I demand, pushing my hand against his hard chest, so he lets me go, surveying me intently.

“Tara roped Keano into trying to hack into Club 7’s system to steal money. She instructed him to date you and then keep you away from me. When she showed up at the beach, it was the first time I’d seen her in years. She supposedly wanted money and then she would give me my divorce, so I played along. But that was all a ruse. And their badly-thought-out plan was ruined when you dumped Keano and Carmine and I locked him up at the warehouse.”

“So Adriano knows that Tara was Keano’s accomplice and your wife? And who killed them – a member or one of the high ranking men?” I fire my questions at rapid speed, not wanting to give him the opportunity to cover up with new lies.

Silence stretches on while we glare at one another with hostility until he admits, “I killed them both, and Adriano doesn’t know Tara was my wife. He only knows she was his lover and accomplice and that they’re dealt with now.”

I let out a discouraged sigh. “And you don’t want Adriano to find out you lied? That’s what this is about.”

He scrubs his hand over his mouth in irritation. “No. Maybe at first but not anymore. Not after I...fell for you.”

When I realize how easily I’ve been fooled, I weave my hands in my curls in despair. “But it *was* about that in the beginning? Oh, my god. I’m so gullible. Keano used me, and you used me too. Why should I believe anything you say? I let you pull away constantly, telling myself it was because of your damn commitment issues. And you were so manipulative, evading my questions. I fell for your lies hook, line, and sinker! Do I even know you?”

“Yes,” he throws back, crowding me again until I hit the window. “You’re the only one who does.”

I go on my tiptoes, not needing him to make me feel so short. “This is what lying does; you lose your credibility.”

He folds his hand over my neck, angling my chin up with his thumb in a terrifying, controlled manner. “I said stop jumping to conclusions. Everything I do is to protect you.”

I grip his jacket, sneering, “No. All you do is order me around. You fuck me, but you can’t even tell me you love me.” His nostrils flare, yet I continue, “Before today, I wholeheartedly trusted you and I asked you to trust me too, over and over, because I felt, deep down, you were holding

something back. But I made myself believe we have something special. All the while, you're married to another woman and lying to my face, every day and every night."

"Jesus fucking Christ!" he whisper-shouts in a tormented tone. "She was my wife on paper only, Mary."

I assess him in disbelief as my eyes begin to tear up. "You don't even get what you've done, do you? You're so damaged by her. She's made you distrust women, and you ruined us before we even had a chance."

His glare is promptly back in place as his grip on my neck intensifies. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you still haven't bothered to address the fact that you can't even say that you love me, Henry."

A crease forms in his forehead as his muscles ripple in rage. "You assume I don't love you. I just...just give me some time."

Until this moment, the moment he confirms that he doesn't love me, I've valiantly fought to keep my tears from falling. But now they roll down my cheeks, and he dips his head, brushing his lips over mine.

"Don't cry, Mary. You're making everything much worse in your head. I may have had more Syndicate-centered motives at first, but that changed weeks ago. Don't doubt that."

"But you don't love me," I mutter, my heart splintering into tiny pieces.

In reaction, he tries to seduce me, as anticipated. He kisses me, a strong and insistent play of lips and tongue that forces my mouth open.

"Kiss me back." He pulls me flush against him with a possessive growl he has no right to make.

Nonetheless, I drown in the sin of his kiss, as always. Henry nudges me back against the window, pushing his bulge between my legs. But when he breaks our kiss, my sanity returns and I propel him backward with all my power. I need space to think, without his sexual advances muddling my mind.

"Stop trying to distract me with sex!" I sag back against the window, touching my swollen lips he's branded as his so deeply. "I don't know whether or not to believe you. I'm so disappointed in you."

Henry grips his hair, messing up the strands, and as we lock eyes, the cracks in my soul expand, a vast emotional distance growing between us.

In this dismal moment, I realize that Henry and I were a beautiful lie. I made up a fairy tale while living in an anarchic mafia world, and again, I'm

in a deceitful relationship, the one thing I wanted to avoid. All of a sudden, I feel like I've aged decades. The naïveté was knocked out of me the second Henry broke my heart.

As the tears burn my skin, I utter, ever so softly, "All I asked was for you to be honest. And in this fucking Syndicate world, that's important because now I question everything." Angrily, I swipe my cheeks with the backs of my hands. "We should've stayed just friends."

"We were never *just* friends," he counters, incensed yet with moisture in his gaze.

Mustering up all my courage, I glance away, no longer able to look at him, because the dream I built up in my head has been completely demolished.

Then *I* order *him* for once, "You need to go."

He straightens, rising to his full height in the most imposing fashion. "No, I'm not going."

"Then I'll go." I march forward, but Henry grabs my arm, fixing me with a terrifying glare.

"You'll stay here. Be mad at me all you want, but you won't put yourself in danger and roam around outside at night just to piss me off. I'll give you some time to let this sink in, but you *will not* shut me out. I'll come by tomorrow."

"You don't have a say in it anymore," I retort dejectedly, and a muscle ticks in his jaw as I pull myself free.

For several seconds, we simply have a standoff, and I don't falter under his unrelenting scowl until he turns on his heel, grumbling, "Goddammit!" before he shifts into the hallway and slams the door closed.

I drop to the floor, finally getting knocked off cloud nine in the most horrible way. For what seems like an endless amount of time, I remain huddled on the floor, overwhelmed by all the thoughts flying through my brain, but the loudest of them keeps resonating like an alarm that won't stop.

He's married and lied to me from the beginning.

When the doorbell rings, I shiver and wipe my tears before treading to the door and opening it to find Adriano.

"Hey." His brows furrow when he notes my red-rimmed eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," I sob as he pulls me into his arms.

Should I tell Adriano?

If I reveal the truth to my brother, then Henry's a dead man.

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CHAPTER 35

Henry

In a completely different frame of mind than when I got here, I charge out of the elevator, infuriated at everyone and everything, but mostly at myself. I'm outraged that Tara managed to ruin it for me.

By the time I get to the reception area, I'm a devastated mess and I rush toward the guard, palming his throat and banging him against the wall as I bark, "Someone talked to Mary at the coffee shop, idiot. You're done in this Syndicate." Then I release him harshly. "Give me your gun."

"Sir, but Mary seemed fine—"

"Hand over your gun and get out of my fucking sight," I repeat, and he forks over his weapon, which I stash in the back waistband of my jeans before striding out into the fog-shrouded night.

Needing to blow off some steam, I hightail it home, skating red lights recklessly while the clouds rumble and raindrops pour down.

Inside my apartment, I snatch off the leather wristband with the wedding ring and fling it across the room, letting it clank against the window.

Absolutely unhinged since I thought my Tara issue was all over, I burst into the kitchen, reaching underneath the sink to grab my bottle of whiskey and a shot glass. After pouring a shot, I down it instantly and fix another one, which I take to my bedroom.

For the second fucking time in my life, I've let a woman unbalance me. Yet not even when I found out that Tara was cheating on me did I feel this depressed and maddened simultaneously.

Shucking off my jacket, I sink down onto the bed, dropping my head in my hands. Although I knew damn well Mary would be furious if she ever

discovered the truth, I didn't anticipate her shutting down on me like she did. But of course, I get that her reaction was because she had to find out everything from Tara instead of me. If I had confessed, would Mary have reacted so fiercely?

Why can't she see that I did everything to protect her?

Because you can't even tell her you love her, motherfucker.

But I'm incapable of saying those three words to her unless I'm positive, and I never actually lied to her, albeit some say omission is the same thing.

When it comes down to it, I have no one else to blame but myself. Nevertheless, it's all out in the open now and she just needs to process it. Eventually, she'll come to her senses and understand how much I did to safeguard her.

As I sit here with a harassing sensation that cuts into my soul, I grasp that I might even love Mary and I should stop being a pussy and admit it out loud to her. It's not going to kill me, and ultimately, I'm not prepared to lose her.

But because it's Mary, I honor her wishes and stay away, expecting her to call me the next day.

Much to my dismay, Mary doesn't contact me on Saturday, and I miss her vibrant presence in my life as if I haven't spoken to her in weeks. I'm used to talking to her throughout the day, and now that I don't have that, I realize she was right – we already had a relationship, only, I held back. All along the way, she was easygoing, giving me every opportunity to come clean and trust her, but I didn't. I was a fucking idiot.

As Saturday turns into a cloudy Sunday, my uneasiness reaches new heights. It's unlike Mary to stay mad; she's not that kind of woman, and her normally carefree attitude is one of the things that attracted me to her in the first place. So her silence leads me to consider another possible scenario that becomes more likely when, on Sunday morning, my phone rings as I'm nursing a whiskey on the couch.

"Hello," I answer.

"Henry," Adriano says. "We need to talk."

"About what?" I ask, my mind still obsessing about Mary.

“My sister.”

Abruptly, I straighten as the possibility of a whole new set of problems arises.

“I’ve spoken to Mary. I expect to see you at my apartment in an hour. Don’t be late.” He cuts the call.

This conversation sends me into a different mode: unadulterated dread and panic. Mary has told her brother about my lie. She chose to throw me to the wolves without talking to me first, and there’s no way out now. The clusterfuck I created has culminated into my being summoned by the boss.

I exit without my gun. If she spilled the beans, there’s no point in having it anyway.

When I arrive at Adriano’s loft apartment, I see we’re alone. With nervousness filling me, I follow him into kitchen where he takes a sip of his coffee, evaluating me.

“How are you, Henry?”

“I’m fine. Why?” I retort, confused by how calm he is. I anticipated meeting with a livid Adriano.

“Mary told me you two had a fight.”

“Yes, we did. How is she?”

“She’s upset, of course,” he answers.

Hearing about her sadness hurts me more than my own. Mary has a grip on my soul, and I’m ashamed that it’s taken me this long to own up to it. I’ve only been focused on fucking her.

“So what happens now?” I ask, not wanting to put off the inevitable, exhausted and drained all of a sudden.

He tilts his head. “I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. That’s why I asked you to come before brunch.”

What the fuck is he talking about? He still wants me to stay for the family brunch?

“And I can tell you’ve been drinking.”

This is about my inebriated state? Baffled, I stay quiet.

He hesitates before continuing, “I just happened to drop by her apartment Friday night. Apparently, you’d just left and I found her crying.

She told me how you guys fought because she can't handle when you're in danger."

With his explanation, I realize that Mary's covered for me.

She didn't snitch.

She just made up a story to save my ass.

She's protected me.

To my great relief, I place a hand on the kitchen counter, releasing a loaded breath. She's been nothing but trustworthy – even after discovering I lied. *How the fuck can I not love her?*

Thinking quickly, I say to him, "Yeah, it was our first fight and she wanted some space, hence why I had breakfast with Jack Daniels."

He casts me a questioning look. "Just don't do that too often. Having a significant other in this Syndicate will be trying at times, but it's worth it. Remember that you chose each other, and you'll need to learn to handle Mary too. Make her feel safe by not confiding in her about our lives behind the scenes."

Inwardly, I smile because Mary's brother is telling me the opposite of what Mary's told me. If I lie again, she'll never forgive me. However, I do need to walk a fine line if I want to be with Mary. And I do. I'll give her more than only fucking; I'm ready to tell her I love her. She deserves to know, and I'm obliged to say it.

"It's difficult because she wants to be in the know."

He waves the comment away. "She thinks that, but if she knew more gruesome details about how we enforce our power, she wouldn't be able to handle it. I don't tell Cam everything. And Luca always keeps Fallon out of business. I told her that sometimes, for her protection, you won't be able to share things, but that set her off."

Fuck! Bad time to mention protecting her, Adriano.

Again, I smile on the inside, needing to speak to her right away. "I need to talk to her."

"Mary and Cam went to get food for brunch. They should be back soon," he explains, just as the door opens. "Speak of the devil," he finishes our chat, moving toward Cam and the baby stroller as she steps inside.

Mary's right behind her, and she freezes when she notices me, glancing at Adriano, but he's preoccupied with his baby and wife. After not seeing Mary for what feels like weeks but is merely two days, I'm mesmerized by the beauty mark above her plump lips and the way her tight, knee-length

dress accentuates her luscious curves. My desire for this woman is so deep that it never fades, and I've missed her with an intensity that pains me.

"Mary, can I talk to you upstairs?" I ask her as calmly as I can, and she bites the inside of her cheek.

It seems to take forever before she climbs the stairs to the second floor, and once we're in the privacy of the master bedroom, I note how her bright eyes have dulled right before she turns to the window.

What do I fucking say? How are you?

But she begins, "What do you want, Henry?"

Why the hell am I tongue tied when it comes to telling her that I need her in my life? That I love her? So I lead in, "Thank you for keeping what happened between us private."

Mary casts me a side-look that betrays her annoyance with me. "Did you expect me to tell Adriano? I'm not that vindictive. You don't deserve to die simply because my heart is broken."

"I'm sorry, Mary," I apologize for the second time in my life to the same woman, and I give her all my trust by coming completely clean. "You were right. I did want to secure my position at first, and I resisted the urge to trust you. But it was there; it's *still* there. I just don't know how to handle my emotions, and I'm not as eloquent in expressing my feelings as you are." I run a hand through my hair, watching her while she doesn't move, continuing to gaze outside. "But Tara being my wife is the only thing I lied about. I *am* attached to you."

"Where are you going with this?" she probes.

"Since you didn't tell Adriano, I'm hoping you'll agree to start over."

Mary tenses, and there's an extreme undercurrent of disbelief on her face. "*Start over?* No, Henry. My keeping your secret doesn't mean we can start over. It just means that you underestimated me. I'm not going to interfere with your job. I knew what I was getting into by falling for you. But I don't know where we go from here. I need time."

This isn't the response I wanted. "How much time?"

Her grunt reveals a flash of irritation. "I have no idea, but more than two days. You punished me for something your wife did to you. Why should I have to pay for her mistakes?!" she hisses with bitterness in her voice she can't contain.

I pay no heed to her comment. "So what do you propose we do?"

"I think we need a break," she replies, downright blindsiding me.

Mary's words are like a dagger to my soul, which I recently realized is connected to hers in some way. I blink and blink, my heart pounding at three times its normal rate. Then I storm across the bedroom and grab her by the shoulders, her eyes growing wide as I drag her toward me.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Each word is delivered with incredulity.

Apparently, she has a destructive power over me, and when all rational thoughts abandon me, I finally lose my shit.

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CHAPTER 36

Mary

Henry examines me closely for a few seconds before he advances toward me, pulling me to his muscled body. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No. I’m serious,” I confess after having gone over every moment between us during the last couple of days, causing me to fall down a spiral of doubt.

On top of that, I don’t get how he can be so cavalier about it and expect us to just pick up where we left off.

“You broke my trust in you. You broke us.”

“Then give me a chance to restore it, to put us back together,” he pleads, palming my cheek. “Have you forgotten about everything I did to protect you?”

“Of course not. But I’ve been so infatuated with you and living so much in the moment that I didn’t even consider the future. And a future with a man like you is too difficult, Henry.”

“I know I’m not perfect, Mary, but I try to do so much for *you*. You have this fantasy of an idyllic relationship, but that’s not real life. And now, because I lied about one thing, you suddenly see me as flawed and untrustworthy, clashing with the movielike relationship you want. No one’s relationship is like that. Not even Adriano and Cam’s, which you admire so much. They went to hell and back to be together.”

“No, I don’t believe that anymore. Keano already ruined that fantasy for me. I don’t need you to be perfect.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“You think that after two days we should just forgive and forget, but that’s not how feelings work. I’m not some system and I can’t turn my anger off. Just like you can’t change your feelings and tell me you love me

like an ordinary person would. I'm disappointed and hurt, and the dream I had about us has died. I can tell my heart to trust you, but my mind won't cooperate. I need some space from you. From us."

He raises his hands in agitation. "You act as if I was actually having an affair with her, but she was my wife on paper only."

"How do I know that's true? Do you even realize how often you pulled away from me? For days at a time? Days when I'd be wondering if you were with someone else, and I chose to ignore the warning signs. More importantly, tell me this, Henry. And be honest. Would you have ever told me if Tara hadn't?"

His silver-grey eyes cloud with fury; Henry's not used to being in a vulnerable position. Yet I have no idea of his thoughts as he becomes unreadable, summoning his hacker persona. It's as if I can literally see him build back that invisible wall I started to break down only a few weeks ago.

He holds my gaze steadily. "No."

To my surprise, he's at least straightforward now. "See, this is who you are, Henry. I don't think you're capable of trusting people anymore."

His mouth tightens. "Are you a psychiatrist now?" He approaches me again, like a predator stalking his prey. "Yes, I made mistakes. But I've tried. I've bent over backwards to keep you safe. And I *have* been faithful. But you've suddenly forgotten about all of that."

I back against the wall when he plants both of his hands beside my ears without bending so that he towers over me with his intimidating height. "You want a break. And then what? Date other people?" He dips his head to my ear, hissing, "I'll fucking shoot any man who even talks to you."

I expel a loud a sigh, one of frustration and a little fear. "Stop threatening imaginary people. Who said anything about dating others? Look what we do to each other. Clearly, we need a break." I briefly press my palm against his chest, but when I start to take it away, he snatches my wrist, keeping it against him. "Jesus Christ. Let me go!"

His grip on my wrist tightens as he gives me an ultimatum. "No. We're not going to take a break. Choose to be with me now or it's over."

I go still immediately in utter shock. "What? No. You can't constantly get your way, Henry. Relationships are a compromise too, and I need some time—"

"I said *no*. Answer. Me." His resolute voice rakes over my every sense.

For a second, as I'm confronted with his tormented yet striking features that I've been obsessing about since I first saw him, I start to waver. If I hold my ground, I'll lose him, maybe forever. But my heart and my mind still can't come to an agreement about whether or not to trust him. Furthermore, I don't even want to continue from where we left off, where he decides every course of action in our relationship.

With all my courage, I confess, "I can't do that. You can't even tell me how you feel, and yet you expect me to wholeheartedly trust you. That's asking the impossible from someone."

He releases my wrist angrily, staring at me with disillusionment while there's a moment of petrifying silence.

"I do love you," he says at the worst possible time and I grimace, trying to hold in my tears, and then he adds, "But you won't believe me now."

"And whose fault is that?" I throw back, but he disregards it.

"*You* broke us, Mary. Remember that." There's a strain in his voice as he spews his cold words before he spins around, obviously needing to get away from me as fast as he can and bounding out of the room and down the stairs.

A huge part of me wants to run after him, but I let him go. Moving toward the bed, I perch on the edge as my heart shatters into tiny pieces and tears scald my skin. Hurriedly, I swipe them away and inhale a deep breath when Cam and Fallon step inside the bedroom.

I hear more voices drifting up from downstairs, so I guess the rest of the family has arrived. Cam sits down next to me, throwing her arm over my shoulder and wrapping me up in a hug while Fallon hunches down in front of me.

"Let it out, Mary," Cam urges, and I hide my face in her chest while I cry for several minutes as she strokes my hair.

Eventually, I pull back and wipe my nose with the tissue Cam grabs from the nightstand, sniffing. "Sorry."

"What's going on between you two?" Cam asks.

"Is Henry still downstairs?"

"No," Fallon answers. "He said he had to go."

I can't reveal the entire truth, but I have to talk to another person since I'm torn, not knowing if I've risked too much by letting Henry go.

"Don't tell Adriano, okay?" I tell Cam and she nods. "We had a huge fight because he lied to me about something, and it bothers me that he can

lie so easily. I wanted to take it slower, but he just gave me an ultimatum and was furious when I didn't give him the answer he wanted."

A crease forms between Fallon's brows. "Did he cheat?"

"No, it's nothing like that."

Fallon and Cam exchange a glance before Fallon informs me, "Look, whatever it was, you need to remember that you're not with a normal civilian. This is one of the consequences of dating a Syndicate member. He'll keep things from you the same way Luca and Adriano keep things from us. Henry will probably do things to protect you."

"You sound like him," I grumble.

"I was in your position once, Mary," Fallon explains, taking my hand in hers as I dab another lone tear away. "I was so in love with Luca, but when I found out he lied about his mafia connection, I was angry and felt betrayed, though now I understand he has to keep me out of things. Trust me; you don't want to know what they do. And no one is always honest, not even you. But if he did it with the best intentions, doesn't that count for something?"

"But if I can't trust him, how can I be with him?"

"Can you honestly not trust him at all because of that one lie?" Cam inquires.

"No. I just wanted some time, but he fought that tooth and nail."

"That's because he wants to keep control over the situation." Cam tentatively smiles. "I see how Henry looks at you, Mary. He looks at you the same way Luca looks at Fallon and Adriano looks at me."

My gaze shoots to Cam in astonishment. All my life, I've longed for a man to bestow that look of adoration on me.

Then Fallon warns me, "And remember, if you take too much time to sort out your own feelings, someone else might catch him."

"I know...But he refused to give me even a few days," I conclude, standing up. "Let's go back before the men come up here."

As I tread down the stairs, I realize that I've fallen in love with a man I may not know at all. And he didn't even fall for me. I believe he lusts after me, but in an overbearing way, which I perceived as fondly possessive. However, I guess I was wrong if he can end us so carelessly.

Despite the facts or the reasoning, the emptiness in my heart expands since he's the first man I've ever loved. Loving Henry was a risk and he

used to be my favorite mistake, but right now I believe he may have been a foolish momentary lapse in judgement.

Yet at this point, I can't even begin to fathom how much a broken heart hurts.

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CHAPTER 37

Henry

Fuming, I enter my apartment on this dreary Sunday, chucking my jacket and keys onto the desk with force. Grabbing the bottle of whiskey from the kitchen counter, I pour two fingers of liquid and down it in one go. It burns as whiskey should, but it tastes sour on my tongue.

“Goddammit!” In a flash, I hurl the glass across the room against the window where it smashes into a thousand pieces and tinkles to the floor.

This is why I usually avoid emotional entanglements, why I rejected the intimacy Mary offered. The second I reveal to her that I do love her, she decides to end us and I feel like she’s fucking shot me.

Without delay, I down a second drink straight from the bottle, taking the whiskey and slouching on the couch. All the fucking drama of the past week has led to Mary giving up on us. On me. Somehow, I didn’t expect this at all because I knew how attached she was to me.

And you took advantage of it, a pestering voice echoes.

Bringing the tip of the bottle to my lips, I take a huge gulp and drop my arm, letting the bottle balance on my knee while I’m swirling in a devastating mix of outrage and pain. My fucking chest hurts, so I take another swig to drown out my thoughts, and eventually, as it gets dark, I finish the entire bottle, passing out by ten p.m.

During the night, I wake up on the sofa, still wearing my jeans and shirt with a pounding headache and growling stomach. I reach for my phone on the table, seeing no missed calls from Mary. Agitated, I scrub my hand over my dry mouth, pissed off that I’m somewhat sober again and wondering whether I should call her. Ultimately, I don’t. Maybe it’s anger, maybe it’s pride. She wants time? Well, she can have her fucking time.

Though my mood plummets as the days go by when I don't hear from her. The intensity of missing Mary only becomes more ferocious, causing me to drink myself into a stupor while Logan covers for me at work.

When I'm drunk, I can reject that nagging voice that tells me it's my own fault. In essence, I realize that all too damn well. Evening after evening, I can't sleep without alcohol, and when I finally do doze off, I can't sleep without dreaming of her.

For an entire week, I descend into a deep depression where so much reminds me of Mary.

On Saturday evening, I open my laptop and the tab is still on Netflix, *Narcos*, episode ten – the last one I watched with her. Slamming the screen shut, I move to my fridge, needing some sustenance other than whiskey. But when I open the door, I'm confronted with Mary's vegetarian sausages, and I grunt in frustration at myself. I need to fucking snap out of this zombie-like state. Not even when I caught Tara cheating did I feel this goddamn miserable.

When my phone rings, I snatch it off the table and sigh, answering, "Adriano."

"Henry, I haven't seen you at the club all week. Did you check Keano's computer to ensure we didn't miss anything? It's still in my security room. Can we ditch it?"

I rack my inebriated brain. "I'm still working on it."

"Did you find anything so far?"

"No," I lie because I actually haven't spent a single minute on it, but disclosing that would raise too many unwanted questions. "Keep it for now. I'll destroy the hard drive after I'm done. Did you dispose of the bodies?" I ask when what I really want to know is how Mary's doing; however, I'm not sure if she told anyone she ended it between us. I'm guessing she didn't, because no one's asked me about it. And the only person I told is Logan.

"Yes, they've been burned at the warehouse. By the way, you can't work from home during the upcoming week. Luca and I need you to go with us to some meetings."

Actually, I'm looking forward to the distraction of work, to receiving more training. "Okay. No problem," I reply, hanging up after we say our

goodbyes, and once again, hating not knowing what Mary's doing.

I loathe this obsession I have with her that I can't seem to shake.

Fuck this. I'm going to the club.

After taking a long shower and shaving my beard, I dress in black slacks and a dress shirt, along with my Fedora, and head out. It'll probably do me some good to get out of this apartment for a while.

Arriving at the club, I immediately order a shot and walk toward the second floor's VIP area where I claim my seat at my usual table while four men are playing a game of poker. Much to my chagrin, the noise and cheers of the people don't distract me as I drink my double scotch, so instead, I peruse the dance floor for any sign of a petite brunette whose curves I'm missing.

Suddenly, a shadow falls over me and I look to the side.

"Another drink, Henry?" Jordana asks, and I nod, handing over my glass as I keep observing my surroundings, becoming more irritated by the minute because, deep down, I'd hoped to run into Mary.

"Here you go." Jordana gives me another scotch, and I take it as she cautiously adds, "Are you okay?" Her expression appears sympathetic, but that could also be the amount of booze I've consumed.

Due to my intoxicated frame of mind, I say, "No."

And she seems as surprised that I've responded as am I. *Didn't I tell her not to talk to me anymore a couple of weeks back? At this point, I don't even remember.*

"You don't look good, Henry," she reveals softly, placing her hand on my shoulder and bending down to my ear. "If you want to take your mind off things, I'm here. No strings attached."

Taking a sip of my drink, I watch her, seriously considering her offer. Perhaps a distraction would get me out of this goddamn depression. Yet as I gaze at her, all I see is Mary, the one woman I crave.

Around a fleeting grin, I retort, "Thanks but not tonight." Then I rise, tip back the rest of my scotch, and go to the security room.

Luckily, it's empty, so I hurriedly log in and track Mary's phone, unable to stop myself. When I locate her only five blocks from the club, I decide that I have to see her, so I determinedly set out to make it happen.

I wish I wasn't so stubborn, because now I feel ten times worse, hidden in my car and spying on Mary, who's seated inside a quaint Italian restaurant across the street with Rosalia, laughing and enjoying her dinner.

A part of me wants her to miss me the same way I miss her. And another part of me wants to punish her with this prolonged distance, yet it seems I've only managed to worsen my own misery. Especially when I have to witness a waiter talking to her much too often. And by the glances he sends her, I can tell they're fucking flirting.

This is gutting me, so I seriously contemplate returning to the club to accept the distraction offered by another woman.

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CHAPTER 38

Mary

On my first night out after a terrible week, I get the feeling that I'm being watched as Rosalia and I say our goodbyes in the parking lot of the Italian restaurant where we had dinner. Not willing to take any unnecessary chances, I immediately take a cab to the Astoria and step inside my state-of-the-art apartment that doesn't feel like home.

Even though Rosalia and the waiter, whose advances I had to fence off, did entertain me, now I'm down in the dumps again. The waiter was cute, but he isn't Henry.

Time apart has merely strengthened my longing for Henry, and although I had hoped for *out of sight, out of mind*, I've found that the phrase is a blatant falsehood. Sometimes you meet someone who'll have a hold on your heart and will never let go, and the second they cross your path, an irresistible bond is forged. And from the moment I saw Henry seven months ago, there was such a reaction, a yearning in the pit of my stomach. It was something electrifying and life changing. Some may call it luck and others may call it fate, but I say that destiny has imprinted Henry on my heart in such a way that my head can't repress or forget, which only makes me miserably sad. So sad that as I plop down on my couch and the silence of this vast living room deepens my loneliness, I can't help but wonder if I made a huge mistake, especially since I miss him immensely. This distance has proven that even when you don't love all the things someone does, you can still love that person for who they are.

Unfortunately, while I'm drowning in my sorrow, I don't see Henry at Sunday brunch the next day, and another dismal week passes at an excruciatingly slow pace. I'm not in the mood to attend classes, and I come to the realization that I don't enjoy the art history program at all anymore,

so I drop out after researching an entirely different major: Veterinary Clinical Medicine. Only, if I do get in, I'll have to move to Champaign County, which is three hours away from the Loop.

But planning a new future far away from Henry doesn't stop me from wanting to know how he's doing. So for the first time in two weeks, I groom myself, blow-dry my curls, and dress in black stockings – otherwise the November coldness will bite into my skin – beneath a tight maroon dress. Then I resolutely take a cab to Club 7.

The club is jam-packed on this Saturday night, and I immediately make my way upstairs to the carpeted VIP area, feeling deflated when I discover that Henry isn't playing poker. Shifting to the railing of the balconied second floor, I scrutinize the people below on the black and white tiled dance floor as the bass pumps in my ears.

Maybe Henry's avoiding the club? While wondering if I should just call him, I stroll to the small bar set up on this floor and wave over the bartender, who smiles widely when he recognizes me. This guy is a cute Italian and he flirted with me before I met Henry, but after that, I forgot about him.

"Hey, Mary. Long time no see. What can I get you?"

"A coke, please," I order.

And he chatters while pouring me one. "I wanted to ask you last time you were here to come on cocktail night. We have one tomorrow."

"I'll see if I have time," I reply absentmindedly, taking my drink and glancing to the end of the VIP hall, where a couple is seated and being very frisky.

A stone sets in my stomach as I grip my glass in bitterness. Henry, the king seated on his throne, has Jordana in his lap, astride him, whispering into his ear while he lazes back cheekily. Without thinking, I charge toward them with my glass in hand, setting it on the table they're sitting at as both of their heads whip to me and Jordana sneers.

But Henry's expression of utter boredom cuts through my heart. He has his glasses on and is in his black tie attire, yet his hair is tousled from Jordana running her fingers through it, which makes me swim in

possessiveness. Something I have no right to feel, yet it takes control of my entire being.

“Can we help you?” Jordana snidely inquires.

I point my finger at her, snarling, “Don’t talk to me. Get off him.”

She lifts a brow and turns her head, ignoring me, so I snatch her wrist and drag her backward as she stumbles off Henry’s lap, raising her hand to slap me when I release her harshly.

Henry jumps up, catches her arm, and pivots her around. “Don’t fucking touch Mary!” Then he jerks his head, ordering her to leave, and when she stomps off, I proceed to spew my rage.

“Well, it only took two weeks for you to find a new fuck buddy.”

Henry edges forward slowly. “You don’t want me, so you don’t get to have an opinion about it.”

In this second, I lose it because the pure jealousy of witnessing another woman dry-humping him is too much. With a sob, I slam a fist against his chest. “Did it have to be *her*?! The one skank who told me you would do this to me! I didn’t want to see you practically fuck another woman—”

He grips my fist in his large hand, tugging me close so we’re face-to-face as he dips his head. “I’d rather fuck you.”

“I don’t want Jordana’s sloppy seconds,” I throw back, causing him to flinch.

The smell of alcohol on his breath has me frowning at him, and when I meet his silver-grey eyes, I notice the dark circles under them and how unfocused his gaze is.

“Are you drunk?”

“Yes.”

Sadness brands my soul.

“Don’t you fucking dare pity me,” he warns, letting me go.

“But I do,” I reply, and he hisses in anger. “I pity how you go from woman to woman.”

“Stop making all your damn assumptions. I didn’t touch her. *She* was touching *me*. And I need to drink to drown you from my goddamn thoughts,” he defends.

“But you let her touch you. How would you feel if you saw me with another man?” I tell him, disliking his cocky, drunken attitude.

“I’d fucking murder him!” Henry’s lips thin into a hard line before he advances on me, but I swivel around, escaping his grasp before I break

down in front of him – I refuse to give him that satisfaction.

I'm not sure how, but I make it outside before my tears spill over, and I hail the first cab I see to take me home, feeling more devastated than ever. Furiously swiping the moisture away, I decide to apply at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in desperate need of a change of scenery.

Though, when I finally decide I'm done, destiny interferes, and instead of getting better, things become so much worse than I could've ever imagined.

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CHAPTER 39

Henry

Anger can give you great power as a Syndicate man, but it can also destroy you when it comes to matters of the heart. Especially the kind of uncontrolled anger missing Mary evokes while her words of yesterday keep resonating in my brain: *I didn't want to see you practically fuck another woman.*

The problem lies in the fact that she's so upset with me, she can't even see through my façade anymore. Jordana might've been in my lap, but I wasn't enticed in the least and couldn't get Mary out of my head. And when I finally saw her, I only experienced more regret and pain. Now that I've lost her, I realize she was a burst of freshness in my jaded world.

However, karma is a motherfucking bitch when I'm nursing a whiskey on Sunday evening at the bar on Club 7's first floor, and up on the second floor, I catch a familiar petite silhouette with curves I've dreamed about every damn night. Mary's in a body-hugging cream dress that stops mid-thigh, black stockings with black boots, and a dozen thin gold bracelets embellish her wrist, as usual. Much to my chagrin, she's chatting up an Italian bartender who's ogling her.

How long has she been here? I've been here for over half an hour, getting shit-faced, and evidently being less observant. But I'm not going to fucking run after her.

No. I'm not.

So what do I do?

Of course, I go after her.

Incensed, I march up the stairs but am stopped by Logan at the top as he places his hand on my chest, warning me, "Don't do it, man. Let her go."

I glance at Mary sitting at the bar to my left, and I snap, “I can’t. Get the fuck out of my way.”

Charging past him, I eat the distance to Mary, who’s perched on a bar stool with that guy next to her, looping his motherfucking arm over her shoulder. I grip his arm, shoving him off the stool as Mary swings around and jumps up in shock.

“I wouldn’t touch her if I were you,” I growl as he lies flat on his ass.

“Oh, my god, Henry!” Mary reprimands me before stooping low to assist him up.

My vision is doubling from all the alcohol I’ve ingested, yet I manage to seize her biceps and pull her against me, whispering to her, “I swear to god, touch him and I’ll beat him to a pulp right here.”

Before she can reply, I tug her with me to the other end of the hallway, to the office, passing Logan, who sends me a disgruntled look. “Henry—”

“Don’t! Is the office empty?” I bark.

“Yeah, Adriano’s gone,” he says, following us as I hurl Mary inside and shut the door behind me.

“What the hell was that?” She throws out her arm at the display that just occurred outside.

“That was because you drive me nuts! I’m done playing these games. Why the hell were you being so chummy with him? Because I was with Jordana last night?” I advance toward her as she moves back. “Nothing happened and I didn’t plan on anything happening. I just wanted to feel good again for one goddamn moment, but I didn’t kiss her or fuck her.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“Yes, you do, or else you would’ve left this office already. Do you want me to fuck her? Because I don’t. I want *you*. Because you haunt me during the day, and you haunt me at night.”

“I don’t haunt you. But you know what does? It’s your regret that haunts you. I loved you, and you played me by lying.” Dampness pools in her hazel eyes and being so close to her softens me slightly.

“I’m sorry, Mary.”

“It’s too late for your apologies.”

“It’s never too late. You made me want you! Why is it too late? Do you feel any better after these two weeks apart? I fucking don’t. I miss you, and I can’t stand seeing you with anyone else. I know you feel the same way. You still love me.”

She skews her lips in irritation and swipes a hand across her forehead. “But that’s not enough.”

“Why? Have you been with anyone else?” It’s difficult to concentrate when jealousy overrules my mind.

Mary jabs a finger into my chest. “You have no right to ask me that!”

I swat her finger away and disregard her forcefulness. “I know how you felt last night, but no woman has made me forget about you, Mary.” I clench my jaw. “Has another man made you forget about me?”

Mary calms little by little and studies me carefully. I’m sure my rampant emotions are visible because she confesses, “No one has made me forget you.”

Upon hearing that, I hunger to touch, lick, and fuck her. Quickly, I latch my arms around her waist, slamming her against the window with drawn, black floor-to-ceiling curtains.

“Henry. No,” she protests when I press my front to hers as her legs fall open in unspoken invitation, my cock hardening within seconds now that I have the woman I’ve coveted in my embrace.

“Yes.” I rest one hand on her throat, tilting her chin up as I dip my head.

Then I force her lips apart and sweep my tongue persuasively through her mouth, reclaiming what I’ve lost. It’s a kiss that trembles with unrequited desire, and after I trail my lips down her silky throat, I pull her dress up her thigh, urgently seeking to find bare skin.

“Jesus fuck,” I groan, all of my blood rushing south when I see the embroidered top of her sexy black stockings.

It’s all lust, animalistic, barbaric needs that possess me. I’m going to fuck her like I’ve fantasized about ever since she ended us.

“Henry, no!” She pushes against my chest, and I nip the beauty mark above her lip as her familiar sweet scent centers me. “I’ll scream.”

Hastily, I unbutton my pants and dare her, “So scream, but I fucking hope you won’t.” Nudging her panties aside, I smother her with a vigorous kiss as I thrust two fingers inside her, powering them into her.

I’ll be damned if she’s going to reject me.

CHAPTER 40

Mary

Usually, Henry's height doesn't bother me, but right now he looks menacing, so I hesitate until he plunges his fingers into me, and as the will to fight the bond between us deserts me, I welcome the burn he ignites. Frantically, I yank his dress shirt from his pants and dig my fingers inside his boxer briefs, taking his rock-hard erection in my hand. Henry rests his arm alongside my head against the window, stroking my curls from my face, and as he fingers me, I pump his cock and our eyes meet.

Leaning forward, I initiate our next feverish kiss. Henry bites my lower lip as he clasps one of my hands, raising my arm above my head while he gropes one breast and sucks the nipple of the other. Then he takes the base of his cock and rubs the head at my wet core, sliding in only an inch as he curls his arm under my thigh and lifts my leg before he drives inside. Only then, with me spread against the window, does he shove his cock into me to the hilt, and I gasp, clutching at his nape when he releases my hand above my head.

Henry skims his palms up my thighs, pulling my dress up higher and cupping my ass as I heft my other leg around his hip, securing my ankles behind him. I cling to him as his fingers dig into my ass while he hammers into me, making the window vibrate.

"I've missed you," I murmur with a whimper.

"I miss you every fucking day." He presses his lips to mine.

Agonizing weeks of regret are evident in the way our lips refuse to break apart. He rides me hard and rough, peppering kisses down my throat and sinking his teeth into my shoulder. Henry keeps up his grueling thrusts, banging me against the window, and lets out a low groan while our bodies melt together.

“You feel so damn good,” he mutters against my mouth, rolling his hips in a way he must know I love.

I speak his name in a breathless whisper and almost come, but Henry has other plans. Without pulling out, he moves to the desk. Smoothly. Swiftly. Then he slides out of me before he lets my feet drop to the floor and spins me around, pushing me facedown onto the polished black glass surface. He kneels while bunching up my dress, tracing the top of my stockings with his tongue, and tugs my panties down and over my ankles.

“Spread your legs, baby,” he orders in a low tone.

When I comply, he buries his face in my center from behind, molding my ass cheeks with his large hands and spanking me once. I grind against his mouth, spreading my arms wide to grip the edges of the desk, as Henry licks every inch of my folds, even up to my ass.

“Henry...” I pant when he drives his thumb inside me and circles my clit fiercely, all the while still licking me.

“Come in my mouth, baby. Let me taste all of you.” Henry removes his fingers and spears his tongue into my core.

Carnal pleasure overrides me. My orgasm pulses into a magnificent explosion, and I buck against his mouth as primitive satisfaction fills me until I go slack.

He roams his hands over the globes of my behind as he stands up, and without preamble, he thrusts his cock inside me. Pistoning into me, Henry snakes his arm around my waist to guide me up with my back against his chest. He positions one of my knees on the desk so that I’m wide open for his assault, one hand cupping me between my legs and the other gripping my side. Then he passionately plunges in and our skin slaps together as my arm comes back around his neck and he nips from the base of my throat up to my jawline.

“Mary...fuck,” he groans against the shell of my ear and pushes in so deep it hurts pleurably as he reaches his peak with a low growl, tipping over the edge before slowing his movement, whispering, “What the hell have you done to me...”

We flop forward on the desk, Henry on top of my back. All of our clothes on and him still inside me, our breathing cuts through the silence.

After moments of quiet where I swim in my thoughts, he pushes off me, and I miss his warmth. Kneeling down, Henry drags my panties up my legs and arranges my dress down over my hips as I face him, at a loss for words.

Only with Henry does that happen. He fastens his pants and combs his hands through his tousled hair a couple of times before we stare at each other for what seems like an eternity.

I'm not sure how to proceed since I let him seduce me without putting up much of a fight, and instead of being happy, I'm unsure how I feel. He's drunk and I'm confused.

A knock on the door has Henry striding to it as Logan inches it open, announcing, "Adriano's just entered the club." Walking inside, he points at me. "Go."

Henry takes my hand, leading the way to the other side of the spacious office and pressing the elevator button. It opens instantly, so I hurry inside.

"Wait for me downstairs at the back entrance," he says in a gentle tone.

"Okay," I promise right before the door closes.

On the first floor, I get out of the elevator, and since I'm still hot from our encounter, I step outside the back entrance for a moment. Lifting my face to the cold air, I'm standing at the curb when I hear a creak behind me. But before I can turn around, someone smothers my mouth, and as I look down, I see a white cloth, my eyelids drooping until I lose consciousness.

CHAPTER 41

Henry

Logan shakes his head at me while I tuck my rumpled white dress shirt into my slacks. “Don’t start.”

“I didn’t say a word.” He smirks as I go into the security room and claim the seat behind Keano’s computer, the one I still need to check to ensure we didn’t overlook anything in Keano’s plan. Something I should’ve done two weeks ago, except I’ve been unable to concentrate without Mary.

And now I can sense we’re even more mixed up after our fucking. I need to alleviate her doubt because I simply can’t live like this, in a drunk stupor, aching for the one that got away and unable to forget her. She’s still mine.

I hear Adriano talking to Logan in his office as I go through Keano’s internet history and then his emails. Lastly, I check the *sent* emails in the folder: *J, abort mission. Leave the Loop.*

Who’s *J*? Not Tara.

The *send* address has the name *jlane*. If he had contact with a third person, that means we’ve overlooked something, or someone, in this case. Quickly, I cross check the email address via various search engines, but it doesn’t match any online profiles. Then I roll to the side to face our own computer and hack City Hall’s system to pull up Keano’s records, accessing the system without difficulty and reading that he grew up in the Loop and has divorced parents and no siblings besides a half sister on his father’s side, yet her name isn’t mentioned. But the second wife of his father is, and her name is a Robin Lane, who’s been deceased for ten years. Typing away furiously, I search for Robin Lane’s records.

While my palms are turning sweaty, I scroll down the screen until I read that Robin’s daughter is named *Jordana Lane* – bartender girl.

Jordana is Keano and Tara's third accomplice and is wandering around here somewhere, but I've been so fucking irresponsible due to my own damn heartbreak that I completely missed it. Apparently, Jordana didn't heed Keano's warning and is playing some game with me. For two weeks, she's been flirting with me nonstop. I'll bet she hopes to find out through me what happened with Keano, or she wants to exact revenge. She must know that he most likely is dead since he's been missing for this long.

"Goddammit!" I surge up, bursting into the office where Adriano and Logan, standing opposite each other, look at me in unison.

"I just discovered that Keano Mathews has a half sister named Jordana Lane, the brunette bartender. She's working today, and Mary's inside the club. We have to find Jordana." I run out of the office and down the stairs to get to the back entrance.

Speeding through the empty hallway, I open the back door and cross the threshold to the windy street, glancing left and right but seeing no Mary, only random pedestrians and cars. Pivoting back around to call Mary's phone, I freeze in the doorway when I'm confronted with the barrel of a gun and Jordana forces me to the side, into a blind corner for the security camera.

"I have your precious Mary. Come with me quietly if you want to see her."

I control my temper and merely hold up my palms, so she motions outside the door with her gun, ordering me to precede her.

"Turn left into the alley," she says, poking the pistol in my back as I round the corner until we stop beside a black station wagon.

When I see Mary lying on the back seat, I panic. "What the fuck did you do!"

"Shut up!" she yells as I open the door and duck inside.

But before I can touch Mary's body, I'm clocked in the back of my head and collapse, trying to roll over in the cramped area until I feel a cloth being pressed against my mouth. Kicking her off me is useless as I inhale the scent, tumbling backward while my vision goes black.

Someone grunts, and gathering the noise is coming from me, I fight for consciousness. It takes a while, but eventually, I'm able to wake up, and

when my eyelids fly open, I'm lying on my side on a cold floor.

The toe of a boot hits my stomach, making me grunt again as I gaze around the scant living room, which seems familiar, and after I recognize the pile of clothes on a small bed, the take-out containers, and the faded wooden floor, I realize I'm in Keano's studio apartment.

"Welcome back," Jordana spews, staring down at me with her gun dangling from her hand, and I now notice it's equipped with a silencer.

Immediately, I attempt to get up, but my hands are secured at my back with tape. My head pounds and I struggle to focus, being somewhat drunk still. A yellowish ceiling lamp lights the space from above, and I zero in on Mary sitting on the floor across from me. She's cuffed to a radiator pipe running down the side of the heater, her wrists secured in front of her as she sags sideways. I scan her for injuries, but her curls obscure her face as her head hangs forward in her unconscious state.

"How the hell did you get us up here?" I wonder aloud.

"A friendly neighbor helped me carry my drunk boyfriend up and I managed to drag you over from the bed. And I had no problem handling her myself; *she* weighs nothing."

"What the fuck do you want?" I roar, unable to get on my goddamn feet.

"I want to fucking know where Keano is. He's been MIA for two weeks, and I know he escaped you that first time."

"Who the hell is he to you?" I play dumb, racking my brain for a plan of action, but there's nothing in this apartment except a bed.

She irately gestures her gun at me. "Christ! I'm his sister, and I know everything." There's something about the viciousness in Jordana's eyes that convinces me Mary and I are in serious trouble.

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know Keano and Tara tried to hack into Club 7 and you did something to them. I believe that because of your fucking infatuation with Mary, you hurt my brother! And Tara. But I don't care about her. She's no one, just the idiot inventor of our plan."

Suddenly, the entire puzzle solves itself. Jordana started to work at Club 7 around six months ago, about the same time Mary met Keano. They targeted Mary and me after Tara probably promised them a shitload of money. But Mary and I ruined their plan when we fell for each other.

Out of the blue, Mary's body twitches as she groans, and Jordana strides to her, stooping low as Mary wakes up, taking in the scene with a gasp.

Jordana grips her hair, tugging her head back roughly, bringing a howl of distress from her. A howl that pierces through my soul. She's in pain with her throat stretched, her breathing harsh.

"Goddammit! This is between you and me," I protest, leaping onto my knees.

"Don't move." Jordana strokes the tip of her gun down Mary's throat, and Mary shudders in the restraints.

"She became involved when she screwed up our plans. And what the hell is it about her anyway? You throw me away within seconds when you see her."

"What the fuck do you want?" I snarl, shifting toward Mary and focusing through my drunken haze as the pistol is shoved in her face.

Jordana shouts, "Move back or I swear to god I'll shoot her. I have nothing to lose. You guys are fucking crazy, because Keano told me you locked him up in some warehouse right before he disappeared again. Tell me what you did to him!"

I instantly come to a halt but remain quiet.

"Stubborn asshole!" Jordana spits, slapping Mary across the face.

Disgust and fury simmer inside me, and on instinct, I inch forward on my knees, attempting to keep my balance with my hands tied to my back but stopping when the gun is cocked and pushed into Mary's temple. Mary shrieks, looking at me with panic.

"Tell me!" Jordana releases her and charges at me, smashing the butt of the gun against the side of my head and causing an explosion of pain in my brain before I topple sideways.

"Oh, my god!" Mary screams, but then Jordana paces back to her with a clenched fist and hits her cheek so hard that her head flies to the side.

"Ow!" she weeps, and Jordana punches her again.

"Motherfucking bitch! Keano's dead! And you're dead too." I'm fuming, my mood savage as she responds with another smack to Mary's temple.

Mary's right eye has already swelled up, but Jordana isn't done yet. She grabs her by her hair again, yanking her curls and pushing her gun into Mary's mouth, a thin layer of perspiration shining on Mary's forehead.

"I swear I'll torture you to death. You'll never be safe from me." I'm unable to breathe, damning her to hell while I try with all my power to fucking stand up.

“Blood pays with blood, Henry. You murdered my brother, didn’t you?! And still, you have that cocky attitude. You think you’re God’s gift to women and that I probably yearn for you, but I won’t let you get out of here alive. And just to fuck with you, I’ll kill her too.”

Muscles start to bulge in my arms, my wrath that’s yet to be unleashed building. It’s gutting me to see Mary hurt while I’m this weak, probably also due to the drug Jordana gave me to knock me out earlier. And my emotions explode as Mary’s eyes are damp with tears while she struggles for breath, twitching in the restraints from the agony she feels but succeeding in kicking Jordana backward.

“Let her go. Goddammit!” I thunder at the same time, twisting upward with all my power.

Jordana raises her arm as she drops onto her ass with a loud thud, pointing her weapon at Mary while the air thickens with a coiled, savage tension that doesn’t bode well for any of us.

“You fucking bitch!” My desperate shout echoes off the walls when a bullet is fired as I collapse onto Jordana with all my weight, pushing her onto her back. When I’m in this sort of cold rage, nothing can stop me.

With my hands tied, I have no choice but to head-butt her as she fights me. In the meantime, I bellow, “Mary!” needing to know if she’s all right. My tone is unlike it’s ever been before: unsteady, unsure.

Then Jordana manages to escape from under me since I can’t access my full strength, and I look at Mary, shifting to my knees while breathing noisily. Complete shock is written all over her face as she’s doubled over as far as she’s able while being cuffed to the pipe, and to my absolute horror, blood is seeping from her side through her cream dress.

Jordana directs her pistol at me. “You’re next, asshole.”

All I wanted was to protect Mary and I failed. Fury thunders like an unquenchable fire. I begin to shake on my knees, the nightmare cutting through my body while I watch Mary through a blinding fog of tears. With every passing moment, the reality of the situation is growing more horrendous – the bullet hit her and she’s losing massive amounts of blood.

CHAPTER 42

Mary

Dazed and with a dull, burning feeling down my left side, I stare at Henry.

I've been shot.

The bullet grazed me, pulling chunks of skin with it, and I'm not sure if it's lodged in me or not. Slouched against the wall, I open my mouth and try to protest as Jordana stands before Henry, ready to blast him, but he lurches his body sideways, hurling himself against her legs so that she sprawls backward. Only, she bolts up, aiming at Henry's stomach and firing while he's lying on the floor, his white dress shirt saturating with crimson.

"No..." I plead in anguish when she discharges another bullet into his stomach.

Seeing Henry broken because he tried his damndest to help me – regardless of the danger to himself – is slowly killing me.

However, thank god, Henry lets out a violent growl and breaks the tape wrapped around his wrists as he bounds up, staggering but finding his footing as he jumps on Jordana. While they wrestle, she spears her knee into his stomach and he roars his physical pain. Clearly, he's exhausted, filled with agony as he grunts while I'm cuffed to the radiator and unable to move with a raw throbbing down my side.

As they struggle, Henry slams her arm above her head, causing her to release her grip on the gun and he steals it from the floor. Then, with a thunderous groan, he shoots once, hitting a floorboard, and in the blink of an eye, he pushes the barrel into her forehead and pulls the trigger, gore spraying out as Jordana goes slack.

Dropping the gun, Henry collapses onto his back and I sob in terror. Henry's abdomen is covered in blood as his soaked dress shirt sticks to his skin.

“Henry,” I implore, yet it comes out whisper-soft because of my own injury.

Sluggishly, he turns his head and crawls to me while I’m struggling for air, a chill biting into my bones.

“M-Mary, stay awake,” he utters weakly as he drags his body in front of me, lying on his back, his head at my hips, but because I’m cuffed, I can’t even touch him as tears pour down my cheeks.

“You too.” I inhale, and a stab of pain courses through me. “W-we need help.”

“My phone’s in my pocket...It’ll be tracked the second the Syndicate finds out we’re both missing. A member will be on the way...” He coughs and I shriek when I notice blood on his lips before his eyes fall closed.

“Henry! St-stay awake.” My voice is shaking and I’m determined to remain conscious to keep him alert as well. “Grab your phone in case they haven’t found out!”

Henry groans, attempting to move, but he’s used up all his strength. He looks up slightly, meeting my eyes, and I weep at the sight of the blood streaks on his face. A devilishly handsome face I’ve loved and hated and pushed away.

“I’m not sure I’ll make it—”

“D-don’t you dare say that,” I beg him, my heart in turmoil while my body is damaged as well.

“Let me say this to you...I need you to know that I love you. This is my version of love, Mary. I take risks and jeopardize everything. I bent over backwards to keep your world unharmed, but I failed. I’m just an idiot when it comes to expressing feelings. And it was never about securing my position after we had sex. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t have done for you. Why didn’t you see that?”

I’m shattered that I can’t even touch and console him. “I do know, Henry. And I love you too, and I’d do all of that for you too,” I admit, finding power in the depths of my soul to speak, even though I’m worn out and suffering.

He tries to grin around a grimace, his voice becoming gentle. “I regret a lot in my life but not meeting you. Even though”—he inhales a deep breath—“you’ve gotten me into some tricky situations.”

“I can’t lose you now, Henry. Don’t leave me,” I cry, sensing that our bond is being broken by an impending death.

“I’m trying,” he replies with a tear rolling down his cheek when his eyes flutter closed.

“Try harder.” I manage to jar him with my knee, and he opens them again.

Staring at his drained posture, I’m swirling in dread at the sight of the pool of blood around his middle, and a need to confess swells inside me.

Sobbing, I say, “Pl-please don’t leave me alone. I’m sorry. Sorry for pushing you away.”

“I know,” he whispers, locking his red-rimmed eyes with mine. “Someday someone will give you the perfect trust and commitment you seem to seek, Mary.”

Then his gaze turns unfocused and his head lolls to the side, and I’m terrified the worst has happened when his entire frame is motionless.

“Henry...No! Henry,” I beg, praying to God that he’s still alive.

Freaked out and petrified, I push against him with my knee, but I have no willpower anymore as I mutter, “H-Henry...”

The silence gives me a bleak prediction, and I cry, ignoring my outer pain since the hole in my heart enlarges each time he doesn’t respond when I murmur his name.

“No...Henry...Henry!” Tears singe my cheeks, and I can’t see a thing through my wailing and the disbelief of my current circumstances.

Then, all of a sudden, it’s as if the temperature has dropped to subzero as I struggle to breathe, every bone in my body stinging. My head feels extremely heavy and I battle to stay awake. Though a new level of fright surfaces when the front door is banged open, yet I can’t concentrate as I see blurs and hear distorted, faraway voices.

“Get the stretchers in here. Now,” someone orders. “Mary?”

Abruptly, there’s a dark shadow right beside me, and I make a sound, but nothing comes out.

“Mary? Dammit! Stay awake, sis.” Carmine’s warm hand touches my cheek.

I hear a bang, and Carmine lifts me up like a doll and I’m laid down on something soft. Lethargically, I gaze around to watch them put Henry on a stretcher.

“I-Is he alive?” I croak out, catching one man shaking his head, so I bawl, “No!” right before an oxygen mask is placed over my face and I float into unconsciousness where I escape the real world.

In truth, my heart simply can't cope with losing the man I love.

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CHAPTER 43

Mary

I wake up in an unfamiliar pristine white room, lying tucked beneath the softest linens. Turning my head to the window to my right, I note that the sky is still pitch-black, and as I sit up to try to see out the open door, the skin on my side pulls tight. Looking down, I swipe the sheet off me and discover that I'm in a hospital gown, gauze taped to my left side. Fortunately, I don't feel any pain. Mostly, I'm tired and weary.

What time is it? And what hospital am I?

Memories invade my mind, but all I need to know is what happened to Henry, so I get out of bed, swaying on my legs yet summoning all my strength to walk to the doorway where a guard blocks my path.

"Mary, you're up."

"What time is it?" I ask, extremely thirsty.

"Midnight. Go back to bed, and I'll get your doctor."

I plead, "No. Where's Henry?"

"I don't know." His brows furrow as a plump nurse enters my room and smiles widely at me.

"Miss Montesi—"

"Tell me where Henry Pierce is!" I repeat, becoming frustrated in all my grief.

The nurse comes up to me, treating me like a fragile child as she places her hands on my shoulders. "I don't know who that is, but I'll get your brothers, okay? Stay calm. We gave you a few stitches in your side."

"I don't care about that," I insist, glancing at the guard with teary eyes. "Please tell me. Is he dead?"

The guard sends me a sympathetic look. "I don't know, Mary. I'll get Adriano."

“Hurry,” I mutter after him, emptiness growing inside me as I stare at the doorway while excruciating seconds pass.

“Miss, why don’t you sit down,” the nurse suggests, but I ignore her completely.

Minutes tick by, and I march to the door when I hear Adriano’s voice from the hall. He meets me right before I exit, wrapping me in a one-arm hug, careful not to touch my injured side, and kissing the crown of my head.

“Mary, how are you feeling?”

“Okay.” I gaze up. “What happened to Henry?”

A compassionate expression clouds his features.

Crying, I grip his shirt. “Is he dead?”

Adriano speaks hurriedly, “No, no, he’s not, Mary. But it’s not looking good.”

“Why?” I ask, dreading the answer as I cling to my brother.

“He almost bled to death and is in surgery now.”

I mumble, “I could’ve sworn someone shook their head when I asked if he was dead.”

“You were really out of it from the blows to your head, but luckily, you don’t have a concussion.”

“Is Henry here? I want to be with him. Wait, what hospital are we in?”

“Northwestern. And Henry’s a few floors up, on twenty.” He guides me back into the room and motions for me to sit on the bed. “First, tell me how you’re feeling. Other than *okay*.”

“My head feels heavy, but I only have a light headache, and my side is just numb. I feel fine,” I explain in all honesty.

“Thank god the bullet only grazed you, and Marc kept you sedated while they cleaned and stitched the wound. He also gave you some painkillers. You scared us, Mary.” He kisses my forehead again.

“I didn’t do anything this time. I went to get some fresh air at the back entrance of the club where Jordana smothered me and knocked me out. And then I woke up in Keano’s apartment and Jordana and Henry were there.”

“Did you know she was Keano’s half sister?”

“No.”

“Neither did we until Henry finished checking Keano’s computer yesterday. Jordana had a different last name, but she worked with Keano. We overlooked a huge fact, but she’s dead now.”

I palm my forehead. “Well, how do we know there weren’t more accomplices?”

“I had another tech guy go through Keano’s computer with a fine-tooth comb. I’m positive there were only three perpetrators. You don’t need to worry.”

“All I worry about is Henry. Do I have to stay here or can I go? I want to go up to the twentieth floor.”

“Yeah, you can go. The doctor told me that your stitches will be removed in a couple of days once your wounds have healed, and I have some pain killers for you in case you feel any soreness.”

“Where are my clothes?”

“They cut your dress off you when you came in. Cam is bringing some clothes for you. She should be here soon.”

In the nick of time, Cam comes inside the room with a bag hanging over her shoulder.

“Mary, you all right?” She dumps the bag on the bed and grips my hand as Adriano kisses her temple.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Pretty numb at the moment.” Then I begin to sob. “I need to know how Henry’s doing. Can we please go up?”

“Of course,” Cam says, motioning to Adriano to leave. “You go ahead, and I’ll help her dress and we’ll come up.”

“Okay. The guard will take you,” Adriano responds and kisses her lips before deserting the room.

Cam unzips the bag, taking out panties and a loose-fitting black cotton dress. “I didn’t know if jeans would hurt your side.”

“This is perfect. Thanks. It *is* painful if I press on it too much.”

But as tender as it is, I remove my gown and dress without her assistance. My need to be with Henry is the only thing on my mind.

Within a minute, I’m done and ready to be on my way. “Let’s go.”

On the twentieth floor, I hurry down the hallway with Cam in tow and into a waiting room where Adriano, Luca, Logan, and Carmine are talking to Dr. Marc Calderone, the Syndicate doctor who works here and makes sure that the police are never involved when members are brought in with bullet wounds.

He takes off his scrub cap, brushing back his hair that's streaked with silver.

"Did you operate on Henry?" I ask, and they all turn to me.

Marc explains, "No. Adriano wanted me to get an update from the doctors operating on him now."

"So he lived?" I have to know.

Dammit. I'm going crazy here.

Yet I grip the doorframe when Marc shakes his head in denial. "I'm not sure he'll live, Mary. He was shot in the stomach twice and lost a lot of blood. Both bullet entries were into the belly. They're checking all of his organs to either repair or pack the bleeding locally. Then they need to irrigate the peritoneum to clear the contamination as much as possible and close his abdominal wall."

"What are his chances of survival?" I probe, sniffing and wiping the tip of my nose.

"I can't say. It depends on how badly his intestines are damaged."

"How long have they been operating on him and how much longer should it take?" Cam inquires, folding my hand in hers and gripping me in comfort.

"He's been in surgery for an hour so far, and it'll take at least another couple of hours." Marc stretches his arm, checking his watch. "I need to go, but I'll be back as soon as I know more or the doctors will come to you, Adriano."

I edge to the side to let him pass and move into the room to sink down onto a cushioned chair with Cam next to me.

"Do you want to stay here?" she asks, and I nod, staring at the floor as tears drop onto my thighs.

Cam winds her arm around my shoulder, pulling me against her, and when I start bawling, she signals to the others to give us some privacy. Without asking any questions, she strokes my hair for ages and lets me cry to vent my misery.

Meanwhile, the waiting game goes insufferably slowly, driving me bonkers. It seems like every time I check the clock, only five damn minutes have gone by. Deep inside a dark place, I fear I'm losing Henry. Little by little, he's being pulled away from me in the worst way possible because we've both been reckless and rash.

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CHAPTER 44

Mary

Two hours later, I'm still in the same position with Cam, and Rosalia has joined us too. But I've retreated into myself and am trapped in an endless cycle of regret.

Why do we always feel the need to punish the ones we love most when they hurt us? Because love makes us fear, and fear can be ten times stronger than love. Unfortunately, fear also elicits distrust.

Henry didn't trust me and discovering that hurt me. Then I didn't trust him and my enforced distance hurt him, which just made me more miserable in the process. The only moment of joy I've had since we broke up was last night when he made love to me and reminded me of how addicted I am to his touch.

While I'm suspended in this bleak place of clinging to a thread of hope, I realize how I wasted two weeks by being mad and punishing us both. I thought I was better at expressing myself than Henry and I've judged him for not being in tune with his emotions, but in essence, I did the same to him.

When it comes down to it, Henry's imperfect, yet so am I. We all are. And the reality is that he's proven he'd do anything to protect me. I should savor that instead of rejecting it because I have some movielike fantasy about love and relationships – Henry's accusation was correct.

Relationships are messy; especially one with a mafia member, and I finally accept that. Although a life with a commanding man like Henry is challenging, I'd still choose him over anyone else, always.

Before I learned about his marriage, I was the happiest I've ever been. Now, at last, I recognize the reason; it's because he *does* look at me the same way Luca and Adriano look at their wives. I witnessed extreme terror

in his eyes when he saw the bullet hit me, as if it grazed *him*. As if he couldn't imagine a life without me.

Tragically, all I'm currently left with is massive regret that stabs my heart.

Please, God. Don't make me lose him. I won't take anything for granted anymore if you just let him live.

I swing up when Marc shuffles inside the waiting room. "He's out of surgery, but the next few hours are critical. No vital organs have been damaged and no bones have been fragmented. Both bullets have been removed. He'll be watched closely for infections, and he should wake up in the next couple of hours."

I release the breath I was holding, relief washing over me. "Can I see him?"

"It's better if you don't while he's in such a weak state. It's best we wait until he's awake."

Downhearted, I nod, even though I hate not being able to be with him. "I'll be here. Please come get me the second he wakes up."

"I will, Mary," he promises before turning on his heel.

And I start living solely toward the moment when Henry comes back to me. Once you've faced death, trivial things don't matter anymore.

CHAPTER 45

Henry

I'm flat on my back in a hospital room that reeks of disinfectant, hooked to an IV. My throat burns and my memory is fuzzy.

As I'm trying to get my bearings, Marc peeks inside. "Henry, welcome back."

How did I end up here?

I remember fucking Mary at Club 7, and then...Jordana!

What happened to Mary?

"Mary?" I whisper, and it comes out hoarse.

Marc approaches my bed, opening my chart and flipping through papers. Evidently, he didn't hear me.

"Marc!" I manage to say, louder, and his gaze shoots up to me. "Where's Mary?"

My heart pounds in my chest, and I now notice the bandages around my middle and recall that Jordana shot me, twice. And she also hurt Mary.

"In the waiting room. She's fine; a bullet grazed her skin, and she was released after getting two stitches and pain killers, but she hasn't left the hospital."

Thank fucking god she's okay!

"How long have I been here?"

"One night. It's morning now." He walks into the adjacent bathroom and comes back with a cup of water and a straw, so I sip it, soothing my throat. But when I lift my head, I feel a stinging twinge in my stomach, and I grumble.

Marc places the cup on the nightstand beside the bed, explaining, "You were in surgery for three hours, Henry. Two bullets were removed from your stomach, but none of your other organs were injured. Your stomach

has been sewn shut, and I'm watching you closely for infection, so we'll change your gauze often during the next couple of days. How are you feeling?"

"Sluggish. My entire abdomen is sore." My voice is still gruff.

"You'll be getting medicine through your IV continuously to relieve your pain."

"How long do I have to stay?"

As he checks my IV, he answers, "At least two weeks. You'll probably be able to walk in a couple of days. I don't foresee any problems, because you're healthy as a horse and no nerves were damaged. You'll be kept on bed rest for a couple of days. And then we'll begin rehabilitation with physical therapy. But it all depends on how fast your wounds heal. We might keep you longer. The most important thing right now is that you need to take it slow."

"I need *her*," I counter, and he grins fleetingly.

"I'll send Mary in," he states, exiting the room.

With anticipation, I wait, eager for the reality of an unscathed Mary to replace my last memory of a bloodied Mary. That vision causes me to clench my fist, and I grunt from the pain I induce. Two fucking bullets didn't hurt nearly as much as seeing the one I've wanted to protect from the moment she and I met fighting for her life. Just thinking about it fills me with anxiety, and I impatiently glance at the door, sucking in a breath when Mary steps inside. She's wearing a baggy dress, and I'm so goddamn glad she appears to be okay, albeit moving a little slowly.

"You're all right," I say the words to calm myself.

Tears prick behind my eyelids from the stunning sight. A sight that I was afraid I'd never see again. Stopping beside my bed, she grips my hand, warming mine. It's as if I literally come alive again, although I grind my teeth when I observe a bruise beneath her eye from where Jordana hit her.

"I'm all right, but I've been worried sick about you," she cries as the mattress dips when she sits down next to me.

Lifting my arm, I palm her cheek, thumbing her tears away. "I'm okay too."

"What did Marc say?"

"They removed the bullets, and I'll need to stay in bed for a couple of days. What did he say to you?"

“I just have to come back next week to get the stitches in my side taken out. I don’t have a concussion, only a light headache. But I feel fine now that you’re awake.” She strokes her fingers over my stubble. “Are you in pain?”

Shaking my head, I rest my palm on her thigh, needing to touch her. “No pain, because Marc pumped me full of drugs, I think.”

A smile pulls at her lips, making my gaze stray to her unique beauty mark. “I’m glad you’re not hurting.” Her knuckles skim down the side of my face in the most soothing manner. “I was so scared I’d lost you.”

“I know, baby.” And I want her to know how guilt consumes me. “I should’ve checked Keano’s computer much sooner, but I was in such a fucked up place when you ended us. I won’t ever be negligent again when it comes to you.”

“There’s no need to apologize. Adriano’s taken care of everything. Jordana’s body has been disposed of, and another tech guy checked the computer. There’s no fourth accomplice,” she clarifies, reminding me why I’m fucking in love with her – because she’s refreshingly easygoing when a person has earned her trust. “We’ve both made mistakes and have been stubborn.” Evaluating me, she pauses before continuing, “Do you remember our talk before Carmine saved us?”

“No. Why?”

“Nothing. We can discuss it later. I just want to be with you now.”

“Good, because I feel the same way, Mary,” I admit, as she sinks down onto the chair right beside the bed, scooting close and entwining our hands, and I clasp hers tightly.

Then she rests her cheek next to my face on the pillow, scratching her nails over my jaw in relaxing circles. In this moment, there’s nothing else I need besides feeling her soft breath hitting my cheek. I need the physical contact to keep me centered.

“Stay here,” I whisper.

“As long as I can,” her husky voice rasps.

Due to my own grogginess and the fact that I’m recovering from surgery, I’m drifting off to the first peaceful sleep I’ve had in two weeks without releasing my grip on Mary’s hand when a disconcerting thought arises.

What the hell did she mean by *as long as I can*?

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CHAPTER 46

Mary

Henry's in dreamland while I sit beside his bed and comb back his thick hair, caressing his straight nose and strong jaw. And as I study him, a million thoughts fly through my mind.

What will happen now? What will he do when he recalls our talk? But the loudest one is, he's alive.

While I'm beyond grateful for getting this second chance with the man I love, first and foremost, I want him to concentrate on recuperating, and then we can discuss *us*. I'll fight for *us*, although I haven't told anyone I might be moving away to Champaign County and I'm not sure how Henry will react.

Marc informed me that his memory might be off, so hopefully, he'll remember everything in the coming days, including our talk.

My head whips to the door when Adriano and Carmine walk inside.

"Hey. Marc said he woke up," Adriano says as they stand opposite me.

"Yeah," I reply, staring at the rise and fall of Henry's chest. "He was awake this morning but has been asleep for a couple of hours."

Carmine glances at our entangled hands. "Are you going to stay here?"

"I plan to if they'll let me, within visiting hours."

"Do you want to stay with him?" Adriano probes, and I look up at them.

Completely unexpectedly, Carmine then asks, "Do you love him?"

My stare moves slowly between them. "Yes."

"Does he treat you right?" Adriano adds.

I don't want to say too much since I don't know where Henry stands in the Syndicate, and I'm unsure if finding out about Jordana's involvement too late will have repercussions for him. But I'll protect him because he almost died to protect me.

So I reveal the truth, “Yes. And I don’t want there to be any consequences for what happened. *We love each other.*”

Adriano’s brows furrow as if he’s surprised. “What consequences? He’s one of us, and that’s why we’re here. The consequences were suffered by Jordana.”

Thank goodness they don’t know how we screwed up and Henry’s position is secure.

Carmine comments, “All we wanted to know was if *you love him*. Because we see the way he looks at you.”

My eyes round since everyone’s been telling me that and I finally see it too.

“And I haven’t seen him with anyone else,” Carmine says. “Apparently, you’ve given him what he needs. A man like him always wants more; he just didn’t know he’d found it until he met you.”

My sweet brother can amaze me every once in a while. “Maybe after you’ve met the girl for you, you’ll change too.”

Smirking, he counters, “No, no. I just like women and don’t want *more.*”

I tilt my head. “Yeah, yeah. You just think with your cock.”

“Mary!” he scolds, pursing his lips in disgust.

“Sorry.” I chuckle.

“Don’t ever...just don’t say that word to me.” He gives me a stern expression, but when Henry stirs, we all focus on him as he smiles cautiously at me first.

“Henry, two bullets? You’ve been shot more than Adriano,” Carmine remarks. “But good to see you’re all right, man.”

“Thanks,” he replies, squeezing my hand, and I’m very aware of the heat of his skin.

Adriano informs him, “Take as long as you need to fully recuperate before you return to work. We don’t have any urgent business. If I do need you, I’ll call you.” Then he tells me, “You also need to take it easy, okay?”

“I will.”

“And, Mary, I’ll talk to Marc and make sure you can come and go whenever you want,” Adriano concludes. “One guard will stay here just as a precaution, Henry.”

Henry coughs before insisting, “If Mary goes out, I want a guard with her too.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary...” My words trail off as he scowls at me, lifting a brow, warning me not to argue with him, so I hold up my hands in surrender. If it calms him, I’ll walk around with a guard for a while.

“I’ll send David,” Carmine says to Henry. “He’s fine, by the way. Keano drugged him, but he was found in the park by a civilian and taken to the emergency room. Marc wasn’t at work, so David used a different name. He came back as soon as he was released.”

Henry nods his approval before they leave the room, yet he still appears exhausted, so I urge him, “Sleep some more. I’m staying.”

In response, he clutches my hand even tighter, letting his eyelids flutter closed while I watch over him.

After spending two days at Northwestern, I need clean clothes, so when Henry’s asleep on Wednesday afternoon, I go back to the Astoria to shower and put on jeans and a pea green sweater. Since I’m still unpacking everything in my bedroom, it takes a little extra time. My clothes and makeup are strewn around the built-in closet, and some of the shelves are too high for me, so I’ll need a stepladder to reach them.

But once I’m ready, I get my laptop from the coffee table and head back to the hospital with my guard, David.

When I return after two hours, voices from Henry’s room have me hurrying inside to see the nurse finishing up changing his bandage while Marc explains, “No infections and your wound is healing nicely. This is good. We could try getting you out of bed tomorrow if you’d like?”

“Okay,” Henry answers right before he spots me and clenches his jaw for a second, so I frown. “Where were you?”

“I just went home to change.” I close the distance between us with the laptop in the crook of my arm as Marc withdraws from the room. “Did something happen?”

“No,” he replies as he pushes the button to incline his bed and looks up, so I kiss him on the mouth. “I just didn’t like waking up and finding you were gone.”

That statement makes me feel treasured, but I’ll need to work on his constant worry and uber-protectiveness.

“And I was fucking bored without you.” He gives me that half-smile I’ve adored for so long.

“I expected that, hence, why I brought entertainment.” I hold up the laptop before placing it on the mattress.

Arcing a brow, he glances at my breasts suggestively. “I’m not sure I’m up for that.”

“No. Why would I mean sex and then hold up a laptop?” I retort as he smirks wolfishly.

“I thought maybe you were surprising me with porn.”

Playfully, I swat his shoulders, causing him to groan. “Sorry, but no, our entertainment isn’t porn. And by the way, can you...?” I wave at his groin.

“...get hard?” he fills in, showing his teeth. “Yes.”

Laughing, I suggest, “But let’s not arouse you just yet. You have to take it easy.”

He grunts, seemingly not pleased about that fact.

“Anyway, we’re going to watch *Narcos*.” Flipping open the laptop screen, I sign in to Netflix as his astonished gaze lands on me.

“Good idea, baby.”

I tap my finger against my temple. “I’m not just a pretty face.”

In reaction, Henry smiles in a way I don’t think I’ve ever seen before, one that shines with a ray of happiness, causing me to cling to the belief that he’s just as grateful for this second chance as I am.

After pressing *play*, I climb into his bed carefully and set the laptop on my thighs, angling the screen up to give us a good view as Henry entwines our hands like he always does.

In comfortable silence, we watch the show as the hours pass much more quickly, and I don’t leave him until he’s asleep that night.

Then I go home and return at seven a.m. That’s my new routine, and there’s no place on earth I’d rather be than at Northwestern with Henry.

By Saturday, Henry’s moving around the hospital in a wheelchair and getting physical therapy throughout the day to keep his muscles strong. According to Marc, he’s strengthening rapidly.

On Saturday night, the guard peers inside the room, holding up a brown bag. “Your order, Mary.”

“Thanks.” I take it from him and stroll back to the bed. “Sushi.”

“Did you—”

“I got you lots of fish,” I interrupt, setting the bag on the nightstand as the corner of his lip quirks up.

My laptop is on the chair, and I pause the episode of *Narcos* we were watching as Henry lounges back, accepting the food as I feed him, finishing our meal within half an hour.

We’re completely at ease, and he’s truly laid back as we sip our Japanese teas. In the past, we’ve always been preoccupied with the near future, but now we’re living for the present.

“What’s that smile?” Henry asks, his silver-grey gaze on me behind his black rimmed glasses as he hands me his cup, which I add to the rest of the empty containers to throw into the trash can in the corner of the room.

“I’m happy.”

In a swift move, he flings his glasses onto the nightstand, snatching my wrist, and I almost stumble against him as I plop onto the edge of the bed.

“Oh, careful!” I warn.

“I’m not made of porcelain.” He jerks me close to nip my birthmark, whispering, “I need to taste you.”

My eyes widen in intrigue and yearning.

“Someone could come in,” I object, yet he peppers kisses down my throat.

“The guard’s standing at the door. He won’t come in without knocking. But I suggest we hurry...”

Since the blinds are closed, I submit, having no self-discipline to deny him after missing him for two weeks.

“Take off your panties, Mary,” he growls, gliding his palm up my bare thigh and under my skirt until his fingers slip over the edge of my panties, lingering just enough to tease me, making me whimper.

Eagerly, I stand up and slide them down my thighs without exposing myself, and he sends me a wicked grin before I press my lips to his. Getting on the bed, I lift one knee over Henry so that I’m kneeled over his face as he scoots down on the mattress and rakes his nails over my ass, his tongue tracing my folds.

“Sit on my face, baby,” he orders, gripping my behind as I grab the headboard of the bed, and he skims his hand roughly over my core.

Arching my body, I throw my head back while he kneads my ass, pressing me into his mouth, against his lashing tongue. Knowing that we could get caught and the fact that I'm entirely dressed while he devours my center make it all the more dangerous and sexy and have me suppressing a whimper. I writhe on his mouth as he sucks and then spears me with his tongue. Electricity pulses inside my belly when I look down, holding my skirt back so that our eyes meet as I weave my hand into his thick, black hair, which seems to spur him on. I can hear him growling, his fingers digging into my behind, my knees spread wide. My limbs quake when I grind down on his face until a titillating motion pushes me over the edge and I reach for the sun, panting. Biting my lip to subdue my moaning, an ongoing orgasm washes over me in a perfect tempest, and I collapse forward, gasping for breath for a moment as Henry places a kiss on my inner thigh.

Having my thirst quenched like only he can, I move off Henry without touching him, lying down next to him when he holds out his arm. He licks his lips devilishly as I glance at his rampant arousal, but we need to take it easy with him.

Content, I snuggle into the crook of his arm, careful not to touch his abdomen, and Henry rubs circles over my lower back while I relish being in a cheerful place again. Although I hate the fact that he was shot, I'm so pleased he's recovering quickly.

"I love you," I murmur, needing to say it again.

Unfortunately, because of our past, I'm barely able to breathe while I wait for his answer.

Henry cups my cheek, forcing me look up at him, and without an ounce of hesitation, he whispers, "I love you too."

At long last, his reply is the one I've hoped for.

With a huge smile, I ghost my lips over his, repeating, "*Ti amo più di quanto io possa capire.*" I love you more than I can understand. "More than I've ever loved anyone, Henry."

Henry lets out a growl, spanking my ass. "Don't make me harder by speaking Italian." Then he pecks the tip of my nose in a tender manner he uses often. "That's why it would've never worked out with anyone else anyway. Because you've always been mine, Mary," he tells me, filling my heart with sweet joy. This is the second time Henry's revealed his emotions.

As if he reads my thoughts, he adds, “And by the way, I remember our talk right before I lost consciousness.”

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CHAPTER 47

Henry

“I remember our talk right before I lost consciousness,” I disclose, recalling every word. “And I meant it.”

“I was hoping you did,” she replies as I trace my thumb over her beauty mark with the taste of her still on my tongue.

“Well, since I’m still here, I obviously don’t fucking want you to find the trust you want elsewhere.”

She stifles a chuckle. “I kind of got that. But can we trust each other?”

“I trust you, Mary. And now I understand the importance of being honest about my feelings.” I trace her lips with my finger. “Do you trust me?”

Without reluctance, she nods, and I palm the back of her head in satisfaction of her acquiescence.

“Then maybe we should start over instead of staying mad about past mistakes. We can’t change what’s been done anyway. There are no more skeletons in my closet, but I…” I glance away for a second and grimace as I move, feeling a dull pain in my stomach. “I can’t always tell you everything, especially with me being Adriano’s successor. Do you get that?”

Her hand wraps around my wrist. “I do, and I don’t want to know everything. Just don’t make me worry.”

“I won’t. And you need to learn to ask me when you want to know things, okay? If I don’t think it’s a good idea to answer, I’ll tell you.”

She frowns before her lips curve up. “You just managed to order me while masking it as a request.”

Smirking, I retort, “Just respond.”

“Yes, boss,” she drawls huskily right before I crash my mouth onto hers, grunting when I swell instantly, needing it to go down. The next week or two are going to be challenging. Laughing, Mary glimpses at my groin and stands up.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” *Jesus Christ*. I’m so fucking addicted to having her with me. I sound like a whiny kid.

She freezes, as if taken aback and troubled by my comment, and I wonder if she’s keeping something from me, but I shake it off when she answers, “No, but I need some coffee. You want one too? Then we’ll finish binge-watching *Narcos*.”

“I’ll just take some more water.”

“Okay. Be right back,” she says, starting to strut from the room without her panties, and I’m about to stop her, but then she looks back over her shoulder, stroking her hand down her luscious rear.

“Mary, take one more fucking step, and I’ll jump out of this bed. You’re not walking around here without panties – without me,” I warn her, attempting to contain a grin.

She rolls her eyes, shifting back to grab her underwear from the floor, and stepping into them.

“When you get back, you can take them off again,” I speak in all seriousness, but she strolls out with a giggle.

“No, no.” I hear her say before the door swings shut.

“Yes, yes,” I reply, chuckling as I laze back.

Thank fucking god she’s constantly here, or else I’d go crazy.

After ten days in the hospital, I *am* going crazy from being cooped up. By now, my stitches have even been removed.

“We could watch another TV show?” Mary proposes, seated on the bed cross-legged as I return from physical therapy, able to walk for a longer period of time. My abdomen can handle some pressure since the wounds have healed, and we’re focusing on building core strength.

Since I have medicine and am in such good overall health, I’m well enough to go home. I feel so useless sitting here in sweatpants and a t-shirt all day without even my own laptop.

“No, I want to talk to Marc and see if I can go home.”

Mary gets off the bed as I slowly sink down into a padded chair at the window.

“I don’t know if that’s smart.”

“I feel fine.”

“You don’t feel fine. You’re still recovering, and I see that you have twinges of pain sometimes.”

“It’s not pain,” I defend.

“Discomfort then. It’s your body telling you not to overdo it. You were shot twice, Henry.”

“Christ! I know that.” I plow a hand through my hair. “I just hate being here, Mary. I hate your having to be locked up in here with me.” In a time when we want to start over, we shouldn’t be in a hospital – reminding us of how easily we can be wounded in this cruel world.

“I don’t mind,” she whispers, seemingly telling me what she thinks I need to hear, and I loathe it.

“I mind,” I retort when the man I’ve been waiting for comes into the room.

“Henry, the nurse said you wanted to see me?” Marc begins.

“Yes, I’m going crazy in here and I need to go home.”

He looks at Mary and then back at me. “Why?”

“I feel well enough.”

“That’s because you’ve been taking it easy so far.” He opens my chart, reading the first page thoroughly. “Your therapy is going well. But I’m not sure it’s smart to let you go. Here, you can shower while sitting down, and the nurses do exercises with you at appointed times. At home, you’re alone and it could set you back. You might feel better than expected, but that doesn’t mean you can do any housework, or even start driving for at least a week. I want no extra pressure on your abdomen yet.”

Peering at Mary, I wonder what to do when she offers, “He can stay with me.”

My brows rise, yet as I consider the suggestion, I think it’s a good one. If it weren’t for Mary, I’d die of boredom, and if I stay with her, I can find very creative ways to spend our time in the privacy of her apartment.

“Problem solved. I’ll stay with Mary.” I stand up, stepping closer to her to briefly kiss her on the mouth.

I’m rewarded with a huge smile, but Marc interrupts, “Is Mary going to drive you to the hospital for therapy for the next few weeks?”

Without breaking our stare, Mary replies, “Yeah.”

I hear him sigh before he relents, “Okay, but I’m releasing you at your own risk.”

“Agreed. I’m gone,” I announce, and he merely nods.

“I expected that. I’ll make sure the paperwork doesn’t go into the hospital system.”

“Perfect. Thanks,” I comment, and Mary’s already placed my bag on the bed, so we throw my stuff in it, both more than ready to leave Northwestern.

After we enter Mary’s apartment, I follow her through the entryway as she turns left into the master bedroom with imposing floor-to-ceiling windows. The king-size canopy bed is pushed against the wall, overlooking the Chicago skyline, and a white wooden built-in closet spans the entire opposite wall. Since its doors are slid open, I notice she only has items on the lower shelves.

“So...are you my private nurse?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“My slutty nurse.”

Giggling, she sets my bag, which I wasn’t allowed to carry, on the floor as I stop behind her, still loving how petite she is and placing my hands on her hips. “Mary, can you not reach the top shelves?”

She moves away from me. “You know I can’t.” Then she gestures to them, grumbling, “Look at how high they are. Who’s that tall?”

I reach up to the top shelf with a smile. “I am.”

She sends me a feigned glare. “Well, we’ve already established you have giant long legs.” And cocks her hip in the cutest yet fucking sexy manner. “If you want your slutty nurse, you better be nice.”

I bring up my palm in supplication. “Fine.”

“Go lie in bed,” she orders.

“Only if you join me.” I kick off my shoes, shifting toward the huge bed, pleased we can finally sleep together again – something I’ve missed more than I care to admit.

“With pleasure. I like having some company. I was thinking of getting another dog,” she remarks, shucking off her coat.

“If you get a dog, I’m out of here,” I inform around a grin.

Her lips twitch. “Fine...no dog. I’d rather have you here.”

“Come on and get in,” I tell her, leaning back against a mountain of pillows. “But lose some clothes first. You’re too overdressed for a slutty nurse.”

She throws her head back, laughing freely, making me feel the most carefree I’ve ever felt.

When she scrambles into bed with me, lying in my arms, I’m where I’m supposed to be, with the woman who’s made me want love again. It took two bullets and the fear of death for us to get past our issues of distrust and lies. If Mary had died, I wouldn’t have had a reason to survive. That’s the truth that burns in my heart. She’s made me dependent on the intimacy she offers.

Together, we lie in bed and *do nothing* while I recover, and the days go by much faster while Mary’s playing host and being the perfect nurse.

In the long run, *doing nothing* is healthy for the mind and soul. If you skip that, you get drowned by your own thoughts and become stuck in your fears, refusing to let anyone get close, like I did after Tara cheated on me repeatedly. However, my assumption that everyone’s deceitful is wrong. I fucking believe with all my heart that Mary won’t ever deceive or cheat on me. In turn, as long as I make her feel cherished, she’ll trust me enough to accept any white lies I may have to tell in order to protect her. I have no other choice anyway, being a Syndicate member. And I’ll always scheme and kill to keep her world safe. Just as she will always remain vital and passionate about her causes and go on missions whenever she wants, which is why I’ll have a guard watch her around the clock, whether she wants it or not.

But while I’m busy planning our life, Mary drops a bomb that sends me into a tailspin.

CHAPTER 48

Mary

“Why don’t you ever go to any classes? I thought you were missing them because I was recuperating, but you’re with me twenty-four seven,” Henry inquires after we’ve returned from the hospital for his check-up a week later.

Since it’s a cold early-December day, I crank up the heat as I wander into my living room, taking off my scarf and tossing it and my coat onto the L-shaped sofa that’s facing the TV screen. Turning around slowly, I bite my nail, knowing I need to tell him the decision I made when we were broken up. Yet I’m anxious because I’m afraid of his reaction and the consequences for our relationship.

“I dropped out.”

Henry’s brows hit his hairline. “When?”

“I stopped going to classes a couple of weeks ago. You know I wasn’t enjoying the program, and I flunked so many classes. It all seemed so futile.”

He frowns, walking steadily to the fridge. His wounds have healed flawlessly; he just still can’t work out yet. “And what are you going to do now?”

“Um...” I fidget. “I-I...”

“Say it, Mary. You must have a plan, or else you wouldn’t have made the *futile* comment,” he points out, seeing straight through me.

Secretly, I adore how close we’ve become, so I confess, being honest, “I’ve actually been looking into Veterinary Clinical Medicine.”

The crease in his forehead deepens as he grabs a bottle of water but doesn’t screw open the top. “That’s completely different from what you were studying. So you want to be a vet?”

“Yes, I want to work with dogs or companion animals.”

He sets the bottle on the kitchen counter, advancing toward me as I perch on the arm of the couch. “Which college?”

“University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,” I answer, preparing for an outburst.

“What? That’s three hours from here.”

“Not really, It’s more like two hours and fifteen minutes by car,” I correct him and meet his cool silver-grey gaze as he towers over me. “But yes, it is a good distance from here, so that would mean I’d move to Champaign.”

He rears back in shock. “I don’t want you to fucking move so far away.”

“I don’t want that either, but I also want to major in something I can be passionate about. I’m turning twenty-one, Henry, and I have to stop running around and start working toward my future.”

His eyes narrow as he mumbles, “A future away from me.”

“No, but I need a good degree if I want to live here.”

With a grunt, he scalds me with a glare. “Since when have you had this plan?”

“Since we broke up,” I admit softly, and he sighs in disappointment.

Then he scrubs his hand over his mouth, his voice becoming flat and hard. “So you were planning to go all along – after first promising me that we’d be together now.”

Standing up, I want to touch him, but the tension emanating from his coiled body prevents me. “No. Because of the differences in the programs, I don’t even know if I can transfer my credits anyway. I’m still waiting to hear back from them. And one doesn’t exclude the other for me. We could do long distance?”

He waves a hand as if to dismiss that suggestion. “I don’t believe in long distance; that’s much more difficult than people realize, Mary.”

“But—”

“No buts!” he goes off and turns away from me, hurling the bottle off the counter and gripping the edge as he leans forward in defeat. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?!”

“I’m sorry.” I inch forward, resting my palm on his muscled back. “Calm down, Henry. Why are you so mad?”

“Because you should’ve told me in the hospital, or at least sooner, Mary.” Lifting his head, he peers sideways with the gloomiest expression as

I lower my arm because my touch seems to make him more angry.
“Because you put me through hell for two weeks due to my dishonesty, and now you’re going to cause us to break up.”

Astonished, I demand, “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I fucking love you enough to not hold you back, and I currently hate that– that’s why I’m pissed, Mary.” He takes a deep breath and straightens as my lips start to tremble since I foresee where this is going. “If you get in and move there, we’ll eventually break up. I’ll make you miserable in a long distance relationship.”

His resolute statement reopens the fractures in my heart that just got mended, yet I refuse to let this discussion ruin us. I’ll cross that bridge when I know I’ve been accepted, so I sneak my arms around his middle.

He returns my embrace instantly as I murmur, “I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight about this now because it might not even be an issue.”

Henry kisses the top of my head before I look up with water pooling in my eyes. In reaction, he cups my cheek.

“Don’t cry, baby. I’m sorry too.” And he presses his lips against mine while we cling to one another, making time and future problems melt away.

So for a while, we manage to live in our bubble again until it’s invaded by the real world. And there’s still a voice from deep within that tells me my second passion in life might be in Urbana-Champaign.

CHAPTER 49

Henry

As Christmas comes closer after four weeks of recovery, I can finally drive and move around for greater lengths of time, and Marc has wiped my hospitalization records, so the only proof of my gunshot wounds are the scars next to my navel.

Nevertheless, I'm still staying with Mary. My entire existence seems to revolve around her, and I've pushed the possibility of her relocating out of my mind since we're always together, without any arguments and lies – it's goddamn refreshing. It's exactly what I need to forget those depressing weeks we were apart. And of course, she gives me what I want, no questions asked. Her sweet, undivided attention as my nurse has sealed my attachment to her. In truth, I don't need the assistance, yet I take it anyway.

However, due to boredom, I've worked a few times on Mary's laptop to hack transport data that Adriano needs for setting up new drug routes to import cocaine into Illinois. Although if I'm going to continue to ease back into doing things for the Syndicate, I'll need my own computers because they're much faster and safer to use than Mary's civilian laptop.

So on a quiet Tuesday evening when Mary and I visit Club 7, I decide to broach the topic. As I sit at my own table after playing a game of Heads-Up with Logan, Mary brings me a beer and I scoot back, inviting her to perch down on my knee, her body-hugging ivory dress riding up her thigh.

Bending her head to the side, she accidentally tips my Fedora, so I take it off and place it on top of her head while fondling her ass, and I start, "I think maybe I should go home tonight."

Her face falls. "Why?"

"I need my own computers, baby." My hand rubs over her rear while her upturned eyes thin slightly.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah,” I state. “Why?”

She opens her mouth, then closes it.

“Say what you want to say, Mary,” I prompt, urging her to speak her mind, as I do often – she won’t push me away with her words.

“I got mail from Urbana-Champaign today – I didn’t get in,” she begins in a cheery tone, though I can clearly see the disappointment in her features, which she fails to hide.

Regardless, I’m selfish enough to want her to stay in Chicago with me and can’t help but let a small smile escape as that last burden falls off my shoulders.

She’s mine and will always stay mine.

She bites her lip. “I don’t want to be in that huge apartment alone with nothing to do while I search for a major that’s offered at a college near the Loop. And since I like living with you...”

“You want me to move in indefinitely?” I ask her to confirm, and she nods.

“I’ll bring four computers,” I warn her.

“So?” Of course, the easygoing response, especially now that there are no obstacles in our way anymore. “There’s plenty of room. You can have your own office in the second bedroom. Then we still have a third left.”

“We?” I repeat, smirking, and she shoulders me, then lazes back against me.

As I mull over the offer, it doesn’t scare me at all. Quite the opposite, I need her trust, and she’s given it back to me with her suggestion. Also, deep down, I wasn’t pleased about the idea of going home, and I have to move out of my own apartment anyway. But that’s not the reason I don’t hesitate to accept. I simply want to live with her and protect her however I see fit – always.

Feeling the need to tease her before I give my answer, I whisper into her ear, “We could play a game for it?”

She sends me a mock glare. “Poker? No way. I’ll lose.”

Laughing, I slide the deck of cards across the table toward me, surrounding Mary with my arms as I begin shuffling.

“Highest card wins.” Placing the deck in front of us, I take a swig of my beer.

“If I win, you move in. And if you win, you won’t?” she asks with a puckered brow.

“Yeah,” I say.

She takes the top card and I grab the second one. Both are facedown on the table with our hands covering them.

“I’m not happy I have to play a card game to get you to move in,” Mary mumbles, flipping over her card. “Queen of spades!” She flicks the spade tattoo on my neck. “This is a sign! Show me yours.”

I turn my card over, grinning in reaction to her scowl. “King of hearts.” I bite her lower lip and let it graze through my teeth, teasing, “It is a sign.”

“Yeah, that you’re the king who’s going to break my heart...” She tries to shift off me, but I lock my arm around her waist, pulling her back down as she grumbles, “I’m getting a dog then.”

“If you get a dog, I’m not moving in...”

“So you will?”

Palming her cheek, I reveal, “Yes. I want to protect you always, baby. The world can be dark and cruel, but the important thing is that we face it together.”

Her smile is my reward. “I agree.”

“Good. But since I still won, I want to cash in on a prize.”

“What prize?” she probes.

“A moving-in gift,” I reply because I’m about to burst since sex has been out of the fucking question with a healing stomach wound and my cock is constantly hard.

“You already live there,” she points out, assessing me with amusement.

“But...you promised me a slutty nurse, and I couldn’t even fuck you at the time.”

Reminding me of my previous statement, she utters, “Say what you want to say, Henry.”

“We’re going *home*,” I emphasize, stifling a smirk when the corner of her mouth tilts up. “And I’m going to fuck you.”

Then I smack her behind, so she rises enthusiastically and we head to the back entrance. As I open the door, Carmine storms past us to the end of the hall, tugging a girl behind him.

“Wow, he seems mad,” Mary comments. “Who is she?”

I cough. “Um, do you really want to know?”

“Um, yeah.”

“She’s a girl from downstairs.”

Her mouth drops open. “From the sex club? An escort? I thought you guys never go down there?”

“We don’t. At least, Adriano, Luca, and I don’t. Apparently, your other brother does.” She makes a face, but I finish, “Forget them. Come with me.”

Entwining our hands, we leave for home.

The second we step through the front door of the apartment, I kick it shut behind me, gripping Mary by her waist and slamming her against the wall in the entryway.

“I don’t think we have time for that now,” she remarks, the corner of her lip tilting up.

“Why?” I push my front against hers, kissing a path up her throat while I stiffen rapidly.

“I’m sorry. I forgot that we have to meet Cam for dinner upstairs. We’ll have to do this later.”

Disregarding her protest since I only have one goal in mind, I kiss the swell of her breasts that are tantalizing me in the plunging neckline of her ivory dress and press my cock against her, creating delicious friction.

“We’re doing it now. A quick and hard fuck,” I growl, capturing her mouth, hungrily nipping her while I grope her soft breasts that fit perfectly in my hands.

“Ah, Henry.”

“Baby, I need to be inside you,” I say, yanking her dress up to her hips.

My palms wander over her ass before I nudge her underwear off and hunch down to force her legs apart, slicing my tongue over her pussy without preamble.

“Oh, yes.” Mary circles her hips, grinding against my mouth while I taste and suck as she pants my name.

I can’t hold back anymore and crave to release inside her alluring body. Unbuttoning my slacks, I free my cock while licking her up and down. She whimpers before I stand up, my erection hard as steel.

“Wet my cock, baby,” I order and swivel us around to change positions.

She goes to her knees, taking my dick in her mouth and tugging the base of it. After only a few pumps, I guide her up to face the wall.

Standing behind her, I rub the head of my cock against her and snag both of her wrists, securing them in one of my hands behind her back and murmuring against her ear, “Hard and fast, baby.” And I gradually sink inside, feeling her flesh give.

“Hmmm...” Mary moans.

Her noises incite me, and I revel in her tight heat as she curves her back while I plunge inside, still holding her wrists. My other hand comes down to circle her clit, and I hammer into her brutally while she groans and my dick swells even more. Greedily, I reclaim her once and for all, slamming in deep.

Mary climaxes first, bucking and moaning my name, and she plants her hands against the wall when I release her wrists. I pull her hips back against my cock, pleasure building until it crests into a magnificent explosion. Then I come with a gratified growl, leisurely relaxing my pace, my heart rate decreasing as I wind an arm around Mary’s waist.

That familiar pull between us rears up, and I whisper, “Later, when we get back home, I’m going to fuck you slow and easy. Then hard and fast again.”

Mary turns her head to the side and shows me a stunning, spirited smile. A smile that brightens a place in my heart where there’s only room for her.

As I slide out of her, I decide on a few surprises. I need to make some modifications to her apartment anyway. Or I mean, *our* apartment.

CHAPTER 50

Mary

They say that life isn't about the destination; it's about the journey. But the journey is made much more enjoyable with a partner in crime, with *the one*. You can fight feelings and destiny all you want, but then you'll only manage to disrupt your own journey. Henry and I needed to learn to journey together. Something we were both bad at when we first met, when insecurities afflicted me and Tara plagued Henry.

Maybe some people need years to determine if they're with *the one*. I'm not one of those people. Ever since I was a teenager, I've wished to experience being hopelessly in love. To find a man who looks at me with absolute adoration. The look Adriano gives Cam and Luca shares with Fallon.

For a while, I tried to force that bond with other guys, but when Henry and I became friends, I felt there was more to him than meets the eye. And now that I've broken through all his barriers, he's become the man I always saw in him. When he loves, he loves hard and at all costs, which can be frightening. As a consequence, I became stuck in my distrust toward Henry. But now I trust him unequivocally and never dwell on the past anymore.

The reality is that life can end at any time. Even more so for us, being attached to the Syndicate. For as long as I can, I'm choosing to be happy with Henry. Perhaps without the shooting and his moving in, it would've taken far longer for us to get to this blissful point?

On the surface, I have everything I could wish for, yet I also want to be a vet. Nonetheless, that's the one thing I'll forgo to be with Henry in the Loop, where we're building our home. Within two days, his stuff was here, and he's already bought the apartment from Adriano and Carmine, putting it in both of our names.

He's also making changes, which has led to some construction, but when I come home on Friday afternoon after doing my Christmas shopping, I'm glad that, for the first time in days, I don't hear any hammering, drilling, or workers. With four bags in one hand, I enter our apartment, strolling to the living room where I dump them onto the couch.

"Henry?" I call when I don't see him in the kitchen.

"I'm in the bedroom." His voice booms from down the hall.

Walking back, I move into the master suite where I notice alterations to the built-in closet that spans the entire wall. The shelves have been sawed shorter to create steps so that I can step on the bottom two in order to reach the top ones. And all my clothes are neatly folded.

Henry's in front of the closet, motioning toward it. "For my petite woman. There wasn't any room for a ladder, so I told them to make steps from the shelves for you."

I eat the distance between us, loving how at home he is here, tracing the shelves with my fingers and stepping onto the first one. "This is great! I didn't know you were doing anything in the bedroom."

"My surprise for you." Henry shifts behind me, so I spin around, standing on the bottom shelf which sets me face-to-face with him. "Thank you so much." I loop my arms around his neck as he brackets my sides.

Kissing the tip of my nose, he asks, "They're done in the office. Want to see it?"

"Yes."

He takes my hand, and we walk to the neighboring room where I stop in the doorway. Henry didn't just make it into his office; he made it into a room for both of us. To my left is a rectangular cherry desk pushed against the wall with his two computers and two laptops. Heavy, reddish-brown drapes adorn the windows, and a cream lounge sofa with cushioned pillows is placed to face the wall next to the door. And suddenly, a white screen lowers from the ceiling.

Henry sails inside and places a small remote onto a round coffee table, pointing to the projector. "I made you a home movie theater, so you can watch Netflix on the big screen whenever you want."

I clap my hands and jump into his arms while he holds me up by my ass. "This is fucking awesome." Crashing my mouth onto his, I grip his thick, black hair.

Pulling back, he places me on my feet and guides me to the sofa that has just enough room for both of us to lie on. I take the remote and Henry explains how to use it while getting his laptop from the desk. “I’ve connected everything, so all you have to do is switch on my laptop, sign in to Netflix, and then start the projector.”

This time, he does it for me, playing *Narcos*, and as he heads back to the sofa, I recline against the cushion.

“This is so comfortable. This is the best room in our apartment now.”

With a smile, Henry lies next to me and I roll halfway on top of him – my favorite position. His hand caresses my curls, tracing a path down my back to rest on my behind while I throw my arm around his middle. Snuggled up, we watch the first episode of our TV show again. Only, the first time we watched it, we sat far apart from each other, but now we don’t allow any space between us.

All of a sudden, Henry kisses the top of my head and says, of his own volition, “I love you.”

“Love you,” I murmur, living in a place where happiness reigns supreme.

Being with Henry has taught me that relationships can be messy, but that doesn’t make them any less loving. Ultimately, no one is perfect. We can just love each other because that’s the best thing we do, for all its flaws and suspicions. It’s worth every agonizing moment with the right person.

He’s the first and only man who’s conquered the part of my soul I always held back for someone special. The one who stole my heart while I was still with another man. The one I wanted long before he ever became my friend. This friendship was never meant to be *just* a friendship.

I’ve found a man who makes me feel cherished, loved, and protected by merely being with me, which is the only thing I ever wanted from him, and I’ll always love my black hat hacker in all his imperfections.

EPILOGUE

Henry

I'm seated behind my laptop in my office, completely stress-free, even though *someone* has decorated my desk with flashing red and green Christmas lights, when I discover Mary's been on my laptop. Checking the history, I see that she's searched for undergraduate programs in the area.

I've been wondering what her plan is, but ever since I got shot, Mary's returned to being her easygoing self and it's as if we picked up where we left off. Even before Tara intervened, I was already in love with her. However, these days, it's grown into an intimate relationship like I've never had with anyone in my life since nothing stands between us anymore. And while I'll always be concerned with Mary's safety, living with her is so tranquil that I feel more laid back, which is imperative in allowing me to center myself in this merciless world.

Although I'm no longer programming and working all the time, I still work a lot of odd hours with Adriano and Luca, so I need for Mary to have something else besides *us* to focus on. But she's still searching for what to do education-wise, and I have a feeling she's much more bothered that she didn't get into Urbana-Champaign than she lets on, and that troubles me because I want to make her happy.

The problem is that I absolutely won't allow her to move away, and without my okay, I know she'll never go – albeit, being a hacker, I could get her in, despite the fact that she was denied before.

Leaning back, I rub my hand over my chin, contemplating my options about how I can help Mary as she bursts into the office, cursing.

“What's wrong?” I ask, pinning my gaze on her bare legs that are peeking out from under her blue satin robe.

Mary waves her hand irately, and she's so sexy when she's annoyed. "Nothing important. I just can't find a scarf I wanted to wear and have been looking for it for months."

"What kind of scarf?"

"What?"

"What color?" I add.

"Reddish brown. Copper to be exact."

"I have that scarf," I explain, recalling when I stole it from her bedroom. "It's on my bottom shelf."

"Why do you have it?"

"I took it from your mirror the first night I came into your apartment," I reply as she approaches me with a grin.

"And you just kept it?"

"Yeah."

She points her finger at me. "Ah, Henry, you already loved me back then."

Chuckling, I swivel the chair around and snatch her wrist, pulling her to stand between my legs. "If you want to believe that, baby, that's fine by me."

"I do want to believe that," she speaks softly in her husky voice, sitting astride me while I grip her ass before sliding my palm up her spine. "I love you."

A fierce longing courses through me with an almost painful prickling, and I clasp her face with both hands and tilt her head down, pressing my lips to hers and seeking a thorough kiss. "I love you too," I say with conviction.

Unreservedly, I take what belongs to me, crushing my mouth against hers again. Our teeth clash and she circles her arms around my neck, weaving her fingers through my hair in the most soothing manner as our kiss becomes languid, more intense – unbreakable. Then she pulls back, resting her forehead against mine.

I can never get enough of Mary and the intimacy she offers – it's a phenomenon that's been there since the first time I fucked her. And I need that outlet, a way of being just *me*, because in reality, I can only be my true self when I'm with her.

"I have to shower," she announces and gets up.

Since I've been wondering about her plan, I ask, "Mary, did you find any vet programs here in the Loop?"

I swear I catch sadness behind her eyes. "No, let's not talk about that," she concludes, leaving the room before I can reply.

A nagging sensation troubles me, so I pivot back around to face my laptop, going to the tab for the University of Illinois and perusing her options.

A week later, on a snowy Christmas Day, I'm upstairs in Adriano's apartment with Adam when Cam yells from the living room, "Henry, Mary's here."

I tell Adam, "Don't say anything to Mary yet, okay?"

He nods vigorously, his blond curls springing as I pick him up and hurry down the floating staircase, causing him to giggle as he holds on to me.

The entire group has gathered around the dining room table which is placed by the floor-to-ceiling windows and is plated with red and black china among dozens of candles. The scent of spices wafts up from the turkey, pastas, and pies, and the white lights of Adriano's Christmas tree located in the corner of the room glows as he places a gift on the pile beneath it with Amalia in his arms. Luca, Fallon, Logan, Rosalia, and Carmine are already seated in their black tie attire, and I glance around, searching for Mary, but only spot Cam in the kitchen.

Setting Adam in his chair between his parents, I nod to greet them, righting my bow tie and questioning, "Where's my girl?"

I haven't seen Mary all day since I had to work this morning. Then I picked up Adam so that he could help me get one of Mary's Christmas gifts, and I changed into my black tux and brushed my hair back with some gel before coming up here.

"Right here," the one voice I want to hear says, so I turn toward her, and my cock twitches from the sight of her hips swaying in a floor-length burgundy dress with thin straps that expose her shoulders.

"Hey." I sift my hands into her wavy curls, kissing her lips briefly and then whispering into her ear, "You look good enough to eat."

"Later," she murmurs around a half smile before she greets everyone while I sit opposite Logan and Rosalia.

As Mary joins me, Adriano's situated at the head of the table with Carmine and Cam on either side of him.

"Aren't your parents coming?" I ask Mary, and she shakes her head.

"No. My mom's feeling under the weather today, so they're staying home," she replies right when a bark is heard and all eyes land on Mary, who frowns.

"What was that?" she probes, glancing at everyone before stopping at me. "I heard a..."

"What?" I feign ignorance, and she smirks as she catches the obvious eagerness in Adam's behavior, prompting him, "Pumpkin, I can see you're dying to tell me something."

"I have a surprise for you, Mary," Adam pipes in and clamps his tiny hands over his own mouth, staring at me.

"He's the worst secret keeper." Logan taps Adam's nose as I wink at him.

"It's okay. Shall we give her the gift?" I suggest, and he bobs his head.

Mary regards me in anticipation, her excitement matching Adam's. Quickly, I go upstairs, hiding the present under my jacket, and return to the table as Adam hops off his seat and goes over to Mary when she slides her chair back.

"Henry and I got you a present," Adam speaks, opening my jacket and exposing her new Chihuahua.

"Oh, my god! You guys got me a dog." Mary reaches for him and holds him in her arms, stroking his pointy ears and brown fur.

"It's a boy," I inform her as she cuddles him tightly.

"You're okay about living with a dog?"

"Only that one, baby," I answer. "And I'm not walking him."

Mary smiles widely. "I'll do it." She stoops low when Adam wants to play with the dog but first kisses his cheek. "Thank you for my gift. You can name him, of course." He opens his mouth, but she adds, "No fruits."

So he closes it with a dejected look. Yet not a second later, he beams. "Christmas."

Mary arcs a brow at Rosalia and Logan while the others laugh, and I jokingly say to Logan, "Your grandkids are going to have names like *banana* and *laptop*."

Grinning with a shrug, he retorts, "I don't mind."

Sinking down in my seat again, Adam heaves himself onto Mary's lap so that they can hold Christmas together.

"Well, *Christmas*," I mutter, "welcome to the family."

Mary puts in with an amused expression, "This is the last time he gets to name anything of mine."

"Wise choice," I agree right before Adam looks up to Mary with such adoration.

Then he nuzzles Christmas, who chuffs, and Adam asks, "Can we take him outside, Mary?"

"Later, pumpkin."

Rosalia points out, "Only if it's not too late, Adam."

Adam scowls at his mother while he and Mary cuddle so fucking cutely together, and he tells his mom, "I'm gonna marry Mary and live with her doggy."

Barking out a huge laugh, I ruffle his curls. "Ha! No one's going to marry Mary but me, little man. I'll fight you for her," I tease him, and he stares at Mary in expectation that she'll choose him over me.

Mary embraces Adam firmly, watching me as she murmurs to him, "You can both marry me."

This seems to be fine with Adam, who's distracted by the dog, and Mary places them on the floor.

"Just to be clear, you're never fucking marrying anyone else," I declare and she smiles, paying no attention to my comment.

"Thank you, Henry. This is the best Christmas gift ever."

Seeing that sparkle in her upturned hazel eyes returning in full force with her new dog, I know one other thing that will make her just as ecstatic as I am in every aspect of our lives. Simply because I crave to prolong the look of love she gives me, I reveal, "This is actually not the best gift yet..." Reaching inside my jacket, I take out a card and an envelope, handing them to her.

Mary accepts them, turning over the plastic card, and her brows knit together as her gaze shoots up to me. "This is my student card for Veterinary Clinical Medicine."

"Yes."

"But how did I get in?"

Via the website, I hacked their system easily; it's pathetic how badly secured school records are. I had to add her to the database myself,

bypassing the common admittance method. These are the perks of being a hacker though – I can alter any data I want.

“I’m a black hat, I can get you enrolled into Harvard if you want. And I’ve paid your tuition.”

She then opens the envelope, taking out an airline ticket. “A return ticket to Urbana-Champaign?”

Resting my arm along the back of her chair, I lean closer to her. “You can go without moving there. You don’t have classes every day and it’s a forty-five minute flight, so the days you have to be at school, you’ll fly there.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. “Oh, my god, Henry. This is so sweet.”

“I knew you wanted to go there, baby.”

“Wow, how decadent. I’ll fly there. Alone?”

“No, it’s a commercial flight, but a guard will go with you, of course,” I tell her sternly.

“Of course. But this is really expensive.”

I kiss her lips, brushing mine over her beauty mark. “Nothing is too expensive. Whatever I make is yours, and we can afford it. I don’t want you to worry about money.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

Her sexy voice washes over me, skittering along my flesh, and I pull back with a smirk. In response, she grins as if we’re silently communicating.

“Thank you. *Ti amo*,” she whispers, and I desire her so intensely that I’m positive it’ll never fade.

Tucking her curls behind her ear, I promise, “I love you too, Mary. I’ll always protect, trust, and take care of you.”

Our eyes lock and she presses another kiss on my mouth before leaning halfway against me, and at this moment, I’m entirely content.

As I look around the table at everyone eating, drinking, and enjoying the night, I realize I’ve found my family with the Syndicate and with Mary. She was a burst of freshness in my jaded world when my soul hungered to trust again and needed someone pure and vibrant to counter my methodic hacking ways.

Our lives became inexplicably intertwined when I had to rescue Mary on her dog missions. Our lives meshed together as she managed to break through my walls and peel away my layers. And I’m fucking glad she did.

Now I simply accept our love and work with it since life can be cut short at any moment, and I refuse to die with regrets.

Because at the end of the day, she's the only one who I need to be with. The only one who truly knows me and my past, and I trust her with everything I have.

The end of Henry and Mary.

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Soraya Naomi reads many genres but favors intense, seductive, and provocative novels where the male character loves fiercely, without remorse or boundaries. She has a passionate obsession with the written word and indulges in chocolate pastries much too often. Her debut novel, *For Fallon* (Chicago Syndicate, #1), was released on July 26, 2014. She's honored that *For Fallon* won "Best Breakout Novel 2014" in the Novel Grounds Semi Annual Literary Awards.

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