



MR.

MYSTERIOUS

in BLACK

S. ANN COLE

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Mr. Mysterious in Black
by S. Ann Cole

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DEDICATION

*For Vyjanti,
My light at the end of the tunnel...
All that, and more.*

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APPETIZER

Peace of Mind

by S. Ann Cole

*I saw her,
Sitting by the riverside—
Her eyes closed,
Her smile ever so bright,
Her head under a crown—
A crown of lilies...
Peace of mind.*

*I saw her again,
Dancing in the rain,
Her smile was the same,
No one could disdain.
She danced as a child,
Placid, meek, mild...
Peace of mind.*

*Ah! Here she is,
Sitting on a swing,
She sways to and fro,
Her golden strands the wind blows.
Yes, her smile is the same,
Her countenance remains.
Peace of mind.*

PROLOGUE

He was tired.

Dog-tired.

His heartbeat was just beginning to recover from a sweaty engagement of breath-ragged, hair-pulling, nail-scraping pleasure mere minutes ago, evening out and lulling him onward into the soothing darkness of sleep.

Unfortunately, he was yanked back from the calling darkness by the feel of soft feminine hands accompanied by flutters of kisses sliding along his chest. He reluctantly opened his eyes to the annoying realization that the treat of the night was still in his bed.

Yeah, he really was tired, because he usually saw to it that the source of his fleeting pleasure got lost the moment he found his release.

His eyes skidded over the olive-skinned, platinum blonde making a meal of his chest, and his brain struggled to remember her name.

She was a bank investor. That's all he could remember about her, because he hadn't been interested in what she had to say when she'd blabbered on (and on) earlier at the Gala. He'd merely paid attention to her curvy figure and the long, toned legs accentuated by six-inch heels that compelled him to spend a few hours in exploration.

He tried again to recall her name...Lacy...Lucy...Lisa... Ah hell, he didn't know and he didn't care.

Nameless Blond pressed her plum lips against the middle of his chest and murmured in a sultry voice that caressed him in places he really preferred to remain inert at the moment, "I want more."

A sigh flowed from him as he mentally kicked himself for almost falling asleep with a woman in his bed. "I'm done. Get dressed. Moore will take you home."

The covers flipped back with a simple flex of his muscular arm, and he swung his feet to the red carpeted floor. With the heels of his hands, he rubbed the weight of sleep from his eyes. "Oh, you were great, by the way. Thanks."

The protesting muscles of his limbs told him just how exhausted he was. And as he wrestled with sleep, he detected no movement from Nameless Blond. Turning, he directed his stare at the blond-haired creature whose green eyes shone with tears as she clutched the black silk sheet over her bosom.

In a controlled voice, one straining against anger, he asked, "You don't understand English?"

"*Thanks?*" she asked, voice breaking. "That's it?"

Closing his eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose. Telling a woman to leave more than once had never happened before, because he wasn't normally this tired. And when he wasn't tired, he was everything akin to a whirling dervish. So, when he gave a command, women usually sensed the peril of questioning him and elected not to argue. "Pretty much. Thought you understood what this was."

When she just sat there still, staring at him, he full on glared. "Listen, girl, whatever the hell your name is, you need to get your ass up, and go."

Recognizing his seriousness, Nameless Blond hopped up from the bed and scrambled around on the carpeted floor, retrieving her clothes.

Appeased, he got up and strolled over to the floor-to-ceiling glass window of the hotel room, staring out at the bright city lights of Chicago. The weak shade of light from the corner lamp silhouetted his tall, muscular frame in the darkness as he stood stark naked and pensive before the window.

One by one, he cracked his knuckles, trying his damndest not to think of *her*.

He failed. Knuckle cracking no longer worked as a distraction.

How much longer? How much longer will it be before I can regain the missing half of my soul?

With every thought of her, his heart ached like a curse from hell. The heart-wrenching fact that the hands now caressing her weren't his, that the lips kissing hers

weren't his, that the body making love to hers...oh dear god, it's as if a bullet was left lodged right in the center of his heart, killing him slowly, painfully, surely.

No. His fingers curled into mighty, determined fists at his side. No. He could tolerate it no longer. He needed to reclaim what was his. It was time he informed Cali D who she *really* was to him. That she belonged not to Cali D, but to him. And if that disgusting piece of shit tried to rebel, he'd give the son of a whore a torturously painful ending.

No more chances.

A faint click of the door handle pulled him from his malevolent thoughts and he turned to see Nameless Blond standing there, her green eyes glistening as she wished him, "Goodnight, Mr. Nelson."

He gave a chin lift to the open door, wanting her to be gone already.

The profound guilt he always felt after sleeping with someone who wasn't *her*, never allowed him to be...*nice* to these innocent women. His usual reaction to the pang of guilt he felt along with the frustration of not having *her*, was to take it out on the woman present.

Made him an asshole, but he couldn't help it.

Nameless Blond gave him a sad smile and teetered away, the door closing silently behind her. Her green eyes were ridiculously alluring, had pulled him in. But alluring as they were, he favored seductively brown eyes. A crooked smile danced on his lips. *Cognac-brown* to be exact.

The shrill of his cellphone broke through the silence, and he went to scoop it off the nightstand. A glance at his caller ID had him slightly panicking.

"Ralph, at this hour?" he growled into the receiver. "Please tell me she's okay."

"Yes, Mr. Nelson. She's sound. But..."

"Out with it, Ralph!"

"She took a job at *Secre X*, Sir."

"*Secre X*? Tico's Club?"

"Yes, Sir."

"The hell's she doing *there*?" he barked. "Say bartending. Please."

Ralph paused for a moment, then, "No, Sir. She's stripping."

As if he'd been touched with livewire, his entire being became fully awake, eyes wide, weariness gone. Anger boiling. Things were getting out of hand. "Her job at the Bistro, what happened?"

"She lost it a week after her split with Cali D."

His chest suddenly felt vacant, heart dropped to the pit of his stomach. "She...She never went back to Cali D?"

"No, Sir. Seems she's serious this time around. And it's smart timing, too. 'Cause the Cubans are out for his soul this time."

"Then why the fuck am I just hearing of all this? That she never went back to Cali D or that she lost her job? What am I paying you all for?"

"I'm sorry, Sir. We've been trying to reach you for the past few weeks, but we kept getting your assistant. And you gave us instructions not to leave messages about this matter with anyone. So..."

Fuck. For the past six weeks he's been doing some heavy traveling, being a work addict and all. Hell, he should've known all this.

A sick feeling lingered. If *she* had to pick up a job at *Secre X*, then that meant she was in need. She was hurting and in need.

She shouldn't be hurting when he could so *easily* take her pain away. She shouldn't be in need of anything when she already had it all.

"When did she start?"

"Tonight, Sir."

Perfect. "Go get Tico to phone me. Now." He began pacing the length of the room, his fingers raking through his hair repeatedly. "And from here on out, every goddamn move she makes, *I. Want. To. Know.* Got it? Doesn't matter how busy I am, don't stop calling until you get through to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good. I'll reschedule my plans here in Chicago and jet out first thing in the morning. I expect a full report of everything that's taken place within the last month."

His fingers trembled as he disconnected the call and sank to his knees, dropping his head in his hands.

My sweet, brown-eyed girl, what are you doing to yourself? I've waited too long, haven't I?

Seven years too long.

CHAPTER ONE

Iridescent rays danced across my partially nude body as I wrapped my long, bare legs around the cold stainless steel that was my fortress at the moment. Imbibing a half bottle of Coffee Patrón within a two-hour span was proving to be a really, really bad idea. My mind was a vortex, my vision turbid, and my bones liquefied.

I opened my eyes and regarded my onlookers who all bore lascivious smiles, waving their green bills aloft. All were wealthy and powerful businessmen with wives either forty pounds heavier than when they'd first tied the knot to do justice to any sexy lingerie, or simply, the thrill was gone.

As I slithered to the center of the stage, I noticed through my blurry vision Mr. Mysterious in Black was present. Ensnared in his rented booth and alone as usual, he regarded me intently. The word I'd use to describe him was... 'odd'. He never danced with anyone; merely sat in his booth all night and stared at me, watching my every move. Sometimes I got the insane thought he was some sort of serial killer who preyed on vulnerable women. If such was the case, it would be a complete waste.

I'd never seen him up close because I consciously kept my distance from him, and club lights do have the tendency to make anyone look good. But if my distant inspections didn't lie, I'd say he was one wickedly hot sonuvabitch. All dark-haired, square-jawed and high levels of intensity. Viewing him up close was necessary to be certain, though. *Not like that's ever going to happen.*

With alcohol-fueled bravery, I winked at him, flashing a coquettish smile. His response was a disapproving scowl and the haughty averting of his eyes.

Ouch.

Was only trying to be nice tonight, for once, because I was drunk. And his ass should've been glad for it, considering the innumerable times I refused his requests

for private dances with me, persistent as he was. No way was I going within a foot of him. He was too...intimidating, if that were the better word.

And strange.

He only dressed in black and no one seemed to have any info on him—well, at least they *said* they didn't. It was as if they feared him or something. Thus, I nicknamed him Mr. Mysterious in Black.

I snaked tortuously up my stainless steel fortress, closing my eyes and allowing myself to float away on the waves of Michael Jackson's *Dirty Diana*, feeling like a Dirty Sadie myself. But the alcohol wasn't enough to keep the reality away. The reality of why I'd gotten this drunk in the first place. Why I'd subjected myself to this 'job', and was now so disoriented.

Feeling like breaking Tico's arbitrary rule given only to me, I awkwardly tried to take off my bra. At the undoing of the first hook, I lost my grip and went spiraling to the floor. Sprawled in a heap on the stage, I was too soused to even attempt lifting a finger, so I just laid there, listening to Michael Jackson scream like a bitch in my ears, telling me how dirty I was. For seconds, minutes, or hours, maybe, I remained sprawled on the stage, until I felt hands holding my arms and legs, and my body being rescued off the stage.

Soon I felt something soft and plush beneath me—the couch in the dressing room, I assumed. I flicked open my eyes and blinked rapidly, trying to focus on my surroundings. Catching a familiar form, my eyes tentatively traveled up to the Stygian, glowering gaze of my pissed-off boss. His wavy blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and his black muscle-shirt stretched helplessly over his fully matured brawns. Tico was a big man. A *really* big man.

"What the hell's wrong with you tonight, huh?" he growled.

Unable to form a coherent sentence, I groaned. My eyes darted around the cluttered room. Bright round bulbs lined above rows of make-up mirrors; each had a fully or half-naked girl seated in front of it painting prettier faces over their original ones. Feathers and fluffs and bras and various dance costumes were strewn about, as dancers milled in and out. Pleased to find no one was paying attention to Tico and me, I relaxed.

Failing to meet his angry glare again, I said, "I just fell on my ass straight from a pole, Tico. Have some pity on me, will you?"

"You fell because you were trying to defy me. I told you: do *not* remove your bra!!"

"It's an enigma why this rule applies only to me," I said in indignation. "How the hell am I supposed to make money? I'm not allowed to dance with anyone and I'm not allowed to go topless. So what's the point of me being here?"

Tico looked frustrated. "You don't need the money. Why do you think you need to be here?"

I stared blankly up at him as if he'd spoken a distinct language. Uh, let's see: because I lost my job merely a week after dumping my good-for-nothing-but-trouble drug dealer of a boyfriend. Had difficulties getting another job. Student loans—debt. My mother's ailment—debt. Three months' worth of rent owed to Brenda, in which I'll be out on my ass if I don't have her rent by the time she's back from her excursion—more debt.

I closed my eyes and swung an arm across my face. "I won't even attempt to answer that, Tico."

Tico sighed. "It's only 'cause I gotta keep my mouth shut, Sadie," he gently removed my hand from my face and looked down at me with an I-know-something-that-you-don't-know expression. "But trust me, you don't need to be here. This job's not for you."

"No, it's definitely not for me. I'm with you on that. But I *do* need the money."

Tico grunted in frustration just as a cocktail waitress strolled in with a glass of ice and a bottle of Club Soda. Taking the tray from her, he poured the Club Soda into the glass and sat next to me on the couch, bringing the glass to my lips. "Drink."

Without hesitation I drank, because frankly, I hated being drunk. I needed nothing more than to head home and fall into a deep sleep. "Thanks."

Tico smiled his signature panty-dropping smile "My pleasure, Sadie." He leaned over to whisper, "Just don't forget me." He revealed that I-know-something-that-you-don't-know expression again, got up and left with a backward glance.

What the heck was *that* supposed to mean?

As my thoughts tried weaving through my intoxicated brain about Tico's inexplicable behavior, familiar arms wrapped around me, and I relaxed into it. "Thanks, Kash. I needed that."

"Sadie, I know you got some awful news tonight, but I can assure you, Patrón is nobody's friend," Kash said, her brown eyes sincere, her caramel skin glowing. "Plus

drinking and working don't mesh well. You'll start out doing things that's just not you, then end up regretting it in the morning."

I merely gave a "hmm" in response. Far too inebriated to take a lecture.

"Let me help you get dressed and take you home. You seem a little out of it. Sleep is the only thing that can help right now."

No argument from me.

After getting dressed and gathering my things, I let Kash steer me through the club towards the exit. Tico popped up in my line of vision.

"You're leaving?" he asked.

"Yes, Tico. I can't even stand straight. What do you expect? Am I restricted from leaving the club, too?"

"No, you're not," he replied with a roll of his eyes. "It's just that, you-know-who is demanding a dance with you again."

"Tico, the guy...makes me wary. I'm not going within an inch of him. The fact he's been so insistent on getting a dance with me all week is creepy. Are you sure he's not some *Lifetime* movie predator type? He's always dressed in black. What if he's one of those cult people who likes to slaughter for the rush of it?"

Tico flung his head back and laughed out. "No, Sadie. I know him very well and he's nothing like that. He's not a member of the club either. He just started showing since you began working here a few days ago. Clubs are not his sort of...thing. His presence here is because of *you*."

"But, *why*? How does he even know me?"

Tico shrugged, but the expression he wore told me he knew much more than he was letting on, and I was too lethargic to even think about deciphering anything at the moment.

"Tell him I said *no*, and he should leave me the hell alone. He's creeping me out." I tugged on Kash's arm prompting her to move with me. Tico gave a reluctant nod and gave us way.

I was rocked awake from my short-lived sleep when Kash pulled up outside my apartment. "What time is it?"

"Just a little after midnight." Shifting in her seat, she turned to face me. "You're gonna stop, aren't you?"

"You know me too well," I mumbled. "There's no point if Tico keeps acting like this."

"Yeah, Tico's behavior *is* a bit out of character when it comes to you. I'm thinking he wants you to quit and get with that scary dude in black who watches you like a damn hawk."

"Nope. Not gonna happen. The guy's a weird one. I mean, he stares at me all night, but if I smile at him, his face gets all serious and disapproving. And *then* he sends Tico to ask me for a dance? He's just...ugh, whatever."

Kash laughed.

But I didn't, because the joke was lost on me. "I'm not sure what the hell I'm gonna do now. Dancing onstage had looked so easy." I managed a short laugh. "Yet I couldn't even last more than four nights."

Kash reached over squeezed my arm. "You are strong, smart and fearless, Sadie. You'll figure it out. You always do."

Opening the car door, I clambered out, swaying. The alcohol still had me off-balanced. Kash rounded the car and came to my rescue, propping my arm over her shoulder. "I got you."

Kash didn't want me to quit working at the club, but that hustling was just *not* for me. At some point in my life, I knew I would look back and ask myself, "What *the hell* was I thinking?"

Tucked away on the thirtieth floor of a skyscraper, *Secre X* was a private and exclusive members-only gentlemen's club, where only elite businessmen—mostly married and bored—were admitted. It had no more than about thirty members and each member rented their own booth. Tico made loads from those guys.

Making use of an inherited and honed talent, I sometimes designed and sold costumes to dancers. Kash was one of my regular customers, so I'd stopped by *Secre X* one night last week with a few pieces she'd ordered. She'd been onstage when I arrived so I took a seat by the bar and watched her performance while I waited. It was at that moment I became like Eve who'd bitten into that deceptively promising apple; the vast amount of money Kash made onstage had been a deadly temptation for a broke ass like me. Easily, I'd convinced myself with a list of more pros than cons, that

it was the easiest and quickest way to pay off my debts. Those thoughts were propelled by Kash's encouragement. However, it didn't take long for me to realize one needed a carefree psyche or a completely inebriated mind to get through a few hours in that kind of gig.

Kash halted with me on my doorstep. "The owner of Narcofax, Sadie. He's coming to see you tomorrow night, remember? That's *at least* a thousand bucks guaranteed. Show up at work tomorrow, if only just to see him."

True, that gray-headed man did give big tips. "Maybe."

Taking my bag, she searched around for my keys, retrieved them and opened the door. "And remember if you want anything at all, don't hesitate to ask me, okay?"

With a nod of acknowledgement, I stumbled across the threshold, closing the door behind me.

"Looks like someone's had a busy night. You're shitfaced."

I glanced up to see Kelsy and Tevin cuddled up on the big black couch in my living room, watching me in amusement.

"You two shitheads still here? Don't you have a home?" I grumbled as I walked rather clumsily over to the leather recliner in the corner and plopped down in it.

"You left us watching *Gone with the Wind*, girl. You know that movie lasts, like, twenty hours and day. We were just about to leave anyways," Kelsy said, popping her gum. "You're back early, though. How was your night?"

"Shitty."

Kelsy Mitchell watched me through big, green eyes, her long, dark hair stylishly pigtailed with red hair ties, her bodacious figure swallowed up in one of Tevin's oversized sweaters. She'd been my best friend, confidante and everything in between for five years. Polar opposites, though. She was from an affluent upbringing and I was from an impoverished, dysfunctional, screwed-up family.

But Kelsy loved me for me; shared in my tears and laughs—though laughs, for me, were a luxury. That, along with the fact I could be used as an excuse to her parents so she could date my ride or die thug of a friend, Tevin.

Tevin was unacceptable, ineligible, absolutely *not* the son-in-law Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell would approve of. He was quintessentially the kind of man all women should steer clear of. Tevin Trouble was what I called him. Trouble with a capital T. But I

couldn't lie though, I adored the curly-haired, Hispanic hombre like a brother. And the respects were reciprocated.

At just over six feet he was athletically built with a unique Spanish swagger to him. He had a large heart-shaped tattoo with massive wings on his arm, and all three of our names were etched in it.

"Just imagine, you own a house with five bathrooms," I slurred, wagging a lazy finger at Tevin. "And you," I slurred to Kelsy, "have enough money to buy one with twice as many bathrooms. So, tell me again why you guys spend more time here where I actually *share* a bathroom?"

On their own, my eyes closed down, my limbs feeling heavier by the second. "Should just let y'all pay the damn rent when Brenda gets back from New York. Lizards."

"We wish you'd actually *let* us pay the rent," Tevin snapped, his words all curled up with that Hispanic accent.

I ignored him.

"Come on, Sadie. You're stressing yourself out over things we can help you with easily. Nothing's wrong with accepting help sometimes," Kelsy joined in, her voice a warm, fuzzy blanket of compassion.

"I don't want your money. Neither do I want your pity. Didn't you guys say you were leaving?"

"Stubborn as always," Tevin said, shaking his head. "C'mon, babe. Let's go."

Their steps neared me, and then I felt their kisses on my cheeks. "G'night, pony. See ya in da' morrow," Kelsy whispered.

The soft click of the door seconds later confirmed their leave.

Unsteadily, I got up and headed to my room, launching myself onto the bed without undressing.

Oh shoot...

It didn't matter how stoned I was, there was one thing I had to do before I met up with sleep. Reaching over to the nightstand, I retrieved my old, tattered bible and opened to where it was bookmarked. With the weight of sleep anchoring down my lids, the words on the page blurred, but I strained nonetheless and repeated the highlighted words of Proverbs; words I'd been reading every night for the past six years:

Oh God, I beg two favors from you; let me have them before I die.

First, help me never to tell a lie.

Second, give me neither poverty nor riches.

Give me just enough to satisfy my needs.

As the last of the words slurred from my lips, my eyes instantly grew heavier and sleep rolled in.

CHAPTER TWO

Slim sunrays streamed through my bedroom windows, obnoxiously bright, warm on my skin, coercing me from sleep. My eyes opened reluctantly, squinting, both from the intruding sun and from the immediate headache that pounced me.

Hangover.

Today would be a lethargic, mood-swinging day, I could tell.

Slipping out of bed, I dragged myself to the bathroom. My reflection, a horror show, stared back at me in the mirror; cognac irises surrounded by lashes like palm tree leaves, a heart-shaped face disastrously mascara-blotched and lipstick-smearred. Twenty-six inches of chocolate brown ripples tangled in knots. I looked like death.

Deciding on a long, hot shower, I stripped down and hopped under the steaming stream. Almost instantly, my muscles began to relax. Tossing my head back, I let the water beat down on my face, the heat stinging my already sensitive skin.

I. Am. Such. A mess.

The tragic and unexpected news I'd received last night still had me a bit on edge. Though, why I was "shocked" by this news, I couldn't tell, because this was a long time coming.

A month. That's how long it's been since I broke up with him. A month. And now, just like that, he was gone.

It was divine intervention that, at just the right time, I'd mustered up the courage to leave him without looking back. Because there's no question in my mind that as soon as the tough got going, I would've ran right back to him.

I always did.

When Tevin brought me the news last night about *him*, my ex-boyfriend Cali D, being murdered in his house, I'd momentarily lost it. Even though I'd grown sick and tired of the selfish, insensitive bastard, I'd still spent a great deal of my life with the

guy, so learning of his brutal murder did hit me something fierce. Cali D was never the ideal man, but he was there for me at a time when I was lost.

Yep, shitty as my life was right now, there'd been a time when it had been far worse.

What if I'd never left him? Watching boxing on Tuesdays was a ritual for Cali D. And I no doubt would've been right there, cuddled up in the theater den with him watching boxing, and just like that the assailants would've burst in and killed us both. / could have been dead.

The thought alone was jarring.

Sad he had to go that way. I never loved him, no, not even an iota, but Cali D was all I'd known for six years. Rough, tough, hardcore love. Drugs, guns, death, cynicism and disloyalty.

Cali D had been my shoulder, my refuge, and an oasis in the desert since *that time* I could no longer torture myself with thoughts about—thanks to my retrograde amnesia. Back then, I was heartbroken, vulnerable and weak, and Cali D was a timely distraction. But I never, ever let myself love him. Never cared to share my heart with anyone.

And since Cali D was easy *not* to love, I'd stayed with him. Many times, when he became overwhelmingly possessive, I'd leave him, but always went back eventually, fearing having to start all over again; or worse yet, meeting someone better and falling in love with them. I didn't want to love. Some unknown force wouldn't allow me to. So staying with Cali D seemed safe—safe only where my heart was concerned, not my life.

That's why I'd drank myself into oblivion last night, to numb it all.

After showering, I spent over thirty minutes blow-drying my hair, struggling to school my overly long and unruly curls. Then I rummaged through my closet of self-made apparels and snagged an outfit: a pale green, squared-neck, flared dress made for Spring, to go with some light yellow loafers. My overt penchant for colors was a secret to no one. I couldn't help it; I love bright colors and I cannot lie. To complete my outfit, I grabbed my oversized Givenchy handbag--black with yellow straps.

The bag was a gift from Cali D. But I made my own clothes. I was good at it. So, yeah, I wasn't a complete waste of space. I was good for something.

Designing was my vice.

After snatching up everything I needed, I stuck my ear-buds in, fetched my iPod and put Pink's *Crystal Ball* on repeat. Pretty damn apt for my crappy life right now. There were a million cracks in my crystal ball.

Wrestling the emergent feels of depression into submission, I bounced out of my apartment, tipped my head back to soak up some of the warm, early-March sun, inhaled deeply, and then commenced my walk to Starbucks.

I found a corner-seat in the back of Starbucks. Invisibility, I craved it. Taking a sip of my espresso, I closed my eyes and hummed in appreciation.

The time, 9:25am. Ten o'clock would be appropriate enough to visit Miss De'Lacy. That gave me a few minutes to catch up on this Laura Kinsale novel I've been trying to finish for the past two weeks. Retrieving my paperback of *Flowers from the Storm* from my handbag, I flipped open to the bookmark page and dug in. Despite his impediment, I was utterly in love with the hero Christian Langland. But overly disgusted and annoyed with the heroine, Maddie.

"Wouldst thou likest..." I mocked at the pages.

A stifled chuckle sounded from above, startling me. My eyes drifted from the pages and upward, where they collided with a curious pair of warm brown ones. A tall, ashy-blond haired man—a rather handsome man, by the way—was hovering over me, his lips twisted to suppress a grin.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I echoed. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, you can. I'm in a rather awful mood today and could really do with some company. Care to lend me yours? "

"Sorry. I'm afraid my mood mirrors yours. My company would only worsen your mood. Plus, unlike you, I desire no one's company. Not even my own."

"Already we have one thing in common. That's got to be a sign."

His grin was charming, his voice soothingly melodic. Clad in a charcoal suit with a crisp white shirt and shiny black shoes, he resembled every bit the confident businessman. He looked...expensive.

"My mother taught me never to talk to strangers," I quipped, bringing my book up to my face as a sign of dismissal.

It was ineffective.

Mr. Handsome chuckled and took the vacant seat opposite me. "My mother taught me the same thing. That's two things we have in common so far."

"Okay, um, you're annoying me."

He tipped his chin toward the book in my hand. "More than the character you were mocking in that book?"

That elicited an involuntary giggle from me. Oh hell no, I didn't think anyone could be as annoying as Maddie.

"Yes," I lied.

He grinned wider, eyes fixated on mine, making me shift uncomfortably. "Your beauty, it's stunning." Then his brows crinkled speculatively, and something unfathomable flitted across his face.

I didn't acknowledge his compliment.

He was obviously as determined to sit there as I was to ignore him. As long as he remained quiet, we'd be good. I brought my book up to my face and resumed reading. *'Christian went out on the battlements when he wanted to be alone...'*

Mr. Handsome did indeed remain quiet, seemingly lost in thought. Despite his earlier proclamation of being in an awful mood, it was paradoxical to his cheery demeanor. Now, he wasn't looking somber per se, but something was definitely troubling him. Not that I cared. I lowered my peeking eyes and carried on reading.

Then he broke the peaceful silence. "I'm Devon."

My eyes peered over the top of my paperback. "Oh."

"Do you have a name?"

Irritated, I slammed my book shut, about to say something peppery, when I noticed his expression was different from what it was earlier. He was no longer amused or thoughtful, but earnest.

I blushed a little. No, I wasn't attracted to him, but that look was...

"Sadie," I answered. "My name's Sadie."

"Sadie," he whispered my name absentmindedly, lost in thought again. *What's going on with this guy?*

Freaked, I checked my cell phone for the time and noticed I'd stayed well past ten o' clock.

Stuffing my paperback and iPod back into my handbag, I swung it over my shoulder and made to leave. My movements pulled Devon from his reveries.

"Sadie, hold up."

On a heavy sigh, I halted and looked up at him with a raised eyebrow.

"You...you are exquisite. I didn't expect—" he stopped short and his brows furrowed. "I'd like to see you again."

What did he expect me to do at that clichéd line, swoon at his words and say: *'Oh, any place, Devon. Anytime.'*?

With a snort, I walked off.

He jogged to my side. "Sadie, please. Can I have your number?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll give you mine."

"Sure." There was no hesitation, because I knew I wouldn't be calling.

Devon frowned at my easy acquiescence. Running his hand along the sides of his jacket, he shrugged. "Don't have a pen or cards on me now. Let me put it in your cell phone." He watched me closely, waiting for my response.

Oh God, the man just wouldn't give up.

Sighing, I retrieved my cellphone from my handbag and passed it to him. He punched in his number, passed it back to me, and then narrowed his eyes. "Can I trust you'll call me?"

"Yeah." I muttered and strode off. "Whatever."

"Was nice meeting you, Sadie," he called after me.
The feeling's definitely not mutual, Devon.

Miss De'Lacy opened her front door with a glowing smile and luminous gray eyes. Her chestnut hair was wrapped in a neat coiffure and her smooth and radiant features belied her late forties' age.

She enveloped me in a warm hug. "Sadie, how are you doing, darling?"

"I'm fine, Miss De'Lacy. How's everything?"

"Oh, you know, we're just taking it one day at a time."

A small lump formed in my throat when I asked, "How is she?"

Miss De'Lacy's face fell. "She's diminishing. I don't know why, but her body doesn't seem to respond to the meds anymore."

I pinched my eyes shut and willed away the surfacing pain.

"I think she's lost all hope and wants to go," she continued.

Miss De'Lacy was the sympathetic Christian neighbor from my childhood. Shortly after my mother had gotten infected, she'd slipped into depression and set our uninsured house to flames, in an attempt to kill herself. Fortunately, she was saved—from the fire. We were left homeless, clothes-less, penniless; and I was only eighteen then, slowly recovering from a brutal head injury. Clueless, but I'd had to make the decisions since my mom had shut down completely and abandoned her motherly duties.

In came Miss De'Lacy who'd altruistically offered to look after my mother until I could afford to do so myself. I'd reluctantly agreed. Shortly after, I began waitressing at a bistro while studying fashion design part-time in college. Then I met Cali D, who'd been substantial enough to help stabilize my life.

Retrieving a white envelope from my handbag that contained my earnings for the week, I handed it to Miss De'Lacy. "For the month. It's short one hundred. I'll get that for you by Monday."

"Sadie, I know you've lost your job and I told you I could wait," she said sternly.

"I know, but I have this now so...take it."

Miss De'Lacy pursed her lips and unwillingly took the envelope.

"And here's her meds for another month." I rubbed my sweaty palms down the front of my dress. "Can I see her?"

"Of course, darling," Miss De'Lacy gently chided. "She's *your* mother."

At my failed attempt at a smile, Miss De'Lacy walked off and I followed her through the charming three-bedroom house, cluttered with trophies and pictures of her children and grandchildren, and her husband who'd passed away from cancer two years ago. Miss De'Lacy was a kindhearted woman who did good deeds only because it brought her contentment. Yep, some people were like that.

She led me out into the backyard where my mother sat inert on an iron bench, vacuously staring off into De'Lacy's blooming, flamboyant garden.

She was more pallid and meager than she'd been the week before. Her hair, once a bountiful bundle of curls that mimicked mine, had dwindled into limp looseness. My heart wrenched. The woman was disappearing before my very eyes.

Theresa Francé used to be as beautiful and vibrant as the bright yellow roses behind her. But just as a rose's beauty fades with the progression of time, so Theresa's hue has faded by life's capricious phases.

I sat down next to her on the bench, but she didn't move, as if she didn't even notice I was there. She was doing this to herself. Not the disease. She was the one giving up instead of fighting. There were many people in the world HIV-positive, just like her, but they still lived happy lives.

"Hi, Mom," I whispered.

No answer. No acknowledgment.

"I miss you, Mom. I miss talking to you. I miss us designing and sewing together. I miss hearing you laugh. I miss your smile. I miss *you*," I told her softly.

More silence ensued.

The tears pooled in my eyes. "Can you please just fight? Can you not lose hope and just try? It doesn't have to be like this."

I sat with my fingers entwined, just hoping to hear her voice. The sweet, sing-song voice I haven't heard in so long.

But all she did was stare blankly into the garden, not a word. I heard birds chirping. Tree leaves shaking. The soft, almost inaudible cooing of the wind. But not my mother's voice. I waited. And waited. And waited.

With a resigned sigh, I closed my eyes and started to get up. Another day tried. Another day failed.

But then I felt her cold hand rest tentatively on mine. She still didn't look at me, though, even as she croaked, "Sewing... I miss that, too. I miss life. And I miss you."

With my free hand, I frantically wiped my tears away, then placed it over hers. "You have life. You do. Choose to live. Please. I love you. I've missed you. You're all I have. Please don't leave me, Mom."

She looked down at my hand covering hers then shakily lifted it to her face, placing my palm flat on her cheek.

"Warm," she said, wistfully. "You are warm. You live." She then lifted her other hand and placed her palm on my cheek. "Feel. Tell me. Am I not cold?" Her brows furrowed as she said this and I closed my eyes and leaned in to her touch.

I wouldn't answer and say what she wanted me to say. That her touch was cold. It was, but she still lived.

"You see, honey? I'm already dead," she whispered, her voice frail and forlorn.

"No, mom!" I cried. "You're not. I can warm you. God can heal you. Please, choose life."

Eyes vacant, she just watched me. "God?"—Slowly, her head shook from side to side — "God gave me a husband who cheats. A husband who beats. A husband who *infects*."—She cocked her head and regarded me—"God gave me sickness so he could *heal* me? God gave me life so he could take it back? Is that love, darling, or is it a tease? Tell me."

What? Theresa never talked like this. No, we never cursed God. Ever. "Don't speak like this, Mom. It's wrong. You know it's wrong."

She blinked at me. Once. Twice. Three times. And with a steely resolve, she brought her gaze back on the garden. She was done talking. And I decided not to force her anymore. She had given up, completely, and there wasn't a thing I could do about that.

Tentatively, I laid my head in her lap, relieved when she didn't push me away. Moments later I felt her fingers in my hair, raking gently through the stubborn curls. A small smile swept across my face.

I miss her so much.

We stayed like that for a while, and I allowed myself to drift off into a weary, sorrowed sleep. Induced by my mother's weary, sorrowed touch.

CHAPTER THREE

"The guy just wants one dance, Sadie. Just one dance."

"I said no, Tico!"

Tico was getting on my last nerve. He'd been up my ass all night trying to get me to agree to a dance with Mr. Mysterious in Black.

"Why are you so insistent on this?" I asked on a lifted brow. It was so out of character for Tico.

"Because *he's* being insistent. As much as I'm annoying you, he's annoying me," Tico said through a heavy breath.

My hands settled on my hips. "Okay, so he's a nuisance. Throw his ass out, Tico! Problem solved."

His beefy chest jerking, Tico laughed heartily at my nonsensical suggestion, his white teeth brightened by the psychedelic club lights. "I can't, Sadie. He's the—" he stopped short, frowned, and placed his hands on my shoulders. "Just one dance. I'll pay you."

Pay me? Dude's that desperate? I laughed out involuntarily and Tico gave me a quizzical stare.

"Okay. One dance." I wagged my index finger in his face to emphasize one dance.

Tico gave a bit-lip grin, his eyes gleaming. "One dance is all it'll take."

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. I sent a silent invocation for the DJ to play a really short song, because I sure as hell wasn't looking forward to dancing with this man. Begrudgingly, I entered the booth of Mr. Mysterious in Black to find him tapping away

furiously on his cell phone. He didn't seem to notice my entrance. Seem, being the keyword.

"You requested a dance?"

He was absorbed in whatever he was doing on his phone. Sending an email? Texting a lover? Who cared?

Then he spoke without lifting his head, his attention directed fully at his phone screen. "Sit."

His commanding tone stood firm against the flowing music of the club, and I just stood, aghast. "Look, Sir, I don—"

"*Sit*, Sadie." He shot me a brief, quelling stare, shook his head, and resumed typing.

I could only stand and stare, stunned at the way my name rolled comfortably off his tongue. He uttered it with such ease, the way a person who knew every dirty little thing about me would. In a way only a person who said my name frequently would say it. With familiarity and intimacy. How did he even know my name?

I'm going to kill Tico.

Lost in thought, lost in the strangeness of the man, I sat down on the red, leather banquette next to him, being sure to keep my distance. There was something about him that made me apprehensive. Though I wouldn't dare let him see that.

I surreptitiously checked him out, and found my distant assessments had been on point: he *was* hot. His dark hair dashed messily across his forehead, giving him that model-type essence. About two days of stubble shadowed his face. *Oh, what stubble on a man's face does to me.*

His jaw was acutely squared and angular, and his lips, *oh his lips*, were too pink to grace a man's mouth. I estimated him to be no older than thirty. I leaned in for a closer look, wishing the booth lights were a tad more revealing. I wanted to see the color of his eyes. I wanted to be able to admire him further...

Mr. Mysterious in Black suddenly glanced up at me and I swallowed noisily, feeling like a child who'd just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. A ghost of a smile whispered across his disconcertingly sexy lips, and with his eyes locked on mine, he slipped his phone inside his jacket pocket.

Why did I feel so warm all of a sudden?

I averted my eyes and fixed them on the bottle of Grey Goose Vodka sitting on the table, minding its own business.

"The song will end soon," I weakly said, "I agreed only to one dance."

"I don't want a dance, Sadie. I just want to talk."

I found the courage to raise my eyes to his face. "It's Strawberry for you, not Sadie. And I'm not interested in talking."

He leaned towards me, both his palms pressed flat on his thighs, and fixed his hard, implacable gaze on mine. "It's *Sadie* for me. It will always be *Sadie* for me," he claimed, staring unblinkingly at me, searing me with his gaze.

Refusing to be intimidated by him, I stubbornly tried holding his gaze. I really tried. But my will was overridden by his. Aiming for indifference, I waved my hand in a dismissive gesture. "Whatever, weirdo."

He blinked, looking vaguely amused, then snorted. "*Strawberry*," he mocked, shaking his head at the word.

"I'm still not interested in talking. So I think we're done here."

Shooting to my feet, I made to leave but was halted by his heated grip on my wrist. "Please. Sit and talk with me."

His urging hadn't arrested my movement, my body stopped of its own volition at his touch. A touch that jolted through me like a live wire, and felt so...familiar. I glanced down at his hand gripping my wrist, then back at him. Confused.

"Please," he repeated. His voice pleaded but his expression was impassive. How did he manage that?

"Okay," I acquiesced. Because to be honest, I didn't really want to leave—*couldn't* leave after feeling his touch. It clutched me not only on my wrist, but other places as well...deep down within me... awakening vestiges of eradicated emotions. *Who was he?*

"And what do you wanna talk about?" I asked, aiming for casual.

"You."

"Me? What about me?"

"For one, I despise seeing you on that stage. It...It pains me," he confessed.
Why?

"Oh, really? Then why the hell are you here, Mr. Prudery? Is it not to watch half-naked women wrap themselves around a pole?"

His faced scrunched in disgust. "No. I don't do strip clubs. I'm here because of you."

What? What did that even mean? "You're not making any sense. Do you know me from somewhere?"

He ran a hand through his mass of dark hair, clearly deliberating over his response. Hell, that one move had me squirming. Evading my question, he said, "Tico tells me this is your last night."

"Yes," I confirmed.

"And what's your intentions for employment after this?"

"That's for me to worry about."

What *was* I going to do for employment, though? My bills? My responsibilities? Heavens, I didn't want to think about any of that right now. In the hope of temporarily decimating my worries, I reached for the bottle of Grey Goose Vodka to fill my glass. But Strange Guy placed his hand over mine to stop me. And there was that electrifying feeling again. Now I really needed that drink.

"No. No alcohol."

"Look, mister, you don't know me, you don't own me, you can't tell me what to do," I sassed.

"Telling you what to do is not my aim. I've seen the calamities you cause when you drink." He smirked, making jest of my mishap the night before.

Sulking like a teenager, I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. Such was most certainly out of character for me. *Oh, this man...*

He looked amused again. "What do you enjoy doing with your free time?"

His gaze was so penetrating, I couldn't help thinking he was trying to tell me something with his eyes. What did he want me to see?

"Fashion design, reading fiction sap, and listening to Pink."

Turning sideways, he took on a relaxed position by bending one leg up on the banquette seat, resting his elbow on the top edge of the banquette and placing his chin in his palm. "Interesting," he considered. "Do you have a portfolio of your designs?"

"Um, no. I've given up the thought of making it a career. Landing a solid job in the field has proved impossible in this crammed city. Now it's just a pastime, or design on demand."

"So what have you thought about doing career-wise? Well, other than this." He waved his hand toward the stage, then raised his eyebrow at me in the most unique way. It's so far up and perfectly arched. That's...hot. *Smoking hot!*

Trying to focus on the conversation, I cleared my throat. "There's nothing else I'd *love* to do second to designing. But I have to take whatever comes along. Designing is all I know. I acquired my Bachelor's in fashion design two years ago and had thought about going for my Master's, but after not being able get anywhere in the field..." I shrugged. Hard work doesn't always pay off.

He didn't censor me as I'd expect him to. Instead, he offered, "I know a designer. He owes me a great deal of favors. He has a grand fashion house here. I'll talk with him and get you an interview. In the meantime, you can put together a compilation of your designs and create that portfolio."

Why would he do that? He didn't even know me. "Okay Mister, whoever you are, I believe in saving myself—and others'—time. And pain. People tend to lie to themselves even when they know the truth. I don't. You *want* something from me. What is it? Tell me and I'll let you know whether I can grant it or not. The kindness and gratuity isn't necessary. Trust me, it'll save us both a lot of time if we're straightforward with each other."

He did that damned thing with his eyebrow again.

Trying not to squirm, I quickly continued, "You either want a fuck buddy, a relationship, a submissive, or someone to tether you up and spank you red to feed some sick proclivity of yours."

Unamused, he just stared back at me with guarded eyes. My instinct told me he was schooling his irritation.

His serious stare intimidated me to my very core, and I was finding it hard to breathe. I wasn't someone who feared easily, possessing an intrepid, unyielding personality that, at times, could be considered foolhardy, if I was being honest with myself.

But *this man*...

He closed his eyes, inhaled slowly, then exhaled. "Just one thing," he voiced in a quiet tone. "Only to be your friend."

That answer was unexpected and...disappointing?

"Is that too much for you to give, Sadie? Is my answer time-saving enough?" he asked, tilting his head to the side.

Feeling awful, my eyes dropped to my drink on the table. Maybe he was *really* just trying to be kind. Maybe. "No. That's fine. We can be friends."

Could I really just be friends with such a deliciously tempting man?

"Good. So will you allow me to get you the interview?"

"Yes."

"Good," he repeated, appeased. "I'm glad you've come to your senses and decided to leave this God-awful place. I feared I'd have to drag you out of here myself." He murmured the latter more to himself than to me.

I would've questioned that addition, but I'd already come to the conclusion the man was like a giant Rubik's Cube. If we would eventually be friends, as he requested, then I'd stealthily try to decipher him myself because I didn't trust he would be truthful if I asked.

"It was a means to an end."

"An explanation is not needed, Sadie. Judging is Jesus' job, not mine. You've worked for less than a week and already you're quitting. That says plenty."

He uncurled his leg from the banquette and leaned forward to take a sip of his drink, then directed his gaze out to the dance floor. I took the opportunity to devour him with my eyes, good-looking sonuvabitch that he was.

He dropped his head in his hands and began rubbing his temples with his thumbs. Something was wrong. Did he remember I was still beside him?

He spoke before I could ask. "I heard you had an accident and your car was totaled. Do you have a ride home?"

Tico is such a blabber! I'm going slit his freakin' tongue. "Yeah. My friend, Kash, always takes me home."

He nodded, and a minute later he turned his head to face me. His impassivity was superseded by some other expression I couldn't quite discern. Care? Concern? Compassion? "Are you okay otherwise?"

I nodded.

"In *every* way, you are okay?"

I nodded again.

"Are you sure?"

Jeez. What's it to him? I figured it was time to leave. Being around this man was much too muddling. And the fact I desired him prompted me to question my sanity. I nodded yet again in reply then stood up. "I should get going."

His mouth opened as if to object but then he evidently resigned himself. "Yeah. Okay."

Taking out his wallet, he withdrew seven crisp one hundred dollar bills and handed them to me.

"No. This is too much," I protested. I wasn't going to charge him.

"No. It's not. You've been good company. Besides, *seven* is my favorite number at the moment."

Huh? "I haven't even given you a dance. We've been—"

"Just take the goddamn money and don't argue with me," he snapped.

Shell-shocked at his tone, I glowered at him, unable to speak.

He ran a hand through his hair again and softened his expression. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "Look, this is what I want to pay. It's not too much. In fact, it's too little."

"And if I don't take it?"

"Then I'll find some other way to get it to you. You can either take it from *my* hands now or get conned into taking it from someone else's. And by then it will be doubled."

Someone else like Tico, I'm sure.

I glared at this unorthodox male in confusion before capitulating. *What an odd, odd man.* And one who's too damn hot for his own good.

As I made to leave, I realized he hadn't asked for my number. Given his inexplicable familiarity, I considered the possibility he already had it, but I decided not to risk the opportunity of a job interview. "You don't have my number."

He looked up at me through his too-long lashes, and for the first time since I'd been here, he fully smiled. A disarming, I-can-make-you-cum-like-this smile.

Disappointment jabbed at me. It'd been a millennium since I've been so magnetically attracted to anyone. But this man wanted only friendship. And on top of that he scared the living daylight out of me, and confused me to the point where my brain protested.

"I'll give you mine," he said smoothly. He reached inside his jacket pocket for a business card and offered it, but suddenly pulled it back with a frown. "Never mind, just type it in your phone as I say it."

I shook my head at his umpteenth bewildering action for the night, took out my cell phone and transcribed the numbers as he said them. It was when my phone prompted me for a name that I realized I'd been chattering with the man, agreeing to friendship,

accepting favors and lusting, all without knowing his name. "Um, I didn't get your name?"

Smile number two was even more beguiling. He leaned forward with his palms flat on his thighs, just as he'd done earlier, fixed his eyes on mine, and breathed, "Natalio."

And I couldn't, for the life of me, command my eyes to leave his. Why did he say his name like that? Hope-filled and promising. *This man is...I don't know.*

Once again, I couldn't shake the thought he was trying to convey something with his eyes. But what? I shook my head to clear it, entered his name and saved the number. My ears were not oblivious to his heavy sigh as he leaned back on the banquette.

Unable to utter another syllable to this mystifying man, I exited the booth and strolled with purpose through the lights-flashing, music-pumping club. Resisting the urge to look back at the perplexing Mr. Mysterious in Black who wanted only to be my *friend*.

CHAPTER FOUR

I was clothed in white. All-white. And there was a crown of lilies upon my head. I was standing on a river bank, gazing at the cascading waterfall. The sound was heavenly and the skies above me were clear. The weather couldn't have been more temperate. Whiter than snow were the clouds, and the sky was the bluest blue. The water splashed the river bank, asking me to trust it. So I stepped from the bank and into the river. It was soothing, and clear. Very clear. I stared at my feet in the transparent water, then wiggled my toes. Whisperingly, the water responded. It pleaded for my trust, and I yielded. I waded deeper into the cool river water, spread my arms and fell back. The river caught me, assuring me of its virtue, and sent me afloat. Away I floated, dressed in all-white, my arms spread wide...

My eyes flickered open.

Wow, that has got to be the most peaceful dream I've ever had in my entire life. With a residual smile, I swung out of bed. I glanced at my bedside clock and noted it was almost noon.

Just then, the doorbell rang and I knew without doubt it was Kelsy. On a moan, I padded from the bedroom, down the hall, and through the living room. My fingers scarcely turned the doorknob when Kelsy barged in.

"Hey, grumpy," she lilted after she popped her gum.

"Sup, nuisance? I yawned, rubbing my eyes. "Where's Tev?"

She plopped herself on the couch and switched on the television. "Working."

I snorted. "Working or hustling?"

Kelsy shrugged. "Same difference."

Excusing myself, I disappeared to the bathroom to freshen up and popped a Ginkgo biloba pill down my throat. An herbal remedy I took every day in hopes it would help with my memory. You see, my father used to be an abusive man to both my mother and me. And seven years ago, he whacked me in the head with a baseball bat, and it sent me into a two-day coma. I woke up with retrograde amnesia, not remembering

anything prior to the head injury. Although my doctor told me recalling events close to the injury would be rare or unlikely, as years went by pieces of my memory sluggishly came back to me. Doctors reason that it may not be my true memories, and quite possibly my own imaginations.

But don't all doctors think they know everything? Even my own damn memory? What do they have to say about people who just become miraculously healed from terminal illnesses? Doctors aren't *God*.

I knew they were *my* memories, because people from my past confirmed the events I recalled as true and exact.

I plodded back into the living room where Kelsy was sprawled on the sofa watching some crappy MTV reality show. The apartment I shared with my absentee roommate was a luxurious one, and more than I should've been able to afford. But my roommate, Brenda, was another rich gal like Kelsy, and her moneybag parents bought her the place. Because of her mutual friendship with Kelsy, she charged me less than half of the rent price.

The space screamed modern, displaying high-end furniture and appliances. My bedroom was big enough to be divided into two bedrooms for a regular-sized apartment, and my bathroom was half that size. Yep, I slept on a king-size bed, watched a fifty-inch flat-screen television and cooked in a gourmet-style kitchen. One would never believe I was up to my neck in debt with the way I dwelled. Everyone around me was prosperous, except me. I was just a sponger.

Making my way into the kitchen, I opened the cupboards on my side, scanning the contents. My roommate's healthy crap was off-limits, so ramen noodles would have to suffice. A reminder that I seriously needed to go grocery shopping. I set a container of water in the microwave to heat.

"So what're ya plans for today?" Kelsy asked from the living area.

"Staying in and sketching. I need to create a portfolio."

Kelsy turned to look at me, folding her arms on the edge of the sofa and resting her chin on top of them. "What brought that on?"

To my surprise, I blushed. *Uh, what the heck?* "I have this, um, friend who knows some important designer and has offered to get me an interview."

Kelsy raised a neatly shaped brow, her interest piqued. "A friend? Do I know this friend?"

"No. I met him last night."

"Him?"

"Yes, Kelsy. The new acquaintance is a 'him'."

"And do you normally blush like that when you talk about *friends* who are 'hims'?" she asked, her brow still raised. "I've never seen you that flushed when you talk about Tev, and I'd kill you if that happened."

With a roll of my eyes, I confessed. "Okay Kelsy, I admit, I'm attracted. He's frickin' hot. And I mean panty-seat-goes-wet-on-the-spot hot!"

"But?"

"He just wants to be friends," I shrugged.

"Oh." Kelsy frowned. "Odd."

"Yes, *oh* and *odd*." Every darn thing about the man was odd. I wondered if he also had an odd—

The microwave beeped and dragged me from thoughts about to take a stroll down naughty lane. I poured hot water in my ramen cup soup, waited a couple minutes for the noodles to soften, then went to sit beside Kelsy on the couch. She seemed a little distracted.

"You okay, sis?"

She shook her head. "Dad's buying me an apartment. He says it's time for me to wake up, go out, and learn to live on my own. I'm scared."

I assessed my beautiful, dark-haired, fraternal sister whose major worry was living on her own. Mr. Mitchell, her father, was a well-known oil tycoon, her mother was successful in the architectural field, and Kelsy sat lazily on her MBA. She'd obediently gone through college and acquired such only to appease her parents. She was, like me, an only child. And she simply lived in luxury. Whatever she desired was dropped in her palm before she even completed the request.

But her father was right, she needed to step out into the world and endeavor to be her own woman. She was highly educated, intelligent and fluent when needed. But she didn't possess an ambitious spirit. Maybe if she had a sibling to contend with, then she might have been pushed to do something. Being around a hustler—Tevin—and an unemployed, aspiring designer—myself—twenty-four-seven, provided no motivation to do better.

"Your father's right, Kels. You're a spoiled brat."

She folded her arms and pouted. Point made.

"Your daddy won't be around forever. You need to learn to make good decisions and so far, you suck at it—just like me. You have the opportunity to choose. Many people, myself included, don't. I've told you before, and he knows my opinion, Tev is bad for you." I set my cup of soup on the coffee table and took her hands in mine. "Look at what happened to Cali D. I could have been there and I would be dead, too. Learn from my mistake, Kelsy. I love Tev to death but he's not good for you."

Tevin had been my friend and brother for six years. He'd been Cali D's right-hand man when I met him. Because he was around to keep me company when Cali D wasn't, we'd grown extremely close. But the greedy ingrate Cali D was known to be, eventually caused him and Tevin to become enemies. Tevin and I retained our growing friendship, nevertheless.

One day while he was giving me a lift from college, we saw this bodacious beauty on the roadside looking pissed and annoyed that her CLK tire was flat. Tevin pulled over to her aid, and for them, it was love at first sight. They were instantly drawn to each other and became inseparable. Kelsy and I grew to become best friends.

Kelsy stared at me with wet, green eyes, and she swung her arms around me. "I know. I know he's bad. But I love him too much to give him up. I worry a lot that something might happen, like what happened to Cali D. But I just can't...I *love* Tev, Sadie."

"I know you do. Let's just invoke a divine intervention for him and hope his road to Damascus is near," I soothed, knowing that was next to impossible. Tevin had made it clear a zillion times he wanted no other life. There are some bad guys who wanted desperately to be good, and some bad guys who're right where they wanna be.

"Will you move in with me when I get the apartment?" Kelsy asked. "Gratis. No rent."

I laughed. "I'll think about it. I'm already disgusted with you and Tev here tongue bathing each other around the clock. Living with it? Chronic gagging."

"Let's go shopping. I need to lift my spirits." She wiped the tears from her brilliant green eyes.

Shopping. Yes, I needed fabrics and a few apparatuses to start working on my portfolio. "Sure."

Loaded with shopping bags, we lugged our tired asses back into the apartment. I'd forgotten how draining shopping with Kelsy could be. "Did you really need to get all that stuff?"

"Yes," she chirped. "*Now* I'm happy."

Flopping down on the sofa in exhaustion, I jerked when my cell phone vibrated. The number wasn't one I recognized.

"Yeah?"

"I knew I couldn't trust you to call me," a deep, melodic voice said on the other end with no preamble whatsoever. I didn't recognize the voice either.

"Uh, I'm sorry, who is this?" *Please say "Natalio, from the club".*

"It's Devon. I met you at the coffee shop yesterday? You told me you'd call, but you didn't."

Hope balloon deflated.

It was that handsome guy from Starbucks. I'd forgotten all about him. "How did you get my number? I didn't give it to you."

"I gave it to myself," he replied simply.

"Huh?"

"It's an old trick, Sadie. When I entered my number into your phone, I rang it. So, yeah, that's how I got it. I had a feeling you wouldn't call and I didn't want to lose contact with you."

"Oh," I said, wondering how I'd never heard of that trick before. How presumptuous, though.

"Sadie," he said in all seriousness. "I really like you and I would love to see you again. Is that possible? Please, don't give me an automatic no. Think about it."

"You tricked me into getting my number. How did you know I wouldn't tell you to fuck off?"

"Because you seem too sweet for that. And your lips are much too beautiful to do abominable things like swearing."

But I just did, you idiot.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Devon." This guy had some of the most rinsed-out, clichéd lines. No one had ever taught him how to woo a woman?

He chuckled. "I'm an aging squirrel and you're a tough nut to crack. Let me try again." He cleared his throat. "Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm deeply attracted to you, but you think I'm full of...poo?"

A smile crawled onto my face as I shook my head. This guy...

"I can sense you smiling on the other end," he said in a sing-song tone. "So how did I do? Well enough get a date with you?"

"Yeah," I agreed. I had no plans beyond sketching, and foreseeing a solitary evening, I needed a diversion from the persistent thoughts of Natalio.

"How about dinner this evening?" he suggested.

"Will it be at some fancy restaurant?"

"Um, yes."

What was it with guys always trying to be impressive, being pretentiously romantic? Only to turn out to be complete dick-heads in the end.

"Then no."

He was silent for a moment. "Where would you like to go?"

"Somewhere ordinary. A nice chill spot would be good."

"Okay. I know just the place. I'll pick you up at eight?"

"Sure. I'll text you my address."

I ended the call, smiling.

"Who was that?" the inquisitive Kelsy asked as she tested her new wild-cherry lip gloss, puckering her lips in the compact mirror.

"Some handsome guy who's interested in being more than just *friends*." My answer was a tad bitter, and I realized it was because I was still seething at being rebuffed by Mr. Mysterious in Black.

Devon and I were seated in the far corner of a swanky chill bar. Designed in stainless steel and glass with neon blue lights and white seating, it exuded a luxurious ambience. At the last minute, I'd changed from my first choice of casual jeans and tank top to a purple close-fitting V-neck dress. And it was a good thing I did, or I would've been sorely underdressed for this outing.

Devon commented repeatedly on my beauty, my legs and what I wore. Nice. But for some reason, his compliments didn't bolster my confidence.

I sipped on Blue Label and Coke, while he sipped Crown Royal on the rocks. As the evening progressed, I learned Devon Morris was single with no kids and owned a construction company. Everything else was just boring, boring, boring, mundane banalities, while I responded to his monotonous chatter with the occasional "Hmm," "Really?" "Impressive", "Ah, I get it", "Interesting". I resisted succumbing to my boredom twitches—which were inspecting my nails or rubbing my neck.

Devon was unquestionably handsome, sweet and flattering. The open-the-door and pull-your-chair-out kind of guy. He embodied all the qualities a woman would tick the box for in a man. But for me, he was...innocuous. Nothing beyond his physical appearance attracted or intrigued me.

He would ask me out again, and of course I would agree. I'd try again because the problem might not be him. At this point in my crappy life, I recognized I was distracted on all levels.

"Oh man," I heard Devon say, dragging me from...wherever I'd drifted off to. "Seems this wasn't the best to place to chill this evening, after all."

"What?" I asked, belatedly noticing the noise level in the bar had turned up.

Devon nodded toward the entrance, where a number of men clad in biker wear and towing scantily-dressed women along poured in. "There was a biker fest down south today. For the affluent. Should've guessed here would be the after spot on their way back."

"So what's wrong with them hanging out here? They all look like grown, responsible men to me." And frankly, I was glad for the sudden change of air.

"Nothing. I just don't—" he stopped. "If you're comfortable, then it's fine."

Huh? Why would he think I'd be uncomfortable?

Devon launched into a story about when he was in college and once rode bikes. I was *actually* enjoying it, until...

There he was, Mr. Mysterious in Black, leaning at the bar, dressed in his favorite shade. Black boots, black jeans, black T-shirt and black biker jacket. His raven hair was messy and strewn about his forehead.

My mouth hanged infinitesimally.

Oh. My. God.

If there wasn't a chair already beneath me, I'd swoon. *Natalio was Y-U-M-M-Y*. My heart flapped around in my chest like a headless chicken.

All his peers were laughing and swigging beers, but he looked distracted. A scantily-dressed blond was clinging onto his bicep, yet he seemed to barely notice she was there.

This man...

How do I align the man I spoke with last night to the man who I now saw before me? The man last night was hot, yes, but business-like, hair neatly combed hot. The man I'm ogling now was biker-boy, rock-star hot; sending electric waves through my veins at the mere sight of him.

Dear Lord, help me get rid of this insane lust.

"Sadie?" Devon's voice pulled me from my inappropriate ogling.

I blinked at him, unable to speak just yet. My mouth was lacking moisture and warm heat settled between my thighs.

"You know him?" Devon asked, eying me curiously.

"Know who?"

"The guy you were gawking at."

Busted.

"Uh, no. He just looks familiar."

He glanced over to where Natalio lounged casually by the bar, exuding sexiness, evoking raw, carnal desire, and Devon's jaw tensed while he drummed his fingers on the table. What's *his* problem?

"You look uncomfortable. Would you like to go?" he asked suddenly.

This time I agreed without hesitation. Not because I was uncomfortable, but because I was suddenly wet and needy and impatient to get home and pleasure myself with fantasies of Natalio above me, on me, kissing me, touching me, tasting me...

Devon rose and held out his hand. I placed my hand in his and we walked rather hastily towards the exit. I ducked my head and drew up my shoulders, hoping Natalio wouldn't spot me.

"Sadie?" The stern, unmistakable voice called from behind.

I winced at being caught and turned to see the walking temptation of a man that was Natalio. "Ah, hi."

"I thought that was you," he said. His tone was warm, but his expression not so much. Again I wondered, how did he do that?

"We were just leaving," I rushed out. "Oh, this is Devon." I gestured to Devon who was staring past Natalio's head, not at him.

Natalio glanced at Devon, and did a double take. His eyes widened momentarily, his mouth slightly hanged, and if I wasn't mistaken, he was shocked. A pissed-off kind of shock.

He caught himself and resumed his previous stance, only now the warmth had vanished. He nodded at Devon, his sapphire-blue eyes glacial. "Devon."

Finally, I got to see his eyes!

Devon reciprocated, but his eyes were anywhere except on Natalio. "Nelson."

Nelson? So they knew each other?

The scantily-dressed blond was back by Natalio's side. She rested her chin on his shoulder, but he jerked back his shoulder and shot her a cold stare. "Hey, you don't see me talking here? Fall back."

The blond bit her plush, pink lips and let her hand slide leisurely down his arm, before letting out a dramatic sigh and sashaying back to where the biker group lounged.

"Er, we're heading out now. I'll see you around sometime," I said. If I stood in front of this steaming man any longer, I would self-combust.

"You mean you'll call me," he stated. It was not a question.

I smiled, hesitantly. "Yeah. I'll call you."

He nodded. But he wasn't looking at me. He was glowering death rays at Devon—whose eyes continued to dart everywhere in the room, but never at Natalio.

I tugged at Devon's rigid arm and he looked down at me with a nervous smile, then we were out of that building.

We walked in silence to the parking lot. My silence was a consequence of that über-awkward run in with Natalio. And Devon's silence...of that I wasn't sure. There was definitely something going on between him and Natalio. But I was much too hot and bothered to attempt asking questions. My reliance rested heavily on the air-conditioning in Devon's Porsche to calm me.

"So, you know Natalio?" I asked a few minutes after we'd entered his car and were out of the parking lot.

"Knew. And apparently you do, too." His tone was soft, holding no sarcasm, no chastising.

"I did say he looked familiar."

"Familiar. From where?" I detected worry from him. Angst even. What the hell was he so anxious about?

"In a club. Seen him there a few times. We spoke once and exchanged digits."

"Oh. Okay." Devon breathed something akin to a sigh of relief and his body visibly relaxed. "Anyway, I completely dominated our conversation earlier and you never finished telling me about your friends. Kelsy and Tevin? I get those names right?"

"Yeah." I laughed, something forced. "Your memory's sharp."

"So, ah, how close are you and Tevin? Like sister and brother close or just casual friends close?"

That's a weird question. "Sister and brother close."

"That means he doesn't hide shit from you, right?"

What's with these odd questions? And why so focused on Tevin? "Everyone hides shit from others. It doesn't matter how close two people may seem. Husbands and wives hide shit from each other. Even the pastor *tries* to hide shit from God."

Devon glanced at me with a look that said he knew I was being a smart-ass. But whatever, his questions were making me suspicious. I quickly launched a question before he could. "And how do you know Natalio?"

He shifted rather uneasily in his seat. "An old college friend."

Lie. I could feel it. They weren't college buddies. But I decided to cease my investigation. I hadn't a care if Devon and Natalio were rivals or...whatever.

I was only certain of one thing: I wanted Natalio in a way I've never wanted anyone before. My body sizzled at the thought of him. I wanted Natalio to want me, too. To want to be more than *friends*.

CHAPTER FIVE

I worried my lip anxiously as I paced around my living room. Natalio's name was selected on my phone and my thumb hovered over the call button. Nervousness washed me. But I *needed* that job, so I needed to get my act together, put lust aside and focus on what was important. Taking a deep breath, I sent off the call. His phone rang out until his voicemail chipped in.

I didn't leave a message, but tried again. This time he answered on the third ring in the briefest of tones, "Speak."

"Natalio?"

"You called me. Get to it."

Sheesh. Was he always this grumpy? "Um, it's Sadie..."

Need I say more? He'd know exactly why I was calling, right?

"Sadie," he said in a softer, less annoyed tone. "I thought you'd changed your mind."

"No, I didn't. I didn't want to call over the weekend... I just figured a better time to call about this, uh, interview would be a weekday. "

"Using the terms *weekdays* and *weekends* are for teenagers and loafers. I work whenever there is work to be done and I sport whenever my life lends leisure time. And the people I associate with are the same. It's not necessary for me to know what day of the week it is. I rise in the mornings, thanking God I'm alive, and I live. Doing what's to be done. So next time, don't time a phone call, okay? Especially if it's, as it is in this case, about *your* future."

This man...

It's true that I prefer men who are a bit off-kilter, but Natalio was...on a whole other level. He wasn't normal. And the more he baffled me, the more I wanted him. Strange.

"I'd do well to remember that," I replied.

Natalio shot straight to the point in a lucid, no-nonsense tone. "He wants you to intern, but that doesn't pay the bills, does it? He owes me too much to have my agreement on that. In the interview, it's your job to let him know who you are, your competence in the field, your versatility, your fashion sense, etcetera, etcetera. He's not a man of formality, and he gets bored easily. So be yourself. Be candid. Do that, and I'm pretty sure you'll nail a good position."

Nerves settling in, I swallowed. "Who's this designer we're talking about?"

"Geo Lee."

Geo Lee?! *The* world-renowned Geo Lee? *The* most famous designer in Los Angeles? "You're taking me to see *Geo Lee*?" I shrieked.

He was silent on the other end. Damn me and my childish hormones. "Yes," he dragged out, as if put off by my excitement.

Not wanting to embarrass myself further, I tried for nonchalance. "Okay. Cool. Thanks."

"You're most welcome, Sadie," he said smoothly, and I could sense him smiling. "Now let's talk time. What're your plans for today?"

"The unemployed don't usually have 'plans' for the days. They just float."

The ensuing silence indicated he didn't find me amusing. "Got a meeting to attend, ah, right about now. I'll call Geo and set up a meeting for—hang on." There was shuffling in the background, and I waited with bated breath, hardly believing he was scheduling me an interview with Geo goddamn Lee.

Natalio was back. "Is two o'clock good for you?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Good. I'll pick you up forty minutes before then. See you soon."

He ended the call and I realized he didn't even give me a chance to give him my address. Pretty sure he might already have it, considering his peculiarity, but I texted it to him anyway, not chancing a miss out on that *humungous* opportunity. And the biggest opportunity of all: seeing Natalio again.

At 1:19pm, I was walking rather timidly towards the white BMW X6 sitting at the curb outside my apartment. I purposely dressed in an all-black outfit. A black pencil

skirt, a black silk shirt tucked in, and my black Geo Lee pumps proclaimed me ready for the interview. After laboring to comb my twenty-six inches of wild curls, I managed only to tie it back, guising some semblance of a chignon.

Natalio hopped out of his SUV and walked composedly to the passenger side, holding the door open for me. He was engaged in deep conversation on his phone yet he didn't seem distracted in any way. He was in control, and seemed to excel at multi-tasking.

I couldn't help the stupid smile on my face as I walked toward him, eyes locked on his. He flashed me a quick smile of his own as I entered the vehicle. Closing the door, he rounded to the driver's side.

"Uncle Thello, I do comprehend, and I am honored. But I'm just one man, I can't live in two places at once. Especially a distant country like Japan...Well, there's ample time to come up with ideas to conduct business from here. I can visit next month and we can explore our options...For the love of God, Uncle Thello, you're not gonna die anytime soon. This conversation is irrelevant right now..."

Japan? That's too far away. *Oh, Natalio, please don't move there.*

Pfft. Hopeless was the perfect word to describe me right now. I sat drooling like a teenager over a man who wanted only friendship. Which suddenly had me wondering, was he pitying me? Did he think of me as some poor, lost soul who needed rescuing? I *was* lost. But I didn't need his pity. I needed *him*—carnally.

Natalio wrapped up his call and shifted in his seat to face me. He gave me a relaxed, life's-peachy smile. Teeth impeccably white, blue eyes bright. The smile was a tad surprising, as I was expecting him to be all weird and petulant as he'd been in our previous encounter. "Hi."

"Hi," I echoed.

"You look...lovely."

And, like a girl, I blushed. I wasn't the blushing type, but damn, those eyes on me made me overly self-conscious. "Thanks," I acknowledged, hoping I wasn't the color of the blood beneath my skin.

His penetrating eyes were a brighter blue than they'd been last Friday at the bar, and they held me captive; I just couldn't look away.

In a velvety inflect, he caressed me with another compliment. "I like your hair like this. You have a gracefully long neck, and this style shows it off. Its clean smoothness..."

I was positive the color of my cheeks was crimson this time. His effect on me was profound.

"Are friends supposed to say stuff like that to each other?" I asked, hoping he would stop staring at me with those probing, intense eyes. It was what I wanted, of course. I liked him. *Desired* him. But I had to keep my wits about me for the impending interview. And at the moment, I was warm, too warm, fighting a burning urge to lunge myself at him.

"Why not?"

"Obviously, because it's inappropriate."

"I compliment my friends all the time and they don't think it's inappropriate. It is, in fact, polite. And for a woman, requisite."

"You keep a lot of female friends?" A tinge of jealousy pricked at me.

His lips twisted as if suppressing a smile. He turned in his seat, shifted the gear, and pulled away from the curb. "No. Not really."

I furtively admired his profile. His hair was tousled as usual, and I wondered briefly what he'd look like post-coital. He was unquestionably hot, powerful and magnetizing, making it impossible to be unaffected by him, impossible to resist the *pull*. And the whole deal of being in black all the time just enhanced all that, throwing "dangerous" and "enigmatic" into the mix.

Humor and curiosity edged his voice when he asked, "Is your all-outfit a coincidence today?"

Shit, I've been found out. "Hardly," I mumbled. "Do you always wear black?"

"For the past seven years, yes." By the sudden seriousness of his voice, I knew I was tip-toeing around landmines with him.

"Why?" I prodded, ignoring his sudden change of mood.

He shot me a quick side glance. "Because I'm mourning."

"Mourning?"—For seven years?—"Who or what?"

"Something immensely precious to me."

"You won't tell me?"

"No."

"Okay."

When he spoke again, his voice was laced with hope. "Whenever it is redeemed, I'll switch to wearing white. Till death."

"So, what you've lost, it's recoverable?"

"I have my hopes."

Who or what could this beautiful man be mourning for seven long years? "I do hope it's recovered. I don't think it's wholesome for anyone to be mourning that long."

"What I've lost is worth being mourned a lifetime." His voice fell lower than a whisper and I struggled to hear him. "I was young and foolish. My hands were greasy, and it slipped from me."

When I glanced over at him, he somehow seemed smaller, leaning on the door and steering the X6 loosely with one hand. "It's *so* close, you know. But still so far away."

Not knowing how to respond to that, I only stare at him. He was so lost in thought, I wondered if he remembered I was still there, beside him. It was as if he were talking more to himself than to me. And I felt incompetent and useless, because I didn't know what to say to console him.

Was this how I'd be if my mom should die? I shuddered at the thought.

Natalio pulled up to the curb of Geo Lee's Fashion House HQ a couple minutes of heavy quietness later. Angst flurried in again.

With a mild harrumph, he was out of the dark, mourning mode and back to being composed and impassive.

This man...

"Geo's expecting you. Just give the receptionist your name and she'll inform you where to go from there." All business again.

"You're not coming in?"

"No. Have some errands to run. I'll be back before you're through."

I nodded and clambered from the X6.

"Sadie."

I spun around at his call.

His mouth opened, then closed. The process repeated before he finally said, "Break a leg."

It was obvious that wasn't what he wanted to say, but I smiled and replied, "Thank you, Natalio."

He squeezed his eyes shut and inhaled deeply when I said his name. What should I make of this man?

Closing the door, I headed towards the building, shaking my head in thought. Once again I was left mystified by Mr. Mysterious in Black.

I'd walked into heaven. The atmosphere gripped me by the lapels and tugged me in, telling me this was where I belonged. The walls, the surfaces, the ceilings were all-white. The art on the walls and the sparse furniture were, contrastingly, bright colors. A neon green, serpentine sofa sat dominantly in the middle of the room. Colors. A mixture of really bright colors everywhere. Yeppers, I was in my zone.

I'd never seen Geo Lee before, just his designs. He was huge in the fashion industry and his name rang constantly. I'd always liked his designs, but his products demanded an extortionate amount of money. The Geo Lee heels I rocked at the moment were a much-appreciated birthday gift from Kelsy.

After giving my name to the gauche receptionist who was, for some reason, very discourteous, I followed instructions and was whisked to the third floor. The elevator doors opened and I headed to the office of Mr. Geo Lee.

Again, the walls and surfaces were all-white, contrasted with brightly colored squares, circles, triangles and rectangles scattered about the walls in odd positions. The ceiling was black with bright pink circle disks and neon green light glowing around the edges.

And I thought / liked colors. Compared to this guy, I was neophyte in the world of colors.

Geo Lee was like a walking cotton candy and was gayer than a rose-pink cock. Dressed in colorful sneakers, too-tight lime-green pants and a pink T-shirt with a lime-green scarf, he had short, ashy blonde hair with streaks of purple at the front and a smirk that seemed intrinsic. Intellect told me he was no older than thirty.

"Miss Francé!" Geo Lee said spiritedly in a curly voice while pointing to my shoes. "If you fawningly wore those shoes to flatter me, then guess what?"

I stared at him, blank, unsure how to respond to such an assumption.

"It's working!" he laughed out. "I like being flattered. But your outfit is way too gloomy. I see Mr. Nelson is rubbing off on you."

"I was told to dress for an *interview*. Had I known you and I had symmetric tastes, as far as colors and textures go, then I guarantee I would've made quite an impression. Mostly, I wear my own designs. Singular designs in colors the average person would *not* choose."

He watched me with an expression signifying, "I've heard it all before". Probably thinking I was bluffing. This made me glad I'd had time to complete my portfolio and also brought along pieces I'd made myself.

My mother was once a designer's assistant at a small company, and I've been doing this since my eyes were at her knees. It's the one thing I was confident about, and I didn't need compliments to be assured I was good at it. I knew my trade. Inside-out.

Geo Lee compressed his lips and stuck his hand out, demanding I prove it. "Only for Nelson," he grumbled. "He's such a hard ass."

I handed my sketches over to him and wondered to myself if '*hard ass*' had the same connotation in the heterosexual world as it did in the homosexual world. Because the way Geo Lee said "hard ass" was as if he was indicating Natalio's ass was hard to get—or hard to enter? I shook my head at the silly, irrelevant thought.

Hmm, Natalio *could* be gay. He said he didn't do strip clubs and he only wanted to be my friend. Only gay men shy away from strip clubs and keep female *friends*, don't they? Plus, he was freakishly good-looking.

The thought made me weary. I could be crushing on a gay man. Boo.

I watched Geo Lee's eyes sparkle as he flipped through my designs. And I knew. I knew I'd caged him.

CHAPTER SIX

"Judging by that grin on your face, I'll go ahead and assume all went well," Natalio said, once I entered his car after my interview with Geo Lee.

My grin widened. "Assistant. I start next week." I almost squealed. "He loves my love of colors and *all* my designs."

"Ah. Forgot that dude's like a freakin' box of Crayolas." He shook his head. "You okay with being his assistant?"

"Natalio, I'll be working for *Geo Lee*. Of course I'm okay with that. Besides, I only have my Bachelor's. Master holders are the ones who can afford to be demanding."

"I can demand for you," he offered.

"No. It's okay, really. I've already jumped steps with your help. If I'm gonna do this, I want to work and prove myself. Not just be handed some high position because I know someone who knows someone."

"It's your call."

"Thank you so much for this, Natalio."

"No prob. You hungry?"

"Not really."

"Let me take you to get something to eat," he insisted.

"Okay."

Minutes later, Natalio was leading me to a rooftop restaurant called 'Eat N' Tell'. The atmosphere was casual and already I liked Natalio's choice of chill spots. No over the top, spit and shine restaurant.

He chose a table next to the margin of the building, pulling out my chair for me to sit. Despite my fear of heights, I peered over the edge which resulted in me jolting back immediately.

"Don't look down," Natalio teased.

"Hard not to look down when I'm sitting at the edge of the roof," I replied, waiting for my heartbeat to return to its regular rhythm.

His brows furrowed. "You want to sit elsewhere?"

"No, it's okay. This is a good way to challenge my fear of heights."

A waiter appeared, filling our glasses with water, wishing us a good evening and handed us the menu before retreating. Sipping my water, I disregarded the menu because I only hungered for one thing. Make that *two* things...

"They serve pizza here?"

"Yeah. That's what you want?"

I smiled sheepishly. "Pepperoni."

Natalio closed his menu, his eyes lingering leeringly on my neck. "Wanna share? We could order a large."

Unable to speak past the newly formed lump in my throat, I nodded. I couldn't help the somatic heat when he looked at me like that. Was he freaking gay or not?

"Good." He signaled for the waiter.

When the waiter appeared, I spoke quickly before Natalio, ordering pepperoni pizza with pineapple and ham topping. Along with a bottle of Merlot. I was testing his reaction to this, because he always tried to be in control. But he didn't protest or seem to care. He merely smiled at me. *Ugh, so unpredictable.*

Once the waiter disappeared, he asked, "You work out?"

Turning down the corners of my mouth, I shook my head.

"So how do you stay fit after eating junk like that?"

"I run...sometimes."

"I don't think running *sometimes* contributes to that body you have." His eyes fell to my neck again.

"Other activities help," I whispered.

"Oh?"

I nodded.

"You gonna tell me what those activities are?" he asked, doing that panty-dropping thing with his eyebrow. Did he do it on purpose, knowing the effect it had on women, or was it an unconscious habit?

To distract myself, I took a chance and stared over the roof. "Sex. Hard sex. Really, *really* hard sex."

Keeping my eyes down to the diminutives of bustling people and trafficking vehicles, I waited for a reaction. But he didn't reply. A minute of silence ensued and I wondered how on earth I was managing to peer down this high building without fright. Maybe it's because I knew the expression on Natalio's face might be more frightening?

The waiter reappeared with the wine and I waited in discomfort as he opened it and filled our glasses. Natalio's eyes were hot on me, but I refused to look his way because of the tension radiating from him. What did I say wrong? Maybe he *was* gay and didn't like the idea of a man and woman having sex?

The waiter left again and Natalio remained silent still, except for the tapping of his index finger on the edge of the table.

This man had a serious problem and I was getting very tired of his weird attitudes. Hopefully the ludicrous lust I had toward him would die. And soon.

"Do you have a problem with sex?" I blurted.

His gaze was sulfurous, his expression implacable, when he replied, "It's not the sex. It's with whom."

What? That was verification enough that this man was gay. I'd convinced myself I was over thinking things and that he actually wasn't. Have even mistaken his politeness for lust. But that just about summed it up. He didn't do strips clubs, he wanted to be friends with a female stranger (who's neither old nor ugly), he had done and is owed favors by one of the gayest men I'd ever met—who actually referred to him as a 'hard ass'—and he abhors the idea of "doing it" with the opposite sex.

Uh huh, he was definitely gay.

With a noisy sigh, I slumped back in my chair. Well, maybe now I could stop being so nervous and flushed around him. My hopes had been crushed. Guess I'd just have to settle for lusting at what I couldn't have.

"You okay?" he asked. He seemed to have wandered back from wherever he'd dallied off to in his mind.

"Oh, I'm just fine," I said, a bit too dramatic. "Awesome, actually."

"Are you sure?" He did that damned eyebrow thing again. Even with my new discoveries—or rather, assumptions—I was surprised it still had the same effect on me.

"Yep," I replied after taking a huge gulp of my wine. A strenuous effort trying to conceal my irritation and disappointment.

Pizza was served.

"So your name's Natalio Nelson?" I asked around a mouth full of pizza. Decency and coyness were out the window.

He eyed me curiously before answering. "Yes. Sounds familiar to you?"

"Nope," I replied on another bite. "Both Devon and Geo Lee referred to you as 'Nelson', so I was wondering if that was your surname or an alias."

I watched as his jaw clenched at the mention of Devon. Hmm, I wondered if Devon was an ex of his. Could they be bisexual? I recalled Natalio being momentarily shocked to see Devon with me, and Devon had looked like he'd been caught with his dick in a monkey's mouth. I knew there was something weird going on with them at the bar, and Devon had told that obvious lie about being old college friends. Yeah, old *buddies* alright.

Emptying my glass of wine in one go, I immediately replenished it.

"GLFH is a thirty minute drive from your apartment. How do you plan on getting to work?"

"Cab, bus, whatever," I mumbled.

"Sadie, you sure you're okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Just annoyed and angry this hot hunk of a man, who I'd daydreamed about all weekend, hoisting me, and taking me in myriads of positions, was freaking gay. *No, I'm not okay!*

"That'll be your last glass of wine," he told me.

Uh, what? "Who are you to say?"

I jerked back with wide eyes as Natalio's fist slammed down onto the table, sending the cutleries into an inharmonious jiggle. "Will you stop acting like this and tell me what the hell is bothering you!"

Whoa. That was unexpected. His sapphire eyes were broodingly ablaze, and, yeah, I was scared. When I glanced around the restaurant, I noticed we'd drawn unwanted

attention. But Natalio's eyes were hot on me, I could almost feel the heat of his burning glare.

"Was that necessary?" I hissed through clenched teeth. I wouldn't let him know I was afraid of him. I'd learned how to hide my fears from my run-ins with Cali D.

Natalio gritted his teeth and glared at me. Why was this man so angry? He seemed to get ticked off at the drop of a hat. Leaning back in his chair, he uncurled his fists. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "You keep saying you're okay when I know you're not. And I want to know what bothers you, *all* that bothers you. I will try everything in my power to fix it."

There's no way to fix it, Natalio. You can turn a straight man gay but you can't turn a gay man straight.

"You can't," I told him.

He leaned in, his eyes begged. "Tell me. Whatever it is. I'll try my best to fix it. If I can't, I'll find someone for you who can."

I snorted. "What, are you supposed to be my savior or something?"

"If you allow me to. Yes." His intense blue gaze locked on mine. The man was truly serious.

"But why? You don't even know me."

He stared at me a moment longer before he closed his eyes. "I know you more than you think, Sadie."

"How? I don't understand." I was bewildered beyond all borders.

Natalio sighed, opened his eyes, leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his silky, raven hair. "Please. Just let me be your friend."

"I thought I already agreed to that." I couldn't understand him. Was he schizophrenic? Bipolar? Did I really want to be friends with this man? Dismantled, that's what he was.

"Well, friends tell each other what bothers them. And you're not communicating with me. It angers me."

Jeez dude, you need to get your emotions in order.

"You get angry just like that?" I asked, perplexed by this troubled man. "You almost always seem so...tense. Why are you so out of sorts?"

He gave a brief shake of his head. "Ignore it. It's a dysfunction."

"Have you tried anger management?"

"Yes."

"Effective?"

"Hardly."

"You don't go all crazy and hurt people brutally on impulse, do you?"

"Christ, no. Am I that frightening?"

"No," I said quickly. "Just curious."

A couple of times it crossed my mind that he was someone dangerous, but Tico said he knew him well. And I'm pretty sure Tico would've warned me about any red flags. Devon also knew him, as did world-renowned Geo Lee. So I guess, for now, I could do away with my qualms of him being someone sinister.

"Okay. I'll be sure to talk to you whenever I have worries," I placated. "I promise."

"And you promise to allow me to help with them, too?"

"Yes, I promise." Why did he insist on helping me? Did I look destitute and desperate?

He stared at me expectantly as he bit into a slice of pizza.

"What?"

"I'm waiting for you to tell me what was bothering you just now."

Should I ask him? That's very personal, isn't it? It might just piss him off; especially if he isn't gay. Not now. Some other time when he wasn't so guarded.

"Nothing I want to talk about right now. I'll tell you some other time. I promise."

He blew out an exasperated breath. "Okay. Fine. We don't have to talk about it now. But know I'll be asking you again and again until you tell me."

I nodded. Christ, what persistence.

"Now back to you and transportation," he started in his usual unrevealing tone. Wiping the corners of his mouth with a napkin before taking a sip of his wine, he continued, "I'll have a car dropped by your apartment later. One less thing to worry about."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Are you asking me if I'd like to borrow your car or are you telling me?"

"I'm telling you," he simplified.

"And don't I get to say if I want to be loaned your car or not?"

"Transportation is a bother right now and I have the solution."

"Yes, but this can be fixed easily with *cab fare*. Transportation is no bother," I insisted, my voice raising. What the hell's with wrong this man?

"With your new job, a car is essential," he said *very* quietly. That was unexpected. Maybe he was trying to control himself from another outburst?

He was right, though. A car was definitely essential. But I didn't want him loaning me a car. I could rent one. Or use one of Tev's—and pray I never got pulled over by the cops.

"I don't want your car."

"It would be yours. Not mine. It's not a loan. You promised to let me help you, Sadie." His tone was accusatory.

"Yes, but this is crazy, Natalio. I don't know why you're doing all of this. You've already helped me land me a job. Thank you. That's good enough. It is not normal meeting a man in a strip club of all places, who tells me he's only there because of me, then later tells me he knows me more than I think—when I don't see how he could because I've never met him before." I paused for air. "Do you not see how weird this is? Do you not expect me to be suspicious of you?" I stopped at a sudden thought and narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you a friend of his? Did Cali D ask you to look out for me if something should happen to him?"

That would explain a heck of a lot.

He scoffed. "No."

"I don't believe you," I said, folding my arms and sitting back.

"Reason?"

"Because you didn't inquire *who* Cali D was."

He opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. "I told you, I know more about you than you think. And I know your ex Cali D. But I'm in no way associated with him. Believe me."

"What do you know about me? *How* do you know about me?"

"For the former, everything. For the latter, you'll know soon." He remained poker-faced and I couldn't read through his tone or his expression.

"I'm afraid to trust you," I whispered.

He leaned across the table and took my hands in his. I successfully didn't simp at the contact. "I understand why you would find it hard to do so. But trust that I would

never do anything to harm you. I just want to make you happy. You haven't been for a while."

How did he know? Why wouldn't he tell me how he knew about me? Why was he so passionate about making me happy? And why did he refuse to answer any of my questions?

"What can I do to make you trust me?" he asked. "I want to earn your trust."

"Tell me what you're holding back."

"I will. But not now. Besides, I'm ninety percent sure you'll unearth it yourself before I have to." He swallowed, his eyes growing soft. "I'm hoping you do. My faith is strong..."

"You'd prefer I find out on my own instead of you telling me?" I asked in surprise.

He nodded.

That surely had to be the most backward thing I'd ever heard.

"Okay." Resigning myself, I slumped back into my chair. There was so little I knew about this man and yet he insisted on being my savior.

"If I asked you to unbutton your shirt, would you do it?" I was exhausted from trying to figure the man out.

He released my hands and sat back. "Why would you ask me to do that?"

"Just curious."

He raised his brow, in that sexy way.

"I was wondering if I'd find an S on your chest."

Natalio grinned. Wow, I liked that. He looked young, earthly and mortal with his features relaxed. There was an unidentifiable nagging in the back of my mind about his familiarity. His boyish grin reminded me of someone. And oddly enough, I couldn't seem to remember who. How could he remind me of someone I didn't remember? Was that even possible? Yeah, with my retrograde amnesia, I suppose so.

"Depends on what you want the S to mean. Superman, Savior...Sadie." He gazed longingly at me with warm blue eyes and bit down on his lower lip. "I prefer the latter, though."

All gay thoughts were decimated from my mind when I blushed. Gay men didn't look at women like *that*.

"I can be anything you want, Sadie. For you. I can't know what you want unless you tell me," he said in a soft voice. His gaze lingered on my neck again, then to my cleavage. *Sweet Jesus...*

Shifting in my seat, I quickly changed the subject. "What kind of work do you do?" That question had been lolling around in my head for a while.

He stilled, eyeing me strangely. "I sell stuff."

"You sell stuff? Is that even a job description?" That had to be the most unintelligible remark he'd made since I'd met him. What the hell kind of answer is 'I sell stuff'? Unless...unless he was a drug dealer. Oh no, not again.

"Yes, it is."

"White stuff?"

"No. I told you, I'm not associated with your deceased. Neither am I like him."

"Then what do you sell?"

"Electronics. Appliances. All that junk." He shrugged. "Why?"

"Because I barely know you. And you want to move heaven and earth for me. I need to know more about my savior."

"I'm not important. You are," he said. "There's nothing fascinating or interesting about me or my life. Well, nothing has been for the last seven years..."

"You're important to me because you're helping me." Why did he not want to talk about himself? Now I was overcurious. "Are you sure you aren't a drug dealer?"

His expression grew grave. "Do I look like a goddamn drug dealer?"

"No," I answered in truth. "But it would explain why you don't want to talk about your job."

"I just don't want to talk about my job right now. It already consumes almost all of my time. I'm enjoying my pizza and *you*. Can't I just do that?" He vibrated with irritation. "I allowed you to evade talking about whatever was bothering you earlier. Do the same for me."

"Okay. Fine. We don't have to talk about it now. But be sure I'll be asking you again and again until you tell me," I mocked, throwing his earlier words right back at him.

That won me another grin. And there was that nagging again. When he grinned like that, all boyish and relaxed, he looked vaguely familiar.

"Tell me about your family," I pressed. "Any brothers? Sisters? Wife? Children? Pets?" *Please don't have a wife or children.*

"I have a healthy, comforting mother and a grumpy, controlling father. Two brothers, one sister, no wife, no children, and my only pet lies in my pants," he briefed.

"I see," I nodded. "I feel like you've just relayed a scripted version of a biography. Not family-oriented?"

"I'd kill for them," he said. "Are you and Devon serious?"

Wow. Where did that come from?

Taking a sip of my wine, I answered cautiously. "We've only been on one date."

"You plan on going out with him again?" It sounded more like a threat than a question.

"Maybe. Yes." Though I'd made up excuses twice when Devon asked me out again over the weekend. I didn't like the way he kept trying to sneak in questions about Tevin. His inexplicable interest in my friend had me wary.

"Does he treat you well?"

"Yes. He's very sweet." I smiled. "Quite the gentleman."

He wiped his hands on his napkin and refilled his wineglass. All his movements were careful and measured as his brows crinkled, as mulling something over. He took a sip of his wine, slowly set the glass down, laced his fingers on top of the table, and lanced me with his stare. "You'll not see him again. Understand?"

My head jerked back at his stern command. "Are you serious? So now you're trying to dictate who I can or cannot see? You have got to be kidding me! I'm not yours to command."

His gaze didn't waver, he didn't even blink. "A shepherd knows his sheep, and a sheep knows its shepherd. This has nothing to do with possessiveness. After all, we're just friends, right? This has to do with your safety. Devon is dangerous. Stay *away* from him."

"Unbelievable!" I laughed out. "Devon has got to be the most banal, innocuous person I've ever met. *You* are the one who's dangerous. *You* are the one I should 'stay away' from."

Natalio sat back in his seat and tossed his arm over the back of the chair in a relaxed position. "I don't do arguments, Sadie. I speak and I expect you to *listen*. If I tell you the guy is dangerous and to stay away from him, then I expect you to take heed and stay away from him. That's where it ends."

“Are you *serious*?”

No verbal response, he just stared at me for what felt like a century. Then out of the blue, he asked, "Do you believe in a man's love, Sadie?"

Sudden turn, again. He kept jumping from one boat to the next. He was either bipolar, or easily distracted.

I rested my elbows on the table and dropped my chin in my palms, being sure to lock my gaze on his. "*There are three things that amaze me—no, four things I don't understand: How an eagle glides through the sky, how a snake slithers on a rock, how a ship navigates the ocean, how a man loves a woman.*"

"Your bible quoting doesn't answer my question."

Hmm, he knows the bible... Impressive.

Deliberately, I drew my brows together and tipped my head to the side. "How could it not?"

"I want *your* view on a man's love."

I admitted, "No, I don't believe in a man's love."

His voice was extremely quiet when he asked, "Why? Has someone hurt you?"

"Yes. But I don't remember the pain or who *that* someone is. And I don't wish to talk about it."

He dropped his head in his hands. Seconds later, he rubbed his hands over his face before pinning me with glossy blue irises and whispering a breathy, "I'm sorry."

He said it, and it was a combination of sadness, pain and apology. Was he sorry about bringing up the topic of love? Or was he sorry about something else? It was really hard to tell. The man was just one big ball of emotions.

Once again, I was left mystified by the mysterious man in black.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Deep masculine laughter swirled with soft feminine laughter above the low flow of Common's *I Want You* in Natalio's vehicle as we drove into my apartment complex. It was Thursday, and after a long day of booze, aggressively salty air and raunchy humor, Natalio and I managed to slip away from an all-white yacht party thrown by Marco Levy, some multimillionaire acquaintance of his. Of course, Natalio's attire was the exception; he wore his usual black.

He continued to keep me in the dark about his line of work. The minute someone tried drawing him into a conversation about work, he'd cut them off, letting them know this was his 'down time' and 'shop talk' wasn't allowed. I wasn't sure why he was hiding something as simple as his occupation from me.

Natalio had invited me out every other evening since we shared pizza at the rooftop restaurant. He was funny, overly intelligent and sometimes sweet—when he wasn't fuming about trivialities. He pledged to earn my trust, and evidently thought dragging me about with him every time he got the chance was a way to do that.

Hardly. Because he still remained closed-mouth when I pried. We talked about any and everything, except him. Therefore, my trust level was still way low. However, the inexplicable connection I had towards him prevented me from resisting him, prevented me from saying 'no', from staying away. And when I wasn't with him, all I thought about was him.

Kudos to me, though, for being able to mask those feelings whenever I was around him, because he said and did the most provocative things, without ever touching me in the way I yearned. He was attracted to me as I was to him, I could feel it, but he wouldn't admit it, so neither did I. Maybe it was a part of his effort to gain my trust?

God, it was all driving me batty!

I *wanted* him to touch me. I *wanted* him to kiss me. I *wanted* him...so bad.

"Don't forget I'm picking you up for dinner on Saturday when I get back."

He was flying to Michigan that evening for a two-day business trip.

"Okay." Two days suddenly seemed really long. I'd miss him.

"You done thinking about the car yet?" he asked.

"I haven't started thinking about it yet. My mind's been occupied with other stuff."
With thoughts of you, on top of me. Kissing me, licking me, sucking me.

He let out a frustrated grunt. "It's just a car, Sadie. You need a car for work and I just so happen to have one sitting in my garage dying to be driven."

Just like I'm dying to be driven into...

"You're not gonna give this up, are you?"

The man was tenacity in the flesh...

His brow arched in that sexy, sexy way. "Don't know me by now?"

"Okay." I smiled sweetly. "I'll start thinking about it tonight."

He chuckled, casting his eyes upwards. "I'll walk you to your door, since I won't be seeing you for another forty-eight hours."

I didn't know if it was the three beers and two glasses of wine I'd consumed earlier, but I was hot. Really hot. And bothered.

Exiting the vehicle, he rounded to the passenger side and opened the door, helped me out, and wordlessly walked me up the steps to my door.

I looked up at him. He looked down at me. No words exchanging.

A flicker of humor danced across Natalio's eyes. What's he thinking now?

His raven-dark hair was all mussed over his forehead and his eyes were the bluest of his variant blues.

Suave and quiet, his voice sliced through the silence. "I like the way your cheeks redden when you dare to hold my stare." He smoothed his index finger gently between my brows. "I like the crease that forms right here when you worry what I might be thinking." Heat surged through my body, the air shifted as I was instantly enveloped with desire. His touch was...scorching, branding, possessing.

"I like the way your cognac eyes dilate then go dreamy every time you react to my touch." His smile, taunting.

This man...

He knew. He knew I wanted him and he'd been teasing me. He'd avoided touching and kissing me all along to drive me insane?

"Most of all," he continued, gently trailing the tip of his fingers down my neck. I closed my eyes and moaned helplessly at the tantalizing feel of his warm fingers on my neck. "I *love* your long, graceful, virgin olive neck." He leaned forward as if to kiss my neck, but he didn't. Instead, he stopped just inches away and whispered, allowing the heat of his breath to lightly stroke my neck. "I'd spend hours kissing this neck. Caressing endlessly. Adorning it with love bites."

My lips parted, my breath coming faster.
Please. Please. Please. Kiss me. Now.

Suddenly he straightened and stuck his hand out to me. "I had a lovely day, Sadie. Until Saturday?"

No. No! How could he do this?

I scowled at his hand, fury climbing through my veins. Forming a word or sentence was impossible at the moment. Was too hot...too needy.

His lips lifted in an innocent smile. "Miss Francé, don't be impolite. I'm wishing you a good evening."

Folding my arms, I glared at him. There he stood, all self-possessed and pleased with himself. Tilting his head to one side, he bit his lip and smiled. "Sadie? You look bothered. You promised you'd tell me whenever *anything* bothers you." His tongue darted out and glossed his lips. "And I promised to help."

Sonuvabitch was teasing me. Clearly enjoying himself.

"You *know* what's bothering me," I hissed.

"No. I don't. You have to learn to com-mu-ni-cate," he said, enunciating each syllable. "Communication is key. You have to tell me what you want, Sadie. It's the only way I'll know."

My tongue curled and touched the roof of my mouth as I made ready to com-mu-ni-cate the need for him to fuck me so hard my eyes twisted, but my roommate Brenda came bouncing up the steps, earphones stuck in her ears and her head bobbing, her pink workout outfit damp with sweat. Back from her daily run.

She'd returned from her New York trip on Tuesday. My roommate didn't like me very much. At least, that's how she acted. I found it hard to believe anyone would share their apartment with someone they truly hated.

Brenda stopped when she noticed us, gave a curt nod and moved around me to enter the house. She keyed opened the door, then suddenly swirled back around like a tornado to face us—to face Natalio, rather. Her eyes stretched as she stared up at him.

Natalio frowned.

Did she know him? Had they been together? What?

Brenda gawked a moment longer, then she blinked. Her mouth opened, then closed. Once, twice, three times. Finally, she uttered a weak apology for disrupting us and walked backwards into the house.

Okayyy. That was odd. And completely out of character for Brenda. She had an arrogant yet impersonal disposition—or maybe she was only like that in my presence. Maybe there was something between them I didn't know about?

"What the hell was that about?" I asked him.

Natalio shrugged with an I-have-no-idea expression. But I knew he was lying.

"Do you know her?"

"Only as your roommate. I know her no other way, if that's what you're thinking."

He shifted his weight and I could tell he was agitated about something. "My flight's in an hour. I gotta go. I'll call, text, email, telegram and BBM you," he said, and I laughed. He shifted again. "Please don't lose contact with me. If you get mad at me for anything, please tell me you're mad and don't ignore me. I'd rather you speak to me than ignore me. Please don't be afraid to ask me anything. And yes, I'll answer truthfully. Okay?" His words came rolling at me like a tidal wave.

Mystified, I nodded. Where was all that coming from? Why would I be mad at him when we weren't even together? Anxiety emanated from him as he lifted my palm to his lips and planted a chaste kiss in the center. He retreated quickly down the steps and into his X6, leaving me staring after him.

Shaking my head at his constant perplexing behavior, I turned the doorknob and entered the apartment. Brenda was pacing the living area, her hazel eyes glittering with excitement. Silky, honey-blond hair dangled over her shoulders.

"Oh my God, Sadie! You're dating one of the Nelsons?" she pounced at me.

"One of the Nelsons?"

"Yesssss," she stressed, seemingly annoyed at my nonplussed question.

"How do you know them? What are they like? Are they as crude and whorish as people sa—"

I held my hand up, halting her. "Brenda, I have no idea what '*they*' you're talking about. I just met Natalio last week. Do you know him?"

Brenda scoffed. "Of course I do! What single woman doesn't?"

"What does that mean?"

Brenda widened her eyes with incredulity. "You mean you really don't know who he is? As in, *who* he is." She emphasized by pointing at the door I just came through.

"Judging by your reaction, I guess not."

Brenda shook her head at me as if I'd just told her aliens exist and they were living beneath our apartment. "Sadie, that sexy sonuvabitch was *Natalio Nelson*. CEO of ENEN. The guy's a freaking billionaire!"

"Henen?" I tested the word, confused. What the heck was that? And a billionaire? I snorted. Natalio didn't come across as a billionaire.

"Yesssss, ENEN!" She marched into the kitchen, prompting me to follow. Brenda pointed to her stove, microwave, dishwasher, refrigerator and toaster, all bearing the marque ENEN.

Ah, the *brand* ENEN.

Brenda disappeared into her room and reappeared with a tablet device, her laptop, and a smartphone, all of the same brand.

"I know the brand, Brenda. You've made your point," I said, annoyed. "Just didn't understand at first what you meant." I plodded back to the living area and slumped down on the sofa.

Was I so out of touch and wrapped up in my own problems that I didn't recognize a known face when I saw one? Or maybe he's not *that* well-known. Maybe Brenda was mistaken. A person that wealthy would never be without a bodyguard or something, would he?

"Maybe you're mistaken. I would've known this. He would've told me." But he *didn't*.

Brenda snorted. "I can spot a Nelson fifty yards away, sweetie."

"So why do you have all things ENEN?" I queried. "You have a crush on him or something?"

Brenda's hazel eyes illuminated. "Not him. Every girl picks a brother. My friend Cara, she crushes on Natalio like crazy. I," she breathed, closing her eyes and pressing her hands over her heart like a dazed twelve-year-old, "am so in love with his brother,

Lovello Nelson. He's the youngest, but the richest of them. And the hottest. The guy's worth gazillions."

In the few years I've lived with Brenda, this was the longest conversation we've ever had. She always maintained a 'hi-bye' relationship with me. I had no idea why. Hence my supposition she hated me.

Brenda was from an affluent family; a lifestyle similar to Kelsy's. On the other end of the spectrum, however, Brenda was a focused, no-bullshit law student. She's usually self-possessed and indifferent—until now. Seeing Brenda this giddy and starry-eyed was a novelty.

"So he didn't tell you who he was?" she prodded.

"No," I answered shamefacedly. "He just said he *'sells stuff'*."

Brenda laughed. "He sells *stuff* alright. A whole collection of expensive, hard-to-acquire gadgets." She shook her head as if still not believing what she'd run into at her own house. "Where did you meet him?"

"*Secre X*."

Her face twisted in revulsion. "Oh. I heard you were working there. That explains why he kept his identity a secret. Probably thinks you're a gold-digging slutbag or something."

And the old nose-up Brenda was back. That was the Brenda I knew, so I decided to ignore her snide remark.

"But ENEN's HQ is in San Fran," I thought out loud.

"That's where they live, silly. His businesses are just located worldwide." She narrowed her eyes at me. "So you two aren't dating?"

"No."

"Didn't look that way from my POV."

"Well, we're not. We're just friends." Though I really wanted much more than that.

You have to tell me what you want, Sadie. It's the only way I'll know. His words came back to me, swirling around in my head.

Brenda gripped my hand tight. "Please, please date him. That way, you can take me along when you meet his family. I really want to meet Lovello. Though, I think I'd swoon if I do." She had this starry-eyed look on her face. "Natalio Nelson looks so damn hotter in person, it's unbelievable. Pictures do him no justice. I can only imagine how drop-dead gorgeous Lovello would be." Brenda sighed dramatically like

a fairytale heroine from an animated film. Why was she so obsessed with someone who didn't know she existed?

I snatched my hand away from hers. "You'll have to find some other way to meet your *dear* Lovello, because I'm not dating his brother."

Wasn't even sure I wanted to see him again, for that matter. He wanted me to trust him but he couldn't tell me who he was? What else was he keeping from me? I knew nothing about him or 'the Nelsons'. Up until twenty minutes ago, I'd never even heard of them. Well, they aren't really celebrities so I could understand why. I'd have to be someone like Brenda who made it her business to know young mega-rich to know these kind of "famous".

I barely even noticed the brands I used. If I liked it, I bought it. That's about as far as it went for me—well, unless it was something related to fashion; that was a whole other matter.

Brenda sighed again and I wanted scream. "I guess we know now who sent the money."

Oh, I'd forgotten about that. The rent. Brenda told me when she came home on Tuesday, that a tall, muscular, African-American man had approached her outside and handed her a white envelope. Informed her it was for Miss Francé's debts owed to her, with interest, and rent payments covering the next six months. I'd assumed it was either Tevin or Kelsy's doing. But they both denied it when I went off on them. Now I had no doubt it was the persistent Natalio who'd sent it. At the time, it hadn't occurred to me that he could be the one responsible.

"*I know you more than you think, Sadie,*" he'd said. Of course he did. He was wealthy enough to get whatever information he needed on me. But why he did all this was beyond me. What was his game? Why the secrets? How can a man of his status be so casually out and about? There were tons of questions I wanted to ask, but I didn't know if I wanted to speak to him again. It would be pointless, because he'd only continue to be evasive.

Maybe Brenda was right. Maybe he thought if I knew who he was I would've treated him differently—as laughable as that was. If he knew *everything* about me as he'd claimed, he'd know that as long as my bills were paid, I didn't give a shit about money. Feast or famine, I treated each situation the same. I'd been around good money, bad money, honest money, stolen money and blood money. And I knew how

destructive it all could be in any scenario. I've never desired to be wealthy; I was perfectly content just to be comfortable.

"I'm going to bed," I told Brenda, pushing up from the sofa.

"At 7pm?"

She wanted to sit and chat? Another first. "Yes. I have a headache."

Brenda darted to my side as I made a beeline for my bedroom. "When's he coming to see you again?"

"We were supposed to have dinner on Saturday when he returns from Michigan," I answered uninterestingly. "But I think I'm gonna cancel that."

"Why?" she prompted, sticking by my side. I half-expected her to hook her arm through mine and start square dancing.

"Well for one, he lied to me. He didn't tell me who he was." I tried not to sound bitter. "And...a host of other reasons."

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier. I didn't mean it," Brenda blurted. "Don't overthink things. I'm sure he has a valid reason why. Maybe he wanted to get to know you first. Please, think about it."

I patted her on the shoulder. "I won't be thinking at all. Goodnight, Brenda." I smiled something fake at her before entering my bedroom and slamming the door behind me.

There would be no more of Mr. Mysterious Jackass in Black.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A pounding headache hammered me awake. A glance at the bedside clock told me it was only 10:05pm. I'd been asleep for only three hours.

After coming to a solid decision to forget Natalio even existed, I'd switched off my cell phone, repeated my proverbs, and went immediately to bed. Now three hours later I was awake.

I let out a frustrated growl. If I stayed awake, I'd start thinking about him. I didn't want to think about him. I needed to sleep, and forget.

Rolling out of bed, I opened my nightstand drawer and took out a packet of Tylenol PM. A trip to the kitchen had me downing the pills with a glass of water, before shuffling back to bed.

Thirty minutes tops before these babies kicked in. Which left my mind wide and vulnerable for thoughts of Natalio to sneak in.

Had he reached his destination safely? Was he okay? Did he miss me?

Sighing, I reached for my Blackberry and switched it on. I had ten missed calls: two from Kelsy, eight from Natalio. Three text messages and one email, all from Natalio. Something moved in the depths of my stomach at the sight of Natalio's name on my phone screen.

"Hey biatch. Where you been?" Kelsy answered when I rang her.

"Had a headache, so I turned in early. Switched off my cell. 'Sup?"

"Nada. Tev and I wanted to chill with ya. We haven't seen much of you since you met that *friend* of yours." *Pop* went her gum. Kelsy was like an addict gum-chewer.

"We went to a yacht party." I groaned. Think I drank too much."

"Didn't think to invite me?" she whined. "You know I love sailing!"

"I tried calling and got Tev. He told me you were house shopping with your dad."

"Oh, yeah. I hope we never find anything," she said. "My strategy is to go ga-ga over anything that's out of budget and absolutely hate anything within range."

The girl was crazy. "Living on your own isn't the worst thing in the world, Kels. You're twenty-three years old, for Christ's sake. Wish I had a dad to buy me somewhere to live. Free of charge. Then I wouldn't have to worry about rent or if my roommate hates me enough to put rat poison in my cereal."

"You haven't answered me, ya know. I want you to live with me. I'd be a heck of a lot more comfortable with the idea if you do. I need you with me since you're more savvy about the streets than me. Please say yes, Sadie."

"I told you I'd think about it," I said lazily through a yawn.

"Girl, I've known you long enough to know that when you say 'I'll think about it', the thinking's already done. And it's usually not in my favor."

I laughed. She knew me well.

Kelsy popped her gum again. "So, have you screwed him yet?"

"Who?"

"That *friend* of yours who's got your head spinning like Anne Boleyn did Henry the Eighth."

"No. And it's never gonna happen."

"Why? I thought you said he was hot." She paused. "Oh no, is he gay?"

I giggled, because I'd thought the exact thing at one point. "Thought so at first. But no, he's not. He was here earlier and Brenda identified him as some electronics tycoon."

"What? Who is he?"

"The CEO of ENEN, apparently."

"Whoa! Natalio Nelson?" she shrieked.

I sighed into the phone. "And here's the fanatic craziness again. I wouldn't expect you, or *Brenda*, for that matter, to react like this. You both should be used to being around money and success."

"Please. It's not the money or success we're looking at. The Nelson brothers are smoking! Who wouldn't want to date them? They're young, impeccably hot—like walking lava, seriously—and, well, they *are* obscenely rich, but that's just a bonus. He didn't tell you who he was?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I've asked myself that question over a hundred times. How do you know them?"

"Mom does business with one of the brothers. Trevillo Nelson. She and Dad even had a big fallout and didn't speak for over three weeks because Dad accused her of sleeping with Trevillo." Kelsy sighed. "I think she's guilty though. And I wouldn't blame her, the guy's freaking gorgeous. If I was her age and that hot, young guy hit on me, I'd bone him, too. Trevillo's known for having a thing for older, kinky women. And my mom's Queen Kink."

A burst of laughter escaped me. "How do you know that?"

"I snoop around when Mom and Dad aren't home. Girl, you should see some of their play shit. It's beyond me how to even use that stuff in the bedroom."

My laughter kept bubbling. The sight of Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell being kinky—I couldn't picture it. Trust Kelsy to make me laugh.

"I still can't believe you're dating Natalio Nelson, though. Go figure."

"We are—*were* just friends," I corrected. "What do you know about him?"

"Except that he's dangerously sexy and worth billions? Not much." Kelsy paused again and I could hear another gum bubble popping. "The Nelsons are a very private family. We can only go by gossip. Their father's a powerful magnate who brooks no nonsense with his boys and ensures they stay in check. I've heard as soon as each one turns eighteen, they're sat down and questioned about what they see themselves doing career-wise. Once their ideas seem viable, Dad helps set them up."

I responded with 'ohs' and 'ahs' as Kelsy spoke.

"Trevillo Nelson, as I've told you before, digs older chicks for whatever reason. Weird. He's the oldest at thirty and dominates the real estate field. He's the one I like." She mumbled the latter. "Lovello Nelson, his cocky ass is a womanizing whore who screws all his female employees and associates. Though the youngest at twenty-seven, he's richest of the three as an internet billionaire and a complete genius."

"Wow," I gasped through a giggle.

"And Natalio Nelson," she continued, "he's the enigmatic, bad-boy type, always in black—and have I mentioned *hawt*?—coming in at twenty-nine. Rumors circulate that he's affiliated with gangs, mafia and all that, but there's never been any proof."

"Enigmatic, clad in black, those two are correct. The bad-boy part I don't know about."

"Well, when you're prosperous it elicits some of the most ridiculous rumors. So I'm not sure if any of what I've just told you is even accurate." Kelsy laughed. "If you haven't heard of them before or kept abreast of them like the affluent women who stalk eligible bachelors, then you might not recognize a Nelson when you see one. So don't feel bad about anything. Who knows, he was probably glad you didn't know who he was so he could be himself around you. Maybe that's why he likes hanging out with you."

"Stop finding excuses for him, Kels. You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am on your side," she said, redeeming herself. "But it would be cool if you guys dated. I'd love to hear if he's good in bed. Come on, I know you've wondered what it would be like to have his dark head between your legs—"

"Not gonna happen. Where's Tev?" I cut through, trying to change the subject.

Kelsy yawned. "Out getting me a burger at Wendy's. I've been craving one all day and I just couldn't sleep until I got it."

The pills were starting to kick in, my eyes growing heavy. "Hmm. Tell him I love his sorry ass. I'm going back to bed. Love you. Night."

I hung up and contemplated if I should read Natalio's messages or just delete them. Curiosity eventually won out, and I blew a shaky breath and opened the first message:

*How was your flight, Natalio? Have you landed safely? Did the hostess flash
you her goods?
Would've been nice to receive any of the above concerns from you. That way,
I'd know you care.
Some friend you are, huh?
Well, Miss Francé, although you didn't ask, I'll still keep you informed: I've
landed safely. And...
I can't stop thinking about you. (Is that allowed?)*

I pinched the soft flesh on my inner arm to punish myself for smiling at the text. The subsequent message was sent fifteen minutes after the first:

*Just arrived at my hotel. Showered. In bed.
But I miss your voice.
Please call or text me.*

The next was an hour after the second.

Your Blackberry was seated on the charger all day today, so I'm positive your battery isn't dead.

You've switched off your phone.

Why?

CALL ME.

His email came in thirty minutes ago.

Sadie,

I think I know what you're sulking about.

Your roommate, she recognized me didn't she?

Please, don't overthink things. Women tend to do that.

But then, you're not like other women...

I hope you understand I never lied to you.

I just didn't answer your questions clearly.

That's not lying.

Your roommate's earlier reaction indicated yours.

I feared it.

You agreed not to get mad at me or ignore me.

And I agreed to be truthful to your queries. At least, I'll try.

Just don't shut me out. Please.

Natalio Nelson.

I scoffed and attempted to power off my Blackberry when it buzzed with a new text message.

I can't fall asleep.

I don't think I'll be able to, not until I hear from you.

Help me?

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do but avoid him. I wasn't angry. Why should I be? As much as I wanted him to be, he wasn't mine.

If he could lie about something so simple from the outset, then what would a relationship with him be like? How could I trust him?

I wasn't sure how I felt. And I wasn't sure how I *should* feel. I only knew I desired Natalio in a way I've never desired anyone or anything. That I couldn't refrain from

thinking about him. And that I hated and wanted to punish myself for wanting anyone this much.

Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe I was angrier about the fact that he didn't kiss me. Maybe I just needed some time to think. Maybe I just needed him. Maybe...

I hit the reply button but my fingers hovered over the keypad because I had no idea what to write.

I sent a blank message.

Hopefully that helped.

A minute later he replied.

Thank you.

"Return them to the sender."

The tall, red-haired delivery guy standing outside my door stared blankly at me with obsidian eyes. It was noon the next day, and I was extremely peeved and moody.

The delivery guy compressed his lips and held up his hand to halt the other two guys who were dutifully unloading rolls of fabric from a white truck with the logo, 'Reel O' Roll', on the side.

The materials were lovely, a variation of bright rainbow colors. My palms itched with the need to peel away the plastic and run my hands over the bright yellow roll the man before me held upright. I loved them. Ideas were already bouncing around in my head of the pieces I could create from them. But I knew without a doubt who sent them, so I wouldn't accept them.

"Ma'am, I would—" the delivery guy began, trying patience.

"I said return them," I snapped. "I didn't order them. I don't know who sent them and I don't want them."

Pressing his lips tighter together—possibly swallowing a curse—he gave a curt spin and left.

I slammed the door and leaned back against it.

Why did Natalio keep doing stuff like this? I've never once asked him for anything, yet he always felt the need to charge in. At the same time, he wouldn't tell me who he was because presumably I might be a 'gold-digging slutbag'—as Brenda puts it.

I just wanted him to leave me alone. It was the only way I'd get over him. I stomped over to my work area off the left wing of the living room, snatched up my Blackberry from the cutting table and furiously typed him a message.

***Enough with the philanthropic gestures, will ya?
I've already visited Salvation Army for food and second-hand clothes this
morning. Enough to last me a while.***

Irritated, I tossed my phone and it landed on a plush armchair a few feet away. An annoying din came immediately, accompanied by muffled buzzing. I ignored it and channeled all my vigor and attention into completing the costumes I was working on. Around seven this morning, Kash had woken me from my sleep and made new orders for costumes. New dancers had joined the staff at *Secre X* and were requesting costumes like Kash's. If I could complete at least a dozen pieces today, that would guarantee me fifteen hundred bucks tonight.

I pressed my feet down on the pedal of the machine and started on my fourth piece...

It was 6:14pm when I sat back in my chair, smiling with satisfaction that I'd been able to complete three pieces more than a dozen.

Twisting and stretching, I stood from my chair. My neck, back, and fingers hurt.

I needed to go out tonight. I needed company. Anything to keep my mind off Natalio. I wondered what Tevin and Kelsy had planned for the night. Maybe I should invite them over and we could eat pizza, drink beer and talk crap. Brenda would disapprove, as she always did, but we never cared.

On second thought, I didn't think I could manage Kelsy and Tevin's tonguing and rubbing and canoodling. Not tonight. It would only remind me of my loneliness.

Maybe I could call Devon. I'd been giving him the run around for the past week due to a certain order I'd received from a certain man in black. Tossing my weight down onto the plush armchair and grabbing up my Blackberry from among the cushions, I sighed when I saw seven missed calls and two text messages from Natalio.

The first was sent a minute after my angry text at noon.

*My heart is far from that of a philanthropist.
I'm only kind to those I like.
And I really like you.
I thought the fabrics would make your Friday.
Please accept them.*

Next message was sent three hours ago.

*I stand before you,
But through opacity you see me.
You know who I am,
But you don't see who I am.
It has been a torturous wait,
In hell I burned my faith.
I've ripped my hair
And gouged mine eyes.
Darkened my soul,
For my life I despised.
My palms I've powdered,
For when I hold you next...
Won't let you slip,
Won't let you slide,
Won't let you leave my side,
No, not this time.
N.N.*

Like a fish caught on a hook, my heart fluttered in my chest. He wrote poetry. *He wrote poetry*. But what did it all mean? Why was he being so passionate all of a sudden? We've never even kissed.

This was all just...too confusing, too overwhelming. And frankly, I was tired of trying to figure the man out. One minute he was an angry, impassive mystic, and the next he was a passionate seducer.

Natalio, you drive me crazy. I want you...but I don't.

I reread his message again and again trying to assimilate and decode what he was trying to tell me. But I was at a loss. I gave up. The only way to forget about Natalio was to avoid him. I would have to change my number on Monday.

I scrolled through my phone book, selected, and called. The melodic voice answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Devon. You up for a movie tonight?"

I was in the bathroom the next night, still dripping from my bath and toweling my hair when I heard muffled voices rambling down the hall. I figured maybe Brenda had invited someone over, albeit a rarefied action. If it wasn't her brother, Tommy, I couldn't imagine who else, because it was uncommon for her to entertain guests.

I'd spent a long time soaking in my bath, thinking on how to spend my Saturday night. Dinner with Natalio had been the original plan, but that plan had been shot to hell since I decided not to see him anymore. And he seemed to have finally accepted it, because he hadn't called or texted me since yesterday.

Devon was definitely out of the question. I could only spare one night of my week on irksome kibitz. He wasn't as entertaining as Natalio. His touch, stare, or smile didn't send sizzles through my body. He couldn't hold my attention for more than five minutes, and he was far too interested in Tevin, always wanting to know how much Tevin divulged to me about his lifestyle.

Going to the movies with him last night was god awful. He'd bored me into a yawning fit. But then, that could be because I was already strung out on someone else, and thoughts of that someone just wouldn't vacate my head. Just wouldn't let me be. Just wouldn't allow me to enjoy being with anyone else.

Maybe I could just snuggle up in bed and try finishing that Laura Kinsale novel.

With the excess water dried from my hair and the damp curls rippling down the length of my back, I exited the bathroom. My steps halted halfway to my room when that unmistakable voice traveled down the hall smacked right into my eardrums.

Shit.

Natalio was here.

Edging a step closer to the living area, my ears perked up like those of an alerted dog as I eavesdropped.

"...just a thank you gift, Brenda. Nothing special," I heard Natalio say casually.

"A gift?" Excitement was evident in Brenda's voice. "Uh, thank you. Wait here, I'll go get Sadie for you."

Quickly but quietly, I sidled off to my room, grabbed a bottle of moisturizer and plopped down on the edge of my bed, pretending to be oblivious. A moment later, Brenda barged in. She was dressed—if 'dressed' was the operative word—in a white camisole tank, no bra, her nipples poking against the thin cotton fabric, and tight boyshorts with the creases of her folds blatantly imprinted against it, while displaying her smooth, tanned legs.

She'd stood before Natalio dressed like that?! And why were her nipples so hard? Wasn't she a Lovello Nelson fan?

"Lost your manners?" I cracked out, even though I'd purposefully left the door half-opened, expecting her.

At her side, Brenda held a neatly wrapped, medium-sized gift box. "You have a guest. Nelson." A smug grin spread across her face as she said, "He brought me a gift." She traced her fingers over the box and her cheeks flushed. "If you don't want him, I'll gladly take him." And spinning on her heels, she left.

Natalio brought Brenda a gift? Why? What's he trying to prove? He said he didn't know her. Who the hell buys a stranger a gift? I thought he said he was only kind to people he liked. Did he like Brenda? I'd heard him say it was a 'Thank You' gift. Thanking her for what, really? My hate for this man quadrupled. Exasperated, I tightened my towel around me and stomped out of my room, down the hall, and into the living area, stopping dead in my tracks when my eyes landed on him.

Sweet Jesus, please don't let me faint. I'm supposed to be angry at him!

In his usual shade, Natalio wore snug black jeans—and, by god, he was *wearing* them—a pair of black Air Force sneakers and a black long-sleeved T-shirt tugged up to his elbows. A cross pendant dangled on his formidable chest on a white-gold chain around his neck. He sported a black studded leather wristband. Every feature of his face was sharpened and prominent, because his usually shabby hair was tamed and combed neatly back from his face. Sapphire eyes focused on me and sculptured lips curved up in a white smile.

Lord, give me strength.

Why did he have to be so intense? So scorching? So irresistible? Resembling every bit the 'bad boy' Kelsy assumed him to be.

Struggling to maintain my acrimonious demeanor, I planted my hands on my hips to emphasize, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Natalio frowned in confusion and I wanted to roll my eyes, because I could tell his frown was forced. He knew exactly what he was doing. "I thought we agreed I'd pick you up for dinner as soon as I landed?"

"That was before!"

His head tipped to one side. "Before? Before what?"

My eyes narrowed at him. He wanted me to say it. He wanted me to say I was mad at him for keeping secret about who he was and I didn't want to see him anymore. He wanted me to express it all...but I couldn't.

"You *know* what." My tone was less severe than before. My anger was dissolving, being superseded by raw, undiluted, Lord-please-forgive-me lust.

"No, I don't. Tell me."

He stood about five feet away from me, hands jabbed in the front pockets of his jeans, looking bold, yet relaxed and self-possessed. Not in the least fazed by my seething. While I, on the other hand, was burning, scorched and turning to ashes just by being in his presence. It wasn't my anger that had me so heated, no. It was my unquenched desire for him that had me on fire. To be touched and kissed and licked by him...*oh god, just one touch...*

My towel loosened a bit and I hurriedly tightened it around me. "Why are you here, Natalio? Why should I go anywhere with you? Why must I—"

In one swift move, Natalio was before me, breathing my air. His arm snaked around my waist, pulling me up against him as he clamped his lips down on mine. I didn't protest, I *couldn't*. Like a slave to him, my mouth opened, welcoming him. He kissed me, hard and fierce, confident and demanding. Then abruptly, he pulled away. His kiss was harsh and clipped...but satisfying.

Eyes closed, I stood reeling in darkness for several seconds. When I opened them, Natalio was gazing down at me, his brow raised in that signature, wet-my-panties way. "That's why," he whispered.

My heart was a pounding tattoo and my knees jellied. Only hot air escaped when I tried to speak. "I-I'll...go get...dressed."

Natalio's lips curved up in a complacent smile. "Good."

Touching my slightly swollen lips, dumbstruck by his assault, I turned and wobbled my way down the hall. I could feel his eyes lasering heated points into my back.

What the hell? Will I ever be able to resist him?

Will I ever be able to stay away from Mr. Mysterious in Black?

CHAPTER NINE

Natalio opened the passenger door of his vehicle and stood aside for me to enter. Such a gentleman when he wanted to be. I loved that, as wealthy as he was, he didn't have anyone driving us around and opening our doors. Proved just how much he craved control. He wanted to open all my doors and maneuver me in *every* way. And *I* wanted him to.

When he rounded the car and got in, he glanced over at me. "That dress is...hell, it's...damn. Who's the designer? I want to buy you a dozen more like it."

"Sadie Francé."

I was wearing an ankle-length, navy blue, off-the-shoulder, velvet dress. The smooth velvet material clung to me like a second skin, accentuating my ample hips, and a mid-thigh split showed off the length of my left leg.

He shot me a doubtful glance. "*You* made that dress?"

I didn't answer. I'd let my silence tell him I'd taken offense.

But in truth, my silence was a way of hindering him from initiating a conversation. I wasn't really able to speak just yet. I was still in vertigo from that kiss. My mind was in disarray and I needed a few more minutes to recover my equilibrium. He wielded too much power over me and I needed to keep shit together. He could simply look into my eyes and my body instantly responded to his unspoken words. *My body* understood and yielded with no struggle, when *I* barely knew what was happening. *My body* was in tune with him, striding alongside him, while my subconscious struggled to keep up. Still trying to comprehend what the hell was happening. I didn't know who he was, but already I think I was enslaved to him.

If I could manage to avoid his eyes, I'd be safe. His eyes told stories I didn't remember and made requests I couldn't give.

I *needed* to avoid his eyes.

We drove in silence to the restaurant.

We were greeted politely by a gangly, brown-haired waiter at the entrance of a restaurant called '*Vibrato Grill Jazz*' and led to our table. The décor was warm and inviting, dimly lit with an intimate ambience. A live jazz band played soothing music on a stage situated at the front, creating a cozy and romantic aura. I closed my eyes and sighed, allowing myself to relax at the sweet melody of the saxophone.

I felt Natalio's eyes burning into me as the waiter continued with his flattery before leaving us to decide on our meal. Maybe he, too, knew the blue-eyed tycoon. Seemed I was the only idiot who didn't.

"Still sulking?" Natalio asked. "Gonna to talk to me anytime soon?"

"Yes," I replied, eyes fixed on the menu. *Avoid the eyes.* "Crispy Calamari for the appetizer. Wild Mushroom T—"

"I'm not the waiter," he bit out.

I took a sip of my water and chanced a quick glance at him. He seemed irritated. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I want to know why you're upset with me."

I sighed. "Natalio, you know why. Why did you lie to me?"

He stared at me, imploring me to look him in the eye. But I didn't. That would be my undoing. "*How* did I lie to you, Sadie? I just didn't tell you who I was."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted you to recognize me, dammit," he said, his voice rising. "Not me, Natalio Nelson, proprietor of ENEN, but *me.*"

What the hell did that even mean?

Because I wasn't up for an angry Natalio tonight, I decided to ignore his building ire. With a shake of my head, I sipped at my water before speaking at a measured pace. "You are the most confusing, contorted, convoluted person I've ever met. I can't understand you. What is it you want from me?"

"First, I want you to look at me, Sadie," he prompted.

I did and immediately regretted it. His eyes blazed with passion, igniting my own. And something, something familiar, something strange, tugged hard at me.

"I want *you*. I want you to want me. I want you to *see* me," he told me with the same pace and steadiness as I'd spoken.

The waiter returned, but Natalio held my gaze as if we were alone. Sighing, I tore my eyes away from his and turned to the waiter, placing my order.

He wanted me. Why didn't he just say that from the first night at the club? *Sheesh*.

When the waiter took our orders and left, I asked, "For someone of your status, why do you travel alone? Aren't you afraid?"

Natalio chuckled. "Afraid?" He chuckled harder. "No, not afraid. And no, I don't travel alone. I've got security."

"Where are they now?" I glanced around the restaurant searching for anyone in dark suits and dark eye shades.

"That's for me to know."

I was back to being annoyed. "Why are you so secretive?"

"I'm not. Well, only...for now."

"Why? You think I want you for your money? Think I'd treat you differently if I knew? If you were looking for an *un*-rapacious, *unselfish* woman who'll like you for you, then a strip club should've been the last place you checked, buddy." I was beyond exasperated. "But get this, if your money was your only attraction, well, for me, you wouldn't be worth the goddamned trouble. Trust me. It's like trying to find my way out of a flipping maze with your complex ass."

His lips twitched, and before he could speak the waiter approached with our wine. Opening and pouring with a graceful flourish.

When we were again alone, Natalio spoke softly. "I've never thought that of you. As a matter of fact, everything I've ever done is for you. Everything I have is also *yours*."

Heaven help me, this dude must be suffering from some sort of illness. Dementia, maybe? Maybe he's deluded?

I was in over my head with this man. Were his savoring good looks and praiseworthy body really worth the trouble? I slowly rolled my head around on my shoulders, brought my palm to my forehead and whined, "Ohhh, pleaaaassee, Natalio. Will you just be straightforward and stop with all the riddles already?"

He tried to repress a smile and failed.

He found this funny? This man was giving me a headache and he thought it funny? "Listen up, Sphinx. I'm no goddamn Oedipus Rex. I absolutely suck at solving riddles.

So if you got something to say, then spit it out. You're giving me a goddamn headache."

"Your neck," he whispered. And I noticed his breathing was slightly ragged. "Why didn't you pin both sides of your hair? I love seeing that graceful neck of yours."

This man...

There I was, baffled, bewildered, with a tinge of anger, and he was adoring my neck. Could he get anymore frustrating? "Stop digressing," I snapped. "Or I swear I'll wear only turtlenecks from now on."

Natalio grinned, and I almost melted. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, you obviously don't know me very well."

"Okay." He sighed, straightening himself in his chair. His expression grew determined and serious. "Sadie, it might sound crazy to you now, but you mean *everything* to me. It's been a long wait but you have no idea the contentment it brings me to have you now, here, so close. I won't tell you straight-up what you want me to tell you because, as I have told you time and time again, I prefer you find out on your own, because I'm not sure how you'll react. I want nothing to be forced. Nothing to be fake. I want you to want me—no, *need* me. I want you to love me. Fall helplessly in love with me just like—" he stopped abruptly, and leaned back in his chair. "You see? I'm getting carried away."

I blinked at him, blank. What in the world was he saying? This enigmatic billionaire wanted me to fall helplessly in love with him? *Why?*

Palming my forehead again, I took a long sip of my wine. There was no understanding this man, because all he did was talk in puzzles instead of coming straight with me. What did he want me to find out on my own? Had he known me before? Or was he just a complete stranger trying to take advantage of my illness? But then, if that was the case, he would've told me all kinds of tales about my so-called past. Maybe he *was* from my past and wanted me to remember him on my own. In truth, there were times, like whenever he laughed and relaxed his facial features, I thought he seemed familiar. But I was sure he was just reminding me of someone who I couldn't remember.

Shaking my head, I took another sip of my wine, placed the glass down, and immediately reached for it again, gulping it all.

"Look, Sadie," he began. "I don't want to scare you away. I want to keep you in my life. I could tell you, but only if I was sure once you knew, you'd love me and run with

me. ” He gave a childish smile at the latter—knowing it was childish jabber. "But I'm worried you might run *away* from me. "

Refilling my wineglass, I crinkled my brows, asking, “Have you known me before? Assuming you know about my amnesia, are you from my past?”

Natalio closed his eyes for several heartbeats before opening them again. “Yes.”

“So why not just tell me who you are to me instead of starting over? You don’t think that might be easier?”

“It would. But how would you know if anything I tell you is true? How would you know that I’m not just making things up so you’ll be with me? I don’t want to tell you things from your past and you start embellishing it with your imagination. If I try to remind you of the past, you will try to force yourself to remember with *my* memories. Then what you’d remember wouldn’t really be your memories. It would be what I told you along with whatever you weaved from your own imagery.”

On a heavy sigh, he ran a hand over his face. “Look, Sadie, it’s not just about who I was to you. It’s about how things… I can’t… I can’t tell you. I want you to remember. And you will. I have faith. Even though I shouldn’t.” He made an anxious chortle. “Of all the doctors I’ve spoken with, only one gave me hope that if you’re around me often, you *might* remember *fragments* of your past with me. And I’ve spoken to *a lot* of doctors. That particular doctor’s own daughter had been in a car accident and suffered the same fate. He said four years after the accident, she began having scattered memories of events leading up to the accident. However, he did label it ‘a miracle’.” Natalio laughed at his last words.

Just like all the doubtful doctors who had insisted my memories weren’t real, Natalio was doing the same and it angered me. But then, anything about this situation tended to anger me, which was why I hated talking about my past. My amnesia wasn’t so severe that I’d forgotten my entire past. The only memories I’d lost were the ones two years prior to my head injury. So I wasn’t *that* bad. I wished people would stop making me feel like a damn freak.

My mood was now bitter as gall, so much so that I was uninterested in continuing this conversation with Natalio. He must have taken note of that when I picked up my wineglass and turned my attention to the Jazz players onstage, because he breathed an audible sigh and reached across the table to take my hand in his.

“Sadie, this is what I didn’t want, for you to start overthinking things or feeling bad about your situation. If we don’t concern ourselves about your memory returning, then we can just start over—well, we’re already doing that. Don’t worry about it and just forget this conversation. I never knew you, you never knew me. We’re just two new people trying to get to know each other. Please, can we just get back to where we were before your roommate opened her trap?”

That was a good proposition, I thought. Because my brain was weary from trying to work through this intricate conversation. What I did know, with utter certainty, was that I wanted him—physically. His hard frame against my melting flesh. His lips on mine again, and hopefully, other places. And what I also knew, unfortunately, was that I was incapable of granting his wishes. I *couldn't* fall helplessly in love with him, or need him for any other reason beyond sexual pleasures. I found him fiendishly attractive, yes. And I'd been longing to be fucked into oblivion by him from the very outset. But now he was talking about forever. And I wanted none of that.

He was right, all that love and forever talk *would* scare me. I *would* run.

Therefore, I would agree with his latest suggestion and forget about it. As long as it didn't stymie us from sharing our bodies sexually, then with no more prodding from me, I would allow him his secrets.

"Agreed."

"Are you here on business?" I asked Natalio once we were on the move again.

I powered back the car seat and relaxed, gazing longingly at the gorgeous hunk of man who handled the steering wheel with easy grace. Replete, content, and fortified with wine, I was once again enjoying my man in black.

"Yes and no."

"Where do you stay when you're here?" I queried, knowing exactly where I wanted this conversation to take me.

His cell phone chimed and he snatched it from its holder and attended to his received email or whatever it was, while maneuvering the vehicle single-handedly and answering my question. "Depends. I have a loft here on the west side. My brother,

Trevillo, owns a hotel on the south side where I have a penthouse suite reserved. And I like Roosevelt."

"Your brother owns a hotel?" *Of course he does.*

"Yes."

"Which hotel?"

A tic jumped in his jaw as he read his phone screen, intermittently glancing up at the road. Like granite, his face instantly hardened and he threw the phone down in the cup-holder with a loud clang. "Viscas."

"Wow. That's a freakin' top-of-the-line five-star hotel."

"Yes."

Monosyllabic. Pensive. What was his problem now? His mood tended to change at the snap of a finger. But I wasn't about to let his mood ruin mine.

In my sultriest voice, I asked, "Where are we heading now? Your loft?"

Natalio side-eyed me. "That's where you want me to take you?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Nope," I said coolly. "See, I can be monosyllabic, too."

He didn't laugh as I'd expected him to. Something obviously had him irked. After a long while, he broke. "Why'd you disregard my order?"

"Excuse me?"

As if trying to repress his anger, Natalio gripped the steering wheel with both hands. Tight. "Sadie, I told you to stay away from Devon. To stay *away* from him. That means you don't get to go on a goddamn movie date with him! It was a simple frigging order. Was it that hard to follow?"

How on earth did he know that? Was he having me watched? Nevertheless... "Are you kidding me? *You* don't get to give me 'orders', Natalio. This is *my* life, not yours. And I can do whatever I damn well please."

Natalio slammed the brakes, jolting the vehicle to sharp halt. It was good I'd been lying back in the seat, or I'm pretty sure I would've gone straight through the windshield. He rammed the gear in park while the drivers behind blew their horns noisily. "No, you will *not!* I can't protect you if you don't listen to me."

“I don’t need your—”

I almost swallowed my tongue when he launched towards me, gripping my shoulders to keep me still…and silent. “Sadie, listen to me. Devon. Is. Dangerous. Stay *away* from him. He’s seeking some sort of information he thinks you might have. And if he can’t get it, he’ll resort to extensive measures. That’s how he works. But I’m going to find out what the hell it is before he gets it.”

The harsh, cold demeanor he wore had me fearful. Fear. An emotion I almost never employ. “Are *you* going to hurt me?”

Natalio’s eyes widened a fraction. Passing car lights made intermittent glides over his face, revealing his pained expression as he eyed his large, aggressive hands gripping my slender shoulders. He then swore under his breath and released me. “No, baby. Never. I’m sorry if I scared you.” He traced the pad of his thumb tenderly across my lips, and I sighed into his touch, believing every word as he said them. “Will I hurt someone who tries to harm you? Yes. Cruelly. Will I hurt *you*? Never. Never, Sadie. Forgive me. Forgive my anger.”

Lowering his head, he brushed his lips against mine, and just when I was opening my mouth to charge my tongue inside his, there was a knock on the window. It was then I remembered we were parked in the middle of the street.

Natalio muttered another curse and powered down the windows, revealing a burly man in a black suit, gripping a handgun in one hand, his sharp eyes searching out the vehicle. “Just checking if you’re okay, boss,” his heavy voice rumbled.

Natalio waved him off. “We’re good, Ruddy.”

The man nodded, eyed me, and backed away as Natalio powered up the window. Well, there’s proof to support his claim that he’s always secured. How did his men stay out of sight though? Until now, I’d *never* seen any of his people.

Natalio slid the gear back in drive and resumed our journey, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as his mind seemed to have wandered off.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I only went out with Devon last night because I was upset with you.”

He didn’t reply. Just kept his eyes on the road; the drumming of his fingers against the steering wheel being the only sound between us.

“He inquires a lot about Tevin,” I added, hoping that would make him speak to me again. “Maybe Tevin’s who he’s trying to get info on?”

“Ah,” Natalio drew out, nodding with a frown. “Tevin. Now that makes sense.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it, Sadie. Just…don’t defy me again and steer clear of Devon, okay?”

As much as I wanted to argue with his terms ‘defy’ and ‘order’, terms that made it seem as if I were some sort of slave to him, I didn’t. Natalio Nelson wasn’t quite the ambrosia mix when he was angry; that tasteful, edifying treat I always saw him as, eager to lick and devour every bit of his immortalizing nectar. An angry Natalio, I’d just learnt, was a scary, unpalatable one.

Leaning forward, I upped the volume of the car stereo. Etta James' mesmerizing voice filled the confined space of the vehicle as she crooned *'I'd Rather Go Blind'*.

Elevator doors slid open and I was led directly into a cold, high-ceilinged, glass-walled penthouse. Not my preferred style of living.

"Can I get you a drink?" Natalio asked as I glanced around.

"Merlot."

His footsteps drifted across the wooden floor, away from me, while my eyes idly drifted around his penthouse, taking in the open-floor-plan massiveness. What wasn't glass was either black or white. Black furniture. White walls. Black and white paintings.

I glanced over to the kitchen where Natalio stood pouring a glass of wine. Stainless steel, gourmet style.

I caught sight of a bubble chair hanging from the ceiling and went to have a seat in it. A huge, fluffy, white pelt laid beneath it. I pushed back and forth in the bubble chair as I heard Natalio’s footfalls approaching.

"You don't want to look around?"

He handed me the glass of wine.

"No." *I'd like to look down your pants.*

"You comfortable in this thing?" He sunk to his knees in front of me on the pelt.

"Yes." *And I'd be even more comfortable naked, with my legs on your shoulders.*

Sitting back on his heels, Natalio lifted my feet onto his lap, slid off my heels, and began massaging my feet.

Okay. Wow. This felt good. Really good. My head fell back as I closed my eyes and emitted a soft moan.

"If it were anyone else, they would've been from basement to balcony, wandering from room to room gushing how amazing this place is."

"It's cold and lifeless. And I've only been in the main room."

His fingers paused momentarily, then resumed. "You don't like it."

"It's not for *me* to like. Next foot."

Subserviently, he picked up my right foot and gave it similar treatment as the left.

He seemed to enjoy doing this. And I wondered what else I could get him to do before he slipped back into complexity.

"Have sex with me tonight."

"No."

Whamp, whamp, whaaaamp. Failure.

"Why not?"

"Because...not yet."

So much for com-mu-ni-cat-ing. That's bullshit. Action speaks a heck of a lot louder. Pulling my foot from his hands, I pressed it gently on his chest, while setting my wineglass on the floor. Natalio looked at me quizzically, but I gave him no time to think. Applying pressure to my foot on his chest, in one thrust, I pushed hard so that he fell backward onto the pelt. Before he could move, I lurched from the bubble chair and sat astride him.

"You want to play, Nelson? Let's play." Leaning down, I raked my teeth along his jaw.

Impassive blue eyes stared at me for a moment, then his mouth twisted in wry amusement, gaze holding a sinister gleam. I momentarily cowered.

Oh hell no, Natalio. I want you tonight and I'm going to get you by all means. Game on.

He folded his arms behind his head, all relaxed, an impish smile flirting on his lips. "What're you gonna do with me, seductress?"

Holding his gaze, I grasped the hem of my dress and inched it up, up, up, slowly. If he broke eye contact, then I knew I could win tonight. I edged my velvet dress farther

and farther up my thighs and he still didn't look away. Damn, he's got more control than I thought.

Reaching behind my back, I struggled to get my zipper down.

Natalio chuckled. "Now that's something you'll need a hand with..."

"Didn't need help zipping it up, and I don't need help zipping it down." Finally, after an eternal struggle, I got it unzipped. "Now, Mr. Nelson..."—I slid my dress down and stopped halfway over my breasts. Natalio drew a sharp breath, but his eyes still didn't leave mine—"if your cock so much as twitches beneath me, *I* get to choose how the night ends."

He gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, with a you-really-think-you-can-call-the-shots expression. I ignored it and released my dress, allowing it to fall down to my waist. My nipples hardened as the cool air whispered around them.

Natalio released a long shuddering breath that I didn't even realize he'd been holding. Warmth settled at my core as I felt his erection growing between my thighs.

A smug smile tugged up my lips. "Guess I win."

He remained silent, and I leaned forward and licked my tongue from the base of his neck up to his chin. He tasted divine. A low groan rumbled in his throat as I bit his bottom lip, then ran my tongue across it. Still, he made no move to touch me. Pressing my lips down on his, I kissed him. Hard. Because that's how I wanted it. My tongue forced its way inside his mouth but he didn't reciprocate. I begged him to open up, but he didn't.

In a flash, he grabbed my wrists, and in one move spun me onto my back so he was on top.

"It's what *I* say, Francé," he whispered peremptorily. "Slow or no."

Natalio brought his lips to mine and kissed me soft, tender, brushing his firm, confident lips against my quivering ones. He kissed my forehead, my cheeks, my ears and it felt so good and so familiar, I wanted to...I didn't know. I didn't know.

"Please, no," I begged him. "Don't be gentle. Nor slow."

"Slow, or no," he repeated as he released his hold on my wrists and brushed his knuckles along my cheek. "Sadie...Sweet Sadie..." he whispered, edging down my neck. "I could never forget..." He pressed soft kisses on my neck and ran his nose along my neckline. "*My* neck. *I* christened it. You've always been *mine*."

Hot and bothered, I thrashed my head from side to side. In love with the way he was touching me, but also hating it. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted him to touch me, but not like this. Lacing my hands around his neck, I implored him to kiss me. He did, and taking advantage of his vulnerable, lost-in-the-moment state, I dragged my hands sinuously down his shoulders, down to his firm sternum, and then pushed, hard, so that he was on his back again. Faster than a cheetah, I was once again straddling him.

Natalio was fleetingly wide-eyed, obviously taken by surprise. Then he chuckled, long and hard. "I see it's gonna be a very long night."

"Not if you give me what I ask for."

He watched me through impregnable blue eyes. "Do you want *me*, Sadie? Or you just want my cock?"

"Let me feel it first. Then I'll get back to you on that."

Due to his resistance, it was a struggle achieving the milestone of getting his shirt off.

Oh good lord... wow. Just, wow. He was defined. *Well*-defined. Ripped and taut. This sight of his bare chest and abs sent another shot of warmth to my core.

"Like what you see?"

"Nah. I think you should up your pounds in weightlifting. Too much flab and no abs."

Natalio laughed and I dipped and dove my tongue inside his mouth, kissing him how I wanted to be kissed. Aggressive and harsh. "This is how I want you to kiss me."

"No."

"You kissed me like this earlier at my apartment, remember?"

"You were mad at me, and I didn't know what to do," he confessed. "I only did that because I was out of options."

"Well, I'm *very* mad at you right now for not giving me what I want."

"You're already in *my* house." His voice was a warm blanket wrapping around me.

"I could leave, you know." *Ha. As if I would.*

"I won't let you."

Growing exasperated, I shrugged. "We're incompatible."

What's the point? He'd been withholding everything, and now wanted to do the same with sex? Uh, no. This was a deal-breaker.

"Because you want us to be," he said, sounding as irritated as I felt.

"I know what I want, Natalio."

"You *think* you know. *I* know. I *know you*."

I could see his anger approaching on a mighty black horse, galloping fiercely on red-hot coals. But then, I didn't give a damn. I was angry, too.

My words were firm, leaving no room for dispute when I said, "Hard. Fast. Or no." Before I knew it, I was on my back again, pinioned beneath him. "Slow or no."

"Fine then." I pouted. "No sex tonight. No sex with *you* ever. Take me home."

"No. You're staying here tonight."

"I want to go, Natalio." *Liar. Not even the warriors of heaven could take me away from this man.*

Natalio was adamant. "You wanted to come here. I brought you here. And you're staying."

"You can't make me," I challenged.

"Really now?" he dragged, as he slid his hand up my thigh. He lowered his head and closed his warm mouth over my hardened nipple, flicking his tongue around it.

"Hmm..." I couldn't help it.

"You've had four glasses of red wine tonight," he started, his voice reverberating through my body. His fingers walked slowly up my inner thigh. "Red wine. A known aphrodisiac." He then trailed his fingers around the edges of my panties, making me squirm.

"You've been wet and wanting since you felt my erection. Maybe even before that." Next, his fingers were inside my panties finding me already wet. His finger scarcely brushed against my bud and I mewled.

"Na...Natal...no..."

"You feel that?" he whispered, nibbling on my earlobe. "That's because you've been turned-on for so long. And I keep denying you what you want." Natalio pressed down on my bud with his thumb and I moaned again. Loud. What's happening? Sadie Francé didn't make noises during sexy time. Ever. I was a quiet lover.

"Now, Sadie, you're intensely aroused, bothered and highly frustrated," he continued to torture. "So when I do this, you'll writhe." He took my bud between his thumb and forefinger and rubbed, once, then twice. Unable to control my movements, I wiggled with a moan. "And when I do this, you'll arch." He slid a finger

inside me, then another. And I arched into him and moaned helplessly. "Now I'll make you come. And, because of the wine and sexual frustration, you'll come so long and so hard your body won't be able to sustain the blow...so you'll lay here, and you'll fall asleep."

Natalio moved his fingers inside me, in and out repeatedly. "Get ready, baby."

He held my bud between his thumb and forefinger again, then squeezed. And I cried out. Oh shit, the sensation. It's...heaven.

He squeezed again and I stiffened with raw pleasure. I was swept up in a dark whirlwind. It's like he was...hypnotizing me. Natalio rubbed his fingers together, my bud trapped in the middle, and I couldn't take it anymore. My whole body tensed, and then vibrated. My eyes screwed shut as I screamed so loud I could hear my voice echoing throughout the penthouse. I imploded, coming hard and long just like he said. It's like I'd never had an orgasm before. On and on it went, rippling.

I remained in the dark place behind my eyes for a long time, because my lids were just too damn heavy to open, and my limbs felt like lead.

The last thing I heard before I drifted off to sleep was, "I win."

CHAPTER TEN

No one knew his beginning or his ending. And he divulged only so much about himself. People could only assume he was somewhere from the west side, where the wealthy lived, but definitely not from this neighborhood.

He was too polished, too genteel, too respectable, too educated. The clothes he wore were what we here in the neighborhood only saw in magazines and dreamt of being able to afford one day. He owned all the latest gadgets advertised on television. And most times, *months* before a cool gadget even hit the stores, he already had it.

No one envied or spoke ill of him. Even the gangsters in the ‘hood kept their distance, as if warned off. He treated everyone with utter respect and kindness, so he was widely loved.

Every week, by late Friday—as he only came around on the weekends—the neighborhood girls would be atwitter of his arrival, so they'd style themselves, flaunting in the skimpiest of outfits—whatever it took to catch the sparkling blue eyes of the mysterious rich boy from the other side of town.

Automatically, he was capped leader of the Nine Lives Clique, because they all aspired to be like him—even though they didn't know *him*, just his trappings. But he was worthy of the title, considering he showered the members with vanity. In no time, the Nine Lives Clique were as fly as he was; sporting the latest kicks, brand name clothes and cool gadgets. You name it, Nine Lives Clique had it. All from the deep pockets of the mysterious rich boy.

When he was around, you could always tell. The atmosphere was light and animated. The whole area reverberated with positive energy. And I wasn't sure why. '*He's just human*', I always mumbled to myself. What about him made them so awe-inspired? What about him made them so happy? *He was just freakin' human!*

Saturday. It was Saturday, and Mom and Dad were fighting yet again about the blonde floozy down the street who Dad slept out with the night before. Dad had Mom pinioned on the ground, pummeling her face, warning her never to dare argue with him again. He was the man of the house and did whatever he damn well pleased.

With tears streaming down my face, I forced myself in the middle, trying to stop them, trying to end the ongoing horror story that was our life. But Dad turned and backhanded me hard across my face, barking for me to get out. To get my “no good” self out of his house and out of his sight.

One hand to my throbbing cheek, I snatched my sketchpad off the kitchen counter, retrieved my messenger bag and tucked it inside then compliantly obeyed my father's command to leave. I'd return a couple of hours later when Dad's anger had simmered down. Calling the cops was out of the question, because Mom would be pissed at me if I did. I'd done so twice before and she'd cursed me, telling me I was responsible for the neighborhood talking shit about her. On top of that, it rendered me beat downs from Dad.

I didn't fear Dad that much anymore, though. He'd hit on me so often, I became immune to it and just took the beatings as he doled them out. My concerns and tears shed were mostly for my mother. All she had to do was say the word and he could be done away with. But that wasn't what she wanted. And the one thing I never want to do was upset her. I loved her too much.

Slinging my messenger bag across my shoulders, I loped through the gate of our small, termite-infested bungalow home, and began my trek to the park.

I ignored the blue-eyed leader who gave me a chin-lift from across the street with his crew members scattered around him, who all were laughing and jesting and flirting with passing girls. The mysterious rich boy was perched on the hood of his sleek white Chrysler as it glistened under the glaring sunlight, while reggae, Buju Banton's *Wanna Be Loved*, blared from its stereo.

No, I'm not delusional, but sometimes I thought he deliberately dawdled in my proximity, waiting for me to leave my house so he could resume his irritating harassment.

An expected moment later, he jogged to my side. "Hey, Sadie."

As always, I ignored him. I couldn't fathom why he found it entertaining to annoy *me*, when there were a multitude of skimpily dressed girls bending over their fences

and railings, twisting chewing gum salaciously around their fingers, desperately trying anything to attract his attention. I've never given him a kind word, a flutter of my eyelashes or a curve of my lips, and still he wouldn't relent.

And no, I did not find his persistence cute or romantic. I found it pestering, shameless, aggravating...arrgh!

He stepped in front of me, obstructing my path. Being around six inches taller than me, I had to turn my sullen face up to look into his bright blues. It downright pained me how beautiful he was. An insidious and fatal beauty detrimental to all and every female who'll ever make the mistake of looking at him. Think, ovary explosion. Uh huh, the guy's beauty was *painful*.

His raven-dark hair was of unnatural length for a man, passing his shoulders in pigtailed braids. A red ball cap was turned backwards on his head, which made him resemble a very, *very* hot Indian.

"What I gotta do to finally convince you to jump off a bridge and kill your damn self?" I snapped at him.

The brightness in his eyes visibly morphed into concern. "You've been crying," he said, voice tender. "Your face is...did someone hit you?"

"My face's got shit all to do with you." I stepped around him and walked off.

He jogged up to my side again, but this time he didn't speak. He just walked quietly beside me, eyeing me closely, assessing me. And when I picked up the pace, he did, too. When I slowed, he did the same, like a puppy sticking to its owner. His eyes were so *there* on my face instead of watching where he was going.

Cars streamed up and down the streets, and a mixture of noises came from the clustered houses and rickety apartment buildings we passed while strolling along the sidewalks. The shrills of babies wailing, frustrated mothers and angry fathers shouting, kids happily playing jump ropes or hopscotch, and blaring music from different homes weren't enough to distract me from how freakishly warm and weird my body felt when I was close to him; the unexplainable curling in the pit of my stomach.

I didn't like it.

A tall brunette, dressed in a short white skirt and pink camisole with her full breasts, bubbling over the curve of her camisole, walked into our path as we passed her house and grabbed his hand, lilting, "Nelly! I've missed you. Why haven't you come to see me yet?"

Stepping around the rumored couple, I continued my walk to the park. *Right.*

I've never liked Mrs. Forrest's—the community gossip—daughter. But now I couldn't have been more grateful to her for pulling Nelly away from me. Because as much I hated to admit it, I *was* attracted to him. I *did* have the hots for him just like the any other red-blooded female. Nevertheless, although I couldn't control how I felt, I could control what I did about it. I didn't like the feelings he stirred in me, and I was angry I couldn't stop them, because I didn't want to feel *anything* for him.

Especially love.

In the park, I nestled up at the trunk of a massive oak tree—my favorite place to relax whenever my home was in turmoil; I found solace beneath the giant green canopy of leaves. Opening my pad, I picked up where I'd left off with my design sketches of what I hoped would come to life one day. Even though Dad told me my dreams were empty, I dreamed on nonetheless. What's life without dreams? Even if they never came true, the healthiest thing one could do was dream. So I *dreamed*. Because *dreaming* kept me alive. *Dreaming* kept me going.

This made me smile. This gave me hope. This gave me peace.

The sunlight dimmed as large fluffs of cumulus clouds passed by it. At the same time, the air shifted, but I kept my eyes to my pad, focused on my sketching and ignored the pair of Timberland boots that appeared before me.

Why won't he leave me alone?

"Now that I know what makes you smile, I know what to get you," the irritable voice said from about a mile above me.

"I want *nothing* from you. I'm not one of your boys from Nine Lives. Go pity someone else," I spat bitterly, my gaze intent on my sketch, my fingers applying enough pressure to break the pencil point.

"I've never seen you happy." His benevolent voice, coming from above, gave the impression of a deity endowing unwanted compassion.

"And what's it to you? Who the hell do you think you are?" I finally allowed my eyes to drift up his slightly bowed legs snug in faded blue jeans, and up to his firmly built torso with abs too proud to lay unnoticed beneath his white long-sleeved T-shirt shoved up to his elbows, and then up to his sculptured lips where my eyes lingered a

bit before gliding over his perfect straight nose and finally settling on his captivating blues.

"I'd like to make you happy," he persisted. A thick billowy cloud moved away from the sun, leaving it right over Nelly's head, crowning him with a halo, darkening his face and forcing its glare down on me so I was forced to squint my eyes. From my point of view, he *was* a deity...

But I was the seed of a cursed Diablo. "The only thing I'd like you to do, Nelly, is leave. Me. The hell. Alone."

Uh huh. He clearly didn't understand English. Because instead of leaving, he moved and sat right beside me under the tree, feet drawn up, arms resting casually on his knees. "I've tried. I can't."

"Try harder," I encouraged. His sudden nearness triggered that damn warm, unfurling feeling in my stomach.

Leaning over, he whispered against my ear, "I don't want to."
Sweet Lord...his breath...against my skin...

I arched a brow. "I can find another spot, you know."

Nelly shrugged. "I'll just follow you."

"And I'll call the cops."

He laughed. "They're easy to charm."

My mouth twisted in disgust. "You think you're all that and a bag o' chips, don't you? Swaggering around here like Solomon in all his glory, thinking you're better than everyone else."

He suddenly looked injured, and I immediately wanted to take back my mean words, because it wasn't the truth. Nelly was anything but proud or conceited, even though you could understand if he was. People who possessed everything they desired almost *never* possessed the great treasure of humility. But Nelly surprisingly did. This, in my mind, showed he was raised by good parents or guardians, with ethical principles, wisdom and integrity.

"Is that what people think?" he asked. "That I think I'm better than them?"

He looked down and mindlessly began trailing his index finger around in the sand, drawing concentric circles.

I've hurt him.

"No," I tried to placate. "No one thinks that. I'm sorry for saying that."

"If it didn't appear that way, you wouldn't have said it," he replied, now drawing a hypnotic coil. "You said it. That means you think it."

"I'm sorry, Nelly. I didn't mean it." I placed my hand on his, stopping him from trailing that hypnotic coil in the sand. It was...disturbing. "I'm just having a bad day, okay?"

I just hate that I like, like you.

Accepting my apology, he made a slight nod. "Why were you crying?"

I quickly removed my hand from his and resumed sketching. "No reason."

"You can tell me. I'm good with secrets."

Well, that's probably true, seeing as no one knew jack shit about the guy.

"No. Leave me alone now."

"Sadie..."

Oh heavens, he's relentless! "Dad's beating my mom to a pulp, I tried stopping him but he hit me and sent me away," I said in a rush. "There now. You've heard why. Goodbye."

"He *hit* you?" Nelly exclaimed, eyes wide. "The hell? Are you hurt?"

He started fussing over me, hands feverish on my face, my shoulders, my arms, checking for bruises. And all I could think about was how good his hands felt on me. How searing his touches were.

Swatting his hands away, I assured him, "I'm fine, okay? Just go. Please."

"Does he hit you often? I wanna help," he said. "Let me. Please."

"Nelly, piss off! Take your nose outta my freaking business now!"

"I won't 'piss off' and I won't 'leave you alone'. But I won't harass you anymore, 'cause I can see your mood's low today."

Shifting, he removed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "I *will* sit here and keep you company, though. Because you just shouldn't be alone." He gave life to a cigarette and puffed it as he said, "Don't worry, I'll keep quiet. I'm only a nuisance when I wanna be."

I scowled at his cigarette. "That's disgusting. Out it." *So much for ethical principles.*

Nelly shook his head. "It'll keep me quiet. It's either this, or me talking your ears off coaxing you to be my girl."

"Not a chance. Your smoking habit alone is turn off number one."

He winked as he sucked in another draw, then blew the smoke in my direction.
"Make me an exception."

"Out it," I insisted.

"No."

My eyes reduced to slits as I set down my sketchpad and launched at his hand. He didn't see the attack coming, so I succeeded in snatching the cigarette from his fingers, then broke it and tossed it away. Not sparing another second, I grabbed the box from his lap, emptied them to the ground, and crushed them all.

Staring at me through wide blue eyes, rimmed with long, dark lashes, he said, "You're a bossy little thing, aren't you?" Moving fast, he clasped me by the waist and pulled me onto his lap. "Be mine."

Oh my...

"No. Let me go." I tried and failed at escaping his hold.

"Why not?"

"Apart from you being a cross-eyed, ugly monster with a huge black wart on your nose and hairs growing from your ears?"

He laughed out. "Yeah, apart from that."

"Well, for one, you're too old."

"I'm twenty-one," he stated simply, unperturbed.

"And I'm *seventeen*. I'm too young for you."

"No, you're not. You're perfect for me, Sadie." He flexed his fingers on my hips and I started to protest again but he talked over me. "Age is just a number. Stop seeking impediments. We'll have a platonic relationship until you're ready. Patience is my best friend. I just...I just want you to be mine."

"I'm nobody's," I whispered, even though the words, "*Yes, I want to be yours*" danced on my tongue. He was working hard to sell himself to me. And it made me feel special for once in my miserable life.

"*Mine*," he insisted.

Oh God, yes. "You have all those girls out there vying for your attention, ready and willing to give it up. They're old enough. Go chase them and leave me alone." I tried to wring free of his arms again but he was too strong for me.

"Not interested. You're more intelligently mature than them, believe me," he said. "They're all about sex and vanity. Trying to trap me with a pregnancy even if I used ten

condoms. Nuh huh, I'm not the one. I'll only play into *your* hands. Let me fall into your trap."

Pointing a finger at his nose, I said, "That's not a very nice thing to say about the girls in my neighborhood."

"It's the truth." He shrugged, unfazed. "Take me. Play me. Trap me. Use me. Own me. Do whatever you want with me, Sadie. As long as you give yourself *only* to me, I'm yours."

"And what about Tanya, Mrs. Forrest's daughter? The rumors, are they true?"

"No. We're not together. I'm here with *you*. I want *you*."

Face inches from his, I whispered, "The cover is alluring. The beginning may be enthralling. But there's no culmination and no happy ending. So I suggest you stop chaptering. I'm badly written."

His nose met mine. "Give me the rights, and I'll edit and rewrite. Polish you to perfection. But you won't be a best seller, because you'll never be published. You'll be for my shelf only."

Oh, don't make me melt...

I trailed my finger down his perfect straight nose, his lips, his chin, to his neck, before swiftly grasping his pigtailed braids and twisting them in opposite directions around his throat. "Release me, or I'll choke you to death."

Nelly grinned. "God, I want you *so* bad."

When I tightened the braids around his throat, he gasped. "Perfect way to die. By the hands of the only girl I'm crazy about." He stubbornly refused to let me go, and instead held me tighter.

"You don't think I'll do it?"

"I trust you," he breathed.

"That's not a clever thing to do, Nelly." Leaning forward, I pressed a soft kiss on the tip of his nose and released the braids.

Grinning helplessly at me, he said, "I need to be more watchful around you. You're quick."

Nelly shifted my legs so I was straddling him, and I inhaled his woodsy scent. He was so...*male*. "Tell me, Sadie. Tell me what I want to hear."

I didn't reply. I just stared at him, at his beautiful face, his sinful blue eyes, his lips...
Yes, I wanted to be his. I liked him that much.

He must have seen the answer to his question in my eyes, because he cupped my face between his warm palms and brought his lips to mine...

I jolted awake. It was morning. The sun was bright in the sky, its penetrating glare invading the room. As my mind adjusted, I remembered the night before and realized where I was—Natalio's penthouse, in his immense bed.

I glanced around the room and I spotted Natalio out on the balcony talking on his phone. He looked up and saw me, smiled, then frowned.

Returning a frown of my own, I pressed my palm to my forehead, wincing at the instant, skull-pounding headache that attacked me. Flashes of my dream blinked before my eyes: they were there, and then they were gone.

I tried like the devil to remember what my dream was about, but all I could come up with were obscured snaps of my mom, my dad, and the community I'd grown up in.

My headache grew more severe, unbearable, and my heartbeats seemed to echo in my ears. I took a few deep breaths. Ten inhales, ten exhales. Then I closed my eyes, because they felt like flames were blazing within them.

Before I knew it, I was out cold again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Someone was watching me. I fought against the darkness and woke up to Natalio sitting on the edge of the bed in black slacks and a T-shirt, watching me.

"Thought you'd never wake up."

I stretched. "What time is it?"

"Noon," he answered. "You've slept for fourteen hours."

"And I still feel like I haven't slept at all. I felt so off and weird when I woke earlier. And I had this dream that felt so real..."

"What was this dream about?"

"That's the thing, I can't remember it. Yet my mind won't let it go."

He took my hand in his and shifted his gaze out to the balcony. "Who's Nelly?"

"What?"

"You kept murmuring the name 'Nelly' in your sleep. This someone I need to know about?" His gaze remained out to the balcony, eyes narrowed, expression distraught.

"I was *dreaming*, Natalio. And I honestly don't remember what about. The hell do I know who's 'Nelly'?"

Silence ensued as he circled his thumb in my lifeline.

Abruptly, my head felt as if it'd been hit with a brick as a severe headache smacked me.

Natalio noticed my sudden discomfort. "You okay?"

"Headache."

"You need food," he said authoritatively. "I made breakfast earlier but, yeah, you slept half the day away."

"Not hungry. These headaches, they only started since I met you."

"A cup of coffee?" he suggested, ignoring the latter part of my statement.

Because I knew he'd be insistent, I countered, "Hot chocolate."

He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed my knuckles, and the sun glinted off a platinum band with a solid gold line around the middle on his left index finger. That ring. It was plain, and simple, but strangely familiar. Where had I seen that ring before?

Natalio noticed my sudden interest in his ring but said nothing. Just eyed me real close.

Maybe I'd seen it in a jewelry store or magazine or something? I shook my head, my head hurt too much at the moment to worry about some ring.

At this, Natalio let off a loud, frustrated sigh, released my hand, and stood up. "I'll get your hot chocolate."

I nodded and watched him leave the room. What's his deal now? And what's up with these pounding headaches every goddamn minute?

Sometime later, Natalio returned with a tray holding blueberry muffins, a small bowl of fruit, and a big brown mug of hot chocolate. He went straight out to the balcony, set the tray down on a round cornice table providing placement for four accompanied by round, black and white-designed chairs that promised comfort.

Free of the tray, he came back to the bedside and held his hand out to me. "Up."

Flinging the covers back, I slid out of bed and took his hand. For several heartbeats, he just stared down at me, something poignant glinting in his depths. His thumb brushed across my lower lip, and just like that, my headache virtually forgotten.

He led me to the balcony and ordered me to sit.

I gestured to the tray on the table. "I told you I wasn't hungry."

"You have a headache. You need painkillers. And you can't take pills on an empty stomach. So eat."

"You're so commanding at times," I complained.

Sometimes he was controlling, and other times, though rare, he would defer to me. He had a high contrast personality.

Natalio snorted. "I'm a pussy when it comes to you, Sadie. But I've learned to stand my ground around you. You're so swift and mischievous—" He stopped abruptly, and unconsciously began twisting the ring around his finger. Something had him troubled.

And *what* was it about that ring?

"Eat," he ordered. Softly. Then he opened his laptop and began typing.

I obeyed. After swallowing the first bite of blueberry muffin, I had to admit I was surpassed hungry. Famished. In record time, I'd eaten both muffins and all the fruits in the bowl, leaving behind only pineapple slices—I hated pineapples.

Natalio raised a brow. "I'd sure hate to see when you *are* hungry."

I gave him an apologetic smile and shrugged.

He got up and disappeared into the bedroom, returning shortly with a glass of water and two aspirin. "Now take these."

And I did. It was startling how smoothly things went when you relaxed and allowed the man to take charge.

Stuffed to the gills, I leaned back in *the* most comfortable chair I'd ever been in; looking out at the picturesque view provided by the twenty-seven stories high balcony. It felt normal and right being around him, as if he'd always been a part of my life. His mere presence calmed me. Natalio closed down his laptop and came behind me to massage my temples.

Boy, does he know how to loosen up a woman. His long fingers massaged my forehead briefly, and then back to my temples. This was so restful and sleep-inducing, I could stay like this all day.

Most of his actions were so calculated and measured, composed, and carefully thought out. It made me realize that whenever his anger surfaced, it was mainly because things were out of his control.

"Spend the rest of the day with me," he said. "Stay the night."

"I planned on visiting my mother today." Though I wasn't sure I was ready to leave these pampering hands.

"I thought you only visited her on Thursdays."

"How do you know—" I stopped myself. Of course, he knew "more about me than I think". "You forgot that I spent my entire Thursday with you last week? Friday and Saturday were awful mood wise. So I just stayed home all day and worked on some pieces."

"And ignored my calls," he 'reminded' me.

"That, too." I laughed. Then I remembered his poem. "What's the meaning of that poem you sent?"

"What did it mean to you?"

"It meant nothing."

His hands stilled for a beat, and he sounded wounded as he said, "Then it means nothing."

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just..." I paused, being sure to choose my words carefully. The man could be really sensitive at times. "Poetry's mind-screwing. It's not straightforward and it never means what you think it means. Always something more profound. Requiring you read it over and over, disassembling and deciphering. I've never been a fan."

Natalio remained silent.

I tried again. "I've heard no one ever truly knows the real meaning of a poem but the poet. Would the poet, N.N., care to divulge the true meaning behind his work?"

"Some other time." He asked again, "Spend the rest of the day with me?"

"I start work tomorrow."

"I'll make sure you get there on time. Your car is here anyway."

My car. This man's ridiculous. "I didn't agree—"

"You'll take the car, Sadie."

"No, Natalio. I will not."

His hands left my temples. "You're so fucking stubborn!"

"Hey, I was enjoying that," I whined.

"Sadie..." he warned, ire infused his tone. Raking a hand through his hair, he made a short shake of his head before stalking off, leaving me alone on the balcony.

Well hell and damnation, the man's fuse was nothing short of volatile.

I went looking for him in the vast, modernly decorated bedroom, but he wasn't there. Best if I kept my distance until his anger subsided. Longing for a hot bath, I went into his sumptuous black and white bathroom suite and ran myself a hot bath, stripped and sank in.

The relationship I had with Natalio was uncertain and unstable. He'd been explicit about what he wanted from me: for me to "need" him. To "fall helplessly in love" with him—though I wasn't sure *why*. What kind of man asked for that?

It was all lust on my side. And even if I wanted to love him, I couldn't. I didn't know how to love or trust anymore.

Even being here was crazy. Because he obviously knew me from before my accident and was hiding something. It could be something extremely bad for all I knew,

considering he didn't want to come right out and tell me. And instead of going in the opposite direction, I was sticking around. Disregarding the warning bells.

He was handsome. He was sexy. He was caring and thoughtful. Perplexing. Angered easily. Had stalker-like tendencies. Sometimes scary and a bit creepy. Determined. And wielded ultimate control over my body.

A helluva combination.

Sucking in a deep breath, I slid underwater, testing how long it would take me to panic and start gasping for air. I couldn't remember the last time I panicked. Or *really* feared. Though Mr. Mysterious in Black sometimes gave me the chills.

Death, on the other hand, I liked to challenge. The insidious bastard was always there, smiling slyly, telling me to come. "*Come. I'm easier than Life*".

Death *was* easy. I could simple open my mouth now and allow water to flow in, and in minutes I'd be gone. I could place a gun to my head and with one easy move of my finger, I'd be gone. It was that easy. On the other hand, it was such a difficult and painful task to bring about Life—

I was abruptly hauled from my reveries and from the bath by two strong hands.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Natalio shouted, his eyes glacial, though tinged with fright.

I looked up at him, wide-eyed at his outburst and trying to catch my breath. "I left you for five minutes and—" he tipped his head to one side, "were you trying to kill yourself, too?"

As much as I wanted to burst into laughter, I didn't. He was already enraged. "No."

"Sadie, you were underwater for—I panicked. I—" he stopped, ran his long fingers through his glorious dark hair, then grabbed a towel and wrapped it around me. "Come."

"I'm not done."

Given my parents' separate attempts at suicide, one successful and the other failed, I understood why he'd think I was attempting the same. But I didn't hate my life *that* much.

"Yes, you are. Come." His eyes were an icy blue. He was not to be messed with right now.

Hoping to defuse him, I 'innocently' peered up at him through my lashes. "I need to clean my teeth."

He opened a cabinet, removed a new toothbrush, ripped off its packaging, squirted toothpaste onto it and handed it to me. "Here. Brush now. I'm not leaving you alone."

"I'm not a child," I protested.

"I know. But you're obviously disturbed. Now brush."

Repressing the urge to howl in laughter, I raised an eyebrow at him. "More disturbed than you are?"

"*Brush.*"

I just shook my head and brushed. The hilarity of his stupid assumption had me swallowing gulps of laughter.

I thought about my life. There was nothing exciting about it. Nothing interesting or meaningful. I was only kept together by the tenuous hope my mother would get better soon. The only other thing that brought me peace was designing. There was nothing else.

Was nothing else. Not until Natalio... He made me smile, feel things, want things—sometimes.

When I was finished, I turned off the tap at the sink and glanced up in the mirror. Natalio was staring me down, one hand pressed up against the wall. His short sleeve bunched down his arm, and I noticed a small dark scar on his arm. Gunshot wound. Cali D had two wounds like that on his leg.

Natalio had been shot. How? Why?

As much I wanted to know, I was positive he wouldn't tell me if I asked. No point in even trying.

"There, I'm all clean."

Still scowling, he took my arm and dragged me to the bedroom. Before I knew what was happening, Natalio discarded my towel, swung his arms around my waist and crushed me in to him. His mouth descended on mine in a swift, harsh kiss, and then pushed me backward onto the bed, landing on top of me, pressing me into the mattress.

"I'm wet, Natalio!" I squealed.

"Shut up."

My mouth snapped shut at the forcefulness of his tone. *What the hell?*

Taking hold of my hands, he raised them above my head, binding them at the wrists with one hand. With his free hand, he gripped my chin and pressed his lips to mine. When I tried to reciprocate, he pulled back.

"*Don't*," he said through clenched teeth. "Don't kiss me back. Don't touch me. Don't do anything."

What?

I opened my mouth to speak but his was on mine again, kissing me so hard my lips hurt. It was perfect. I kissed him back, because I couldn't understand how he expected me not to.

"You wanted it rough, Sadie. I'll give it to you rough. If it'll deter your suicide attempts."—*Ah, that's what this was about*—"Rough's what you want, isn't it?"

I could no longer hold back my laughs. "Natalio, I wasn't trying to kill myself. Stop overreacting!"

He glared. "That's what they always say."

Unable to help it, I bubbled into laughter. "Okay, dude. Just *stop*. You worry about me too much."

There was now a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Making fun of my concerns?"

"No," I squeezed out through a fit of giggles. "I just think you're too extreme. I'm not a child. You don't have to worry so much about me." I arched a brow at him. "You think I would end my life without first knowing what it feels like to have *Natalio Nelson* buried deep inside me? Not a chance in hell, babe."

He sighed, loud and hard. "I can't have it with you rough, Sadie. Not with you. I can't. I'm sorry about that just now...whenever I'm at a loss I always...do shit like that."

"But shit like that is what I want."

"I won't."

"Make love to me then," I breathed.

"No. That's not what you want," he said. "You only want me to make love to you because you think it's what I want. I've told you what I want, Sadie. I want you to want what I want. I want you to want *me*."

Oh Christ, this man was giving me migraines. "I do want you."

"Not just for sex, Sadie."

"No, not just for sex, Natalio."

"How much, then?"

"More than you know." I sighed. "You remember when we had pizza at that rooftop restaurant?"

"I remember every single thing we do together, Sadie. Every second of every minute I spend with you is paramount in my mind."

This man...

"Okay. You remember asking me what was bothering me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was irritated, disappointed and frustrated all at once because I thought you were gay."

He afforded a short laugh. *Finally.* "You thought *I* was gay?"

I traced a finger around his lips. "Yep. And I was pissed at myself. Pissed at you because I wanted you so much. I've wanted you since we first talked in the club. Fantasized about you. There's this...*current* between us. And something very familiar about you that tethers me to you. I...I can't explain it."

Natalio watched for a few seconds, unblinking. Then he smirked. "You fantasized about me?"

Shyness suddenly crept over me. "Yes."

"What was I doing in your fantasies?" he drawled, flashing me a wicked grin.

"Oiling baby chickens..."

Natalio broke into a laugh. "What?"

"I'm kidding." I smiled back at him. "You were doing *things* to me, Nelson. Things that I liked. Things that I loved. Feel-good things. Orgasmic things."

"Like?"

Touching my forefinger to my lips, I whispered, "You kissed me very gently, here."

Natalio brushed his soft lips against mine. "Like that?"

"Exactly like that." I breathed. "Then you let me taste your tongue."

He kissed me, and I opened for him, granting his tongue permission to explore. And we kissed. Kissed like my Natalio thinks I should be kissed. Ardent. Savoring. Revering. Our tongues entwining. Mine massaging his. His massaging mine. It was divine.

Natalio kissed my nose, my eyes, my cheeks, nibbled on my ear. While I twisted and squirmed with need to have him inside me.

"Sadie," he groaned. His mouth traveled down to my neck, licking and tasting and nipping. "You smell of pear and lemon."

"Your body wash."

He paused on the left side of my neck. "Can I?" he asked. "Lovebite," he added when I raised an eyebrow in question.

Lovebites were tacky and old-school...but anything for Natalio right now. "Yes."

His hot mouth sucked at the delicate area of my neck. It stung a little, and I remembered getting a lovebite at the exact spot. Just not by who.

He released my flesh and stared at the mark. "My neck. My mark. You're mine." He kissed me there again. "For as long as it lasts, every time you see it, you'll remember me."

Natalio continued down my body, kissing and nipping and licking. Twirling his tongue around one taut nipple, he suckled, while he cupped and kneaded the other.

Beneath him, I was like a slithering snake, bucking my pelvis up to his, trying to find some friction against him.

"Patience," he scolded, before trailing his warm tongue to the unloved breast, pleasuring equally.

"Natalio..."

He dropped hot, melting kisses down, down, while smoothing his palms gently up and down my sides. He paused at my navel to make a quick swirl of his tongue and I arched into him as I grew slick and hot. He dripped kisses from hip bone to hip bone. And I was like a jiggling pressure cooker, whistling steam I could no longer hold. I could come just like this, from his gentleness and tongue worshiping every inch of my body.

He was right. He *knew* what I needed. He knew I wanted all of this...all this tenderness. Gentleness I hadn't felt in so long. He knew *me*. How? God, I wanted to cry.

Natalio kissed and nibbled leisurely until he was finally where I desired him the most. Then he stopped. I could only feel his hot breath passing over my starving folds. I moaned noisily and bucked up my hips. Nothing.

"Kiss me," I begged, "please."

He kissed me.

"Again."

He kissed me again.

"Again and again and again," I cried in frustration. "Kiss me, lick me, suck me. Don't stop even if I beg you to."

"That's more like it," he said, laughter evident in his voice.

Natalio dipped his head and showed no mercy, his tongue slaughtering my bud, sliding through and over my folds. I cried out from the intense pleasure, begging him to stop, trying to get away, but he held my trembling legs in place. It felt so good... "Natalio..."

I drifted on cloud nine as my legs went rigid. "Ohgodohgodohgodohgodohgod," I whimpered as I neared my orgasm, about to detonate under the assault of Natalio's tongue. Then I did. Bursting into pieces, fisting my hands in his hair, bucking into his mouth as my orgasm rocketed out of me, while Natalio's kept his mouth over my swollen bud.

After a few intense minutes, I went stiff and motionless; I'd reached the peak.

With a long moan, I fell back down. Every jigsaw piece of me fitting back to its rightful place.

When I opened my eyes, Natalio was above me, staring down. "Hi."

"Hi," I whispered back. "Why aren't you naked?"

"I was worried you'd fall asleep for fourteen hours again."

"You wear me out," I said. "You're intense."

He kissed my lips. "That a good thing or a bad thing?"

Hungry for more, I tugged at his T-shirt. "Undress. Show me what else your body can do to me, then I'll get back to you on that."

I pulled his shirt over his head before he planted his lips on mine again, kissing me hungrily. With a pop of his pants button, I unzipped them and shoved my hand down his pants, curling my fingers around his veined erection.

"Impressive, Nelson."

He groaned in response, flexing his hips forward.

I worked my hand up and down his length, but his jeans restricted full movements. "Take them off."

Moving off me and onto his feet, he shed his pants and boxers, went over to the nightstand—giving me clear view of his amazing ass—retrieved a condom from the

top drawer and tossed it to me. "Do your thing," he whispered as he came back above me.

I suddenly felt self-conscious, being nude and sprawled on his bed, with his lean, sculptured body looming over me. He was here for me. Live and erect. "How do you know I know how to put it on?"

"Because I *know*."

I deftly tore the packet, pinched, and rolled.

Natalio watched my eyes. "Good girl."

Sliding my fingers through my slick heat, I collected moisture and began stroking his hard, rigid, distention. Natalio closed his eyes and made a deep sound in his throat.

Situating his crest at my entrance, I told him, "My body yearns for you, Natalio. Take me. Now."

His eyes slowly opened, and keeping them on mine, he pushed into me. All the way in. Making sure I felt all of his overwhelming length. He bucked in deep, and I sucked air through my teeth at the intense pleasure of his penetration.

Oh god. This man...

Then he moved. Slowly. In and out.

He kept his pace, lifting my hips and circling into me. Shifting his hips around. In and out and around. My back arched up as he gripped me by the waist while he knelt upright and fixed me steadily onto him. This way, I was feeling everything, moving within me, deep and satisfying. He wasted none of himself, giving me every damn inch. The penetration was sweet pain and I wanted it to go on forever. "Ah...I...I love...the feel of you inside me."

Since when did I babble this much during sex? Stop talking, Sadie.

"Natalio...please...don't stop..."

Stop. Talking. Now.

Natalio made a flex of his hips that touched some secret spot that opened a fissure to my soul. "M'god, Na...Natalio..."

How could he have such power over my body? He made me feel like saying all manner of things. Crazy things. Sweet things. Quote a poem. Sing a song. Anything. God, I felt *so* good. I wish this could go on forever.

Too soon, I felt myself quickening.

Releasing his grip on my waist, he picked up my left foot and brought it to his mouth while he slid in and out of me torturously. Then my toes were in his mouth, he licked around them, his pleasure-filled eyes locked on mine.

"Sweet sins," he growled, letting go of my foot and crashing down on top of me. Cupping my face, he kissed me greedily, picking up momentum, driving into me with ferociously hard pumps. I couldn't moan or scream because he buried his tongue in my mouth.

I wrapped my legs around him as that telltale tingle darted through me. My head swirled a crap ton of feels. Natalio was slamming forcibly into me while my mouth was captured, it was too good.

Unprepared, I exploded, my fingers digging into his biceps as I vibrated around him, my inner walls clenching at his shaft inside me.

"Christ, Sadie," he hissed. "You feel...oh shit..." He plunged deep. Once. Twice. And on the third penetration he came, pulsing, jolting, with a string of incoherent words, my name tangled in the mix.

Collapsing heavily onto me, he hugged me, tight, repeating my name, "Sadie... Sadie...Sadie."

I was hugging him tightly, too. Eyes screwed shut. Trying to shut out the niggling thought that someone, someone important, had once kissed me, touched me, made love to me, then whispered my name exactly like he just did.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Nelly, my fingers hurt," I complained as I worked on the last cornrow. "Your hair's just too damn long."

Plaiting Nelly's hair was usually a challenge, because it was too soft and silky to grasp from his scalp. And then there was the length—around fourteen inches of hair. I wasn't sure why he liked his hair plaited, anyway. Maybe it made him appear tougher and more street? Or maybe he just liked having my hands in his hair.

"You don't like my hair long? You wanna cut it?" Nelly asked, always ready to please me even when my complaints were trivial. He made me feel as though he lived and breathed only for me.

"But then you'd lose all your strength and beauty, my dear Samson," I teased. "I'm no Delilah, I could never do that to you."

"So you like it then?"

"Of course I do. It just takes a hell of a long time to plait," I said. "It's my fingers that protest."

Nelly was sitting cross-legged on a thick red blanket while I knelt behind him grooming his hair. We were at our favorite spot—under the giant oak tree—in the park where we spent most of our time together. Happiness has been a close friend of mine since I've met Nelly. He was what I never knew I needed. Someone who made me smile, someone who gave me hope. He was attentive, caring, considerate and passionate. Over and over he assured me of his burning love for me, but I didn't have the courage to return the words, because it was hard to believe any of this was real, to believe it would last.

For one, I only saw him on the weekends. It was agonizing to wait for the days to arrive so I could touch, taste and feel him. We chatted and texted profusely during the week, though—he'd bought me a smartphone and a laptop.

Nelly was the center of my world, all I thought about, all I dreamed about. But somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that one day I'd wake up and it would all be over. As if it never happened. It was too good to last. And I didn't believe in happy endings. No such thing existed.

"There now. All done," I said, when I'd finished the last cornrow. My fingers were numb.

"Oh, thank God." He twisted and pulled me down to the blanket with him. "Because I've been dying to do this... "

He kissed me. Hard and deep and longing.

Nelly...

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, and summer's lease hath all too short a date'." He paused to kiss me again before continuing the Shakespeare poem softly against my lips. *"But thy eternal summer shall not fade, nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st'."* He pulled away to look at me. "I love you, cognac-eyes."

Mind sidetracked, I replied with a small smile.

His brows crinkled with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Sadie, we've been together for seven months. I know when something's bothering you."

I broke his gaze. "It's nothing, Nelly."

"Baby, tell me."

My eyes focused on his chest. "If you love me so much, why are you so secretive?"

As if not sure what to say, he just stared at me. Opened his mouth, then closed it.

"I mean, I know you personally. What you like, dislike. What makes you smile and all that," I continued. "But I don't really know much *about* you. Where you're from. Your true name. About your family. You know everything about me. And it's not the same with me."

Nelly closed his eyes and slid down my body so that his head rested on my stomach, he held me tight. "I will tell you. You will know. I belong to you, Sadie. And you to me."

But I can't right now." He paused. Exhaled loudly. "I'm waiting. On your eighteenth birthday, I'm taking you away from here. I'm gonna marry you, Sadie. You're gonna be my wife."

Marry me? Wife?

"So you don't trust me enough to tell me about yourself?" My voice was lower than a whisper. I was too hurt.

He gripped me tighter. "Of course I trust you. Sadie, don't think this is about you. It's not, okay? It's the consequences I'll face if people know who I am. My father..." he trailed off, then hugged me tighter. "I may never be able to see you again. And I couldn't bear that. It would kill me."

I nodded, not that he noticed, because his eyes were clenched shut as he clung to me like a life-saver.

"You have to believe I love you," he breathed. "*Always.*"

"I believe you."

"Then why haven't you told me you love me? You don't feel the same?" He lifted his head and rested his chin on my navel. His beautiful blue eyes stared hopefully at me, while I fiddled with the ends of his braids.

I averted my gaze off to a far distance where a young boy played 'go fetch' with his shaggy brown dog. Behind them were two baby girls wallowing about in a sandbox. "Your true name, at least? I don't deserve to know even that?" I asked, evading his question.

"What do I have to do to make you love me, Sadie?"

"Tell me your name."

He sighed heavily and laid his head down again, cheek to my stomach. "My name's Na—"

A basketball bounced on Nelly's back, cutting him off. I jerked my head up to see a few of the Nine Lives Clique members grinning down at us.

"We're fixin' to play ball, Nelly. C'mon," said Darren, a tall, tattooed hunk with thick auburn hair.

Nelly gave them a perfunctory shake of his head. "Nah, guys, I'm chilling with my girl."

The guys started laughing. Then Travis, stocky, brown-haired, chubby-faced, said, "Dude, you've been datin' this chick almost a year. That's some ol' school shit. Everyone knows Sadie's not givin' it up."

"Shut the hell up, Trav," Nelly warned as he eyed me, gauging my reaction to his boys who were always explicitly antagonistic towards me. They didn't think I deserved Nelly's attention.

Travis fixed his dark eyes on me. "Isn't it true, Sadie? You're not givin' it up, are you? We know you don't love him. He's just your pastime when daddy kicks you out the house so he can juice your mommy like a lemon."

I rolled onto my side and turned my back to them.
It's wasn't true. I love Nelly. Of course I love him.

Nelly rose to his knees. "Trav, chill the hell out. You're upsetting her."

Darren butted in. "Come on, Nelly. It's true. You're...*you*. You can get *any* piece of ass you want. Is Sadie worth the wait?"

Nelly was on his feet next, furious, his hands curled into steady fists. "One more word out of any of you, and I swear I'll—"

"Okay. Okay." Travis tried calming the situation. "No need to get violent. Apologies, Nel."

The boys knew better than to piss Nelly off. An angry Nelly meant bloody noses, no more spoils, and maybe being dismembered.

"Come play ball with us," Darren urged.

"You assholes need to fuck off. Right now." Nelly knelt back down beside me. "I've got damage control to do."

The crew muttered more apologies and wandered off.

Nelly touched my shoulder and I shrugged him off. "Don't be mad at me, Sadie. They're jerks. You know this. Why do you always let them get to you?"

Silence...

"Sadie, please."

Continued silence...

"Want me to sing a Pink song? Choose any one and I'll sing it."

Thank God I was facing away from him so he couldn't see my small smile, or the tears. Singing—or rather *crowing*—a Pink song was his way of cheering me up. I l-o-v-

e-d Pink's music so much that I could never resist breaking into a smile when he sang to cheer me up.

Sighing, I turned and curled in his arms. His expression crumbled when he saw my wet eyes.

"No, cognac eyes," he whispered, stroking his fingers through my curls. "You're stronger than that."

"I'm ready," I choked out.

Nelly stilled. "No. you're not. Stop letting those assholes get to—"

"I've been trying to tell you I'm ready for the last two months, Nelly. And you keep saying I'm not."

He thumbed my tears away. "That's because you aren't."

It's annoying sometimes the way he treats me like a naïve child. "Yes, I am!" I half-shouted. "Stop babying me."

Nelly closed his eyes and sighed as he opened them. "I want this moment for you to be special, Sadie. You deserve the best of everything. I want us to be married. On our honeymoon. On an exotic island when this happens. Call me old school, but that's what I want to give you."

I snorted. "And when will that be? When I'm thirty?"

"Eighteen."

"I don't want to wait," I whined. "I want you, I want you, I want you. No waiting. Please, Nelly."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Nelly sat up straight and pulled up his feet. "Come, sit here." He pointed between his thighs. "And wrap your legs around me."

When I did as told he circled his arms around me, squeezing me hard, like he always does. The atmosphere became cooler as a result of the sun's dimming. The leaves of the oak tree whispered gently above us. And the distant noises of bouncing balls, barking dogs and playful children grew silent to our ears as we embraced each other.

"You always tell me I hug you too hard," Nelly began. "That's because no matter how tight I hug you, it's like I'm just not getting all of you. I have this feeling of needing you so close that our bodies become one. So my soul kisses yours." His eyes were filled

with warmth and unconditional love. "I love you so much it scares the living shit outta me. No one should ever need another human being this much. I told my mother about you, and she said it's hazardous to love anyone this much. She said: *'If one should love another more than they love God, then he'll take that person away. Everyone and everything else should be secondary to him.'* And I don't want to lose you. I try not to love you this much. But I think I'm obsessed. I can't help it. I need you to smile. I need you to feel whole. I need you so I can breathe."

Oh god...

"Nelly, I-I-," I stuttered. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you love me, too, dammit," he snapped.

No. I'm afraid.

I cupped his face and kissed him senseless, trying to express my love without having to say the words. I know he needed to hear it. But I couldn't say it.

We parted, gasping for air.

Nelly picked up his messenger bag, reached inside and came out with a black velvet case. He flipped it open, and inside sat two identical silver bands with a line of gold around the middle. "These are promise rings," he told me. "We'll both have one. It's a promise that you'll be my wife one day. That you'll be the mother of my children, the love of my life. That you'll be my forever. That I'll go to the grave loving you."

He removed one of the rings and showed me the engravings, *'Nelly, My Forever'*, on the inside, then slid it on my left index finger.

"Now put mine on and promise me," he whispered, watching anxiously for my reaction.

He didn't know I loved him beyond sanity. That he *was* my forever. So to alleviate his anxiety, I removed the other ring from the box, which had the engravings *'Sadie, My Forever'*. "I promise." And I slid the ring onto his finger.

He grinned, moved in, and pressed his lips to mine. And we kissed greedily, feverishly, his hands in my hair, my hands moving restlessly beneath his shirt.

He fell on his back, taking me with him. And we both laughed.

"I'll die, Sadie, but my love for you won't. I'll go to the grave loving you."

Someone was shaking me awake.

I reluctantly opened my eyes and was staring right into Natalio's. Again. He was on his side, propped up on one elbow.

Something was tickling my cheeks. Tears. I was crying. I was crying in my sleep?

"Sorry to wake you, but you were crying so hard I couldn't..." Natalio tried to smile but a torn expression marred his features.

"It's okay," I whispered. "Thanks for waking me."

"Was it a bad dream?"

I closed my eyes and tried to remember what my dream was about. There were flashes of the neighborhood I grew up in, the giant oak tree I used to sketch under, the park...there was this person, hugging me, but his face was obscured. The flickers were quick, I had them, and then they were gone. Zilch. "No."

"Wanna tell me about it?"

"I-I can't remember any of it, Natalio."

With a sigh, he flopped back on the bed, eyes on the ceiling. "You were dreaming about Nelly again," he said. "Saying his name over and over. Saying you loved him." He looked pained, as though whatever I'd been saying in my sleep was too much for him. "Nelly's the one who hurt you. The one who made you a cynic of love, I realize. How is it you see this person each time you close your eyes, yet when you open them, you don't? How can you dream the memories, but when you're awake you remember nothing?"

"Memories? You think my dreams are memories?"

He gave me a contemplative side-eyed glance as he unconsciously fiddled with the strings of his sweatpants. "Maybe..."

I didn't know the answers to his questions. If my dreams *were* my memories—which I have a strong belief they were, due to the fact my childhood neighborhood's always in my flashes—then they've only started since I met him.

Maybe this Nelly person was someone from my past who got lost in the damaged memories. Someone related to Natalio? He did say he was from my past, after all. But then, if he knew a Nelly, he wouldn't be asking me who this Nelly person was.

I liked Natalio. A lot. And wouldn't want him leaving me because of this. But I could see the pain I was causing him already, sleeping next to him and dreaming of someone else.

"I don't know," I whispered. "I really don't know how."

Shifting back on his side, he brought his gaze to me, but said nothing. Natalio's eyes were rarely readable, but now—maybe by his deliberate doing—I could read all that was in his eyes: his distrust, his poignancy, his disbelief, and the most illuminated, his hope.

"Hug me back to sleep?" I begged him.

He opened his arms and I crawled into them and snuggled up to his chest. Being in his arms felt so right. There was an unexplainable peace when I was with Natalio, and I wanted to focus on what I had with him. Channel all my attention to him. Find some sort of happiness again.

I listened as his heartbeat slowed and his breathing evened out. Knowing he'd fallen asleep, I tilted my head to admire him. I tentatively stroked my finger across his brows, then gently down his face. He didn't stir.

I'd never really looked at him this closely before. Asleep, he looked young, peaceful and vulnerable. Nothing like the hostility-ridden, intimidating, mysterious man in black.

I stared at him like an obsessed freak until my eyes grew heavy again. When I finally dosed off, an image of an extremely hot young guy with bright blue eyes appeared in my vision. I was beneath him, and he was naked on top of me.

I knew him. He was...Nelly. My first.

He kissed me, told me he loved me. And left...

Everything went blank.

I tried to open my eyes but I couldn't; it felt like something, something powerful, was holding me down.

Then Nelly appeared again. He was lying next to me now, on his side. Sleeping. Long braids tumbled over his shoulders. He was so damn beautiful.

Suddenly his eyes opened and he looked forlorn, his brows creasing and the blue of his eyes dimming as he asked in an echoing whisper, "How long, Sadie?"

My eyes flew open, my heart palpitating. I blinked a few times, trying to make sense of what I'd just dreamt or saw or...whatever.

Nelly...

Now I remembered who Nelly was to me, jumbled pieces of my memories flitted in and out of my mind, never lingering for more than a second. Nelly on top of me...him

kissing me...I'm crying...I'm alone...I'm being laughed at by a faceless group...there's my father, red with rage and holding a baseball bat in his hand...

The pounding of my heart grew loud in my ears. I never had memories or dreams of my father close to the injury before. Ever. Were these real? Or were they just fragments of my imaginations? That last image of my father sure as hell made me not care for those memories. Those memories were better off locked away.

"I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry, Sadie..."

Confused, I tipped my face up and realized Nelly was still next to me. Except he looked years older now. And his long braids were gone. His hair was trimmed but messy, and he had sexy stubbles on his jaw. He was still hot, still beautiful, and I still love him.

I smiled. I didn't want to wake up from this dream.

Nelly mumbled something incoherent in his sleep again, and I placed a hand on his chest. Okay, this felt way too warm to be a dream. His arm around me tightened. That, too, felt too real.

A strange tingling bristled the hairs on my nape. Something wasn't right.

I dragged my eyes from Nelly's face for a second to take in my surroundings. I was in *Natalio's* bedroom. Cuddled up beside...Nelly?

I had an immediate headache, like I was whacked in the head with a bowling ball.

And like the snap of a hypnotist's fingers, things fell into place. This migraine alone told me I wasn't dreaming.

Oh. My. God...

My heart slammed so hard into my chest I was sure my ribs were fractured. *Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god.*

Nelly. Nelly. Natalio was Nelly! How? *How?* Impossible.

Unblinking, unable to breathe, I could only stare at Natalio. For several moments I was motionless, frozen in place.

I closed my eyes and counted to ten, then released a long, shuddering breath.

This couldn't be real...

Searching for solid proof, I carefully peeled Natalio's arm from around me to check that damned ring that had bugged my mind all day. Flashes from my dreams came barreling in as I studied the ring. We're in a park...and...there's two of them...they're promise rings.

Was Natalio really Nelly?

Tears came as scattered and muddled images slid in and out of my mind. It was making me dizzy, tired, really tired. This was how he knew me. All his figurative statements were starting to make sense. His poem:

*I stand before you,
But you see me through opacity.
You know who I am,
But you don't see who I am...*

He tried to tell me in so many ways.

Out of nowhere, a conversation my mother had with me after I came out of my coma played in my head. When I'd inquired why dad had hit me so brutally, she'd only looked at me with sad eyes and said: "*That boy caused you great pain, darling. I had faith in him, you know. I thought he really loved you. I believed he would've given you a good life. But I guess they're all the same. You didn't deserve to be left like that. Now look at the permanent damage he's caused...*"

When I'd asked her what boy, she wouldn't tell me. Said it would be for my own good.

I squeezed my eyes shut and there it was...not in a vision this time, but in my heart. The pain Nelly had caused me. How he'd used me. It wasn't in my memory; it'd always been in my *heart*. My eyes burned as tears spilled from them.

That's why he looked so torn whenever he woke me. He knew I was dreaming about him, yet I didn't see he was *him*.

"How is it you see this person each time you close your eyes, yet when you open them, you don't?"

Everything he's ever said or done was starting to make sense. He *wasn't* complicated or mysterious. *I* was ignorant. I suddenly felt nauseous and weak-limbed.

Quietly, so as not to wake him, I gingerly weaseled out of his arms. He sighed in his sleep and turned, hugging my pillow to him.

The bedside clock displayed 2:12am.

I padded to his dresser and stole a white T-shirt and a too-big pair of sweatpants. I folded the sweatpants at the waist a few times so it wasn't dragging on the floor. Then I retrieved my purse and cell phone, all the while stifling sobs.

As I made to leave, I paused at the bedroom door, turning to look at him one last time.

The purse slipped from my grasp as I sidled back to the bed and sat next to him. I let my knuckles taste his warm skin, and my lips touched his as he slept quietly, unknowing. His messy hair tossed across his forehead, his broad chest rising up and down with each breath.

Opening the nightstand drawer, I searched for a pen and paper and scribbled Solomon's song:

One night as I lay in my bed, I yearned for my lover.

I yearned for him, but he did not come.

So I said to myself, "I will get up and roam the city, searching in all its streets and squares.

I will search for the one I love."

So I searched everywhere but did not find him.

The watchmen stopped me as they made their rounds and I asked,

"Have you seen the one I love?"

Promise me...Not to awaken Love until the time is right.

Hot pearls of tears rolled down my face, plopping onto the note, smudging the words. I fixed the note squarely on his nightstand, kissed his parted lips again and left the room.

By then it was 2:30am. There was only one person I knew who'd be awake at this hour.

Music was blaring in the background when he answered my call.

"Tev, I need a lift."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Tell me his name, Sadie," Tevin demanded when I entered his car and he saw my face. My tears ran freely. "Tell me the asshole's name!"

"Chill, Tev."

Tevin craned his neck to glare up at the skyscraper building through his windshield. "What did rich boy do? Say the word, Sadie. Say the word and I'll deliver his head to you John the Baptist style."

"Tev, I promise you, I'm good," I tried to defuse him. "He didn't do anything to me. I just...needed space and snuck out. That's all."

He didn't believe me. It was obvious. "Y'sure?"

"Yes." I added a nod with the word for emphasis. "Is Kels at your place?"

Tevin finally pulled away from the curb. At this ungodly hour, the roads were dark and unpopulated. "Yeah. Been there all week."

"And you're out swindling?"

"Gotta make that green, baby girl," he said through his sexy Hispanic accent. His basketball cap barely sat on the side of his head.

"I'm gonna sleep at your house tonight then. But stop at my apartment first so I can grab a few things. My new job's in a few hours."

"Why? What's wrong with your apartment?"

"Not a damn thing." Except that as soon as Mr. Mysterious in Black wakes up and notices my absence, he's decidedly going to come knocking.

"'Kay. You can take one of the rooms upstairs."

"I'll take whatever goddamn room I want, Tev. Sleep between you and Kels if I damn well feel like it, too."

Tevin groaned. "I know something's wrong, Sadie. And I know you're gonna go bawling ya big brown eyes out to Kels. Then when I get home, fuckin' will be off limits 'cause her ass will be empathizing with you. It's easier to just tell *me* and lemme gouge the eyes of that motherfucker, pluck his fingernails out and brew stew his eyeballs for ya. However painful you want his death to be, just say the word."

Trust Tevin to make me laugh. I wiped my nose in an unladylike fashion. "That's what you're worried about? Fucking? Seriously?"

Tevin shrugged. "I love being inside ma' girl, Sadie. Wha' can I say?"

"Well I'm not sorry. I need my friend right now. You're just gonna have to jack-off."

I was surprised to see Brenda awake when we got to my apartment. She sat cross-legged on the sofa in Betty Boop pajamas, books and papers strewn about her, eyes bloodshot, face bleary.

"Hey, Bren Bren," said Tevin.

She gave a perfunctory nod. Brenda despised the very air Tevin breathed.

"Law school looks like a pain in the ass," I commented, taking in the scene and the dark circles under her eye.

"Only when you keep procrastinating assignments," Brenda replied through a yawn.

"Hmm." Not something Brenda would usually do. She's been surprising me a lot lately.

As she eyed me from head to toe, I was reminded of my oversized attire. "Been with Nelson?"

I walked off. None of her damn business. "I'm just here to grab some stuff. Proceed with your paper."

Brenda bolted up from the sofa, tailing me to my room. "Has he...said anything about me?"

Curious, I glanced over my shoulder at her. "Was he supposed to?"

"The gift he gave me..." she trailed off, frowning.

I grabbed my duffel and began tossing things inside. "What was it?"

"Um, a chunk of cheese."

I swiveled around and just stared at her, nonplussed. *What the hell?* Natalio was such a weirdo.

After a beat, I shrugged and zipped my bag. "Welcome to the complex world of Natalio Nelson," I said as I shouldered past her and started down the hall.

Back in the living area, I nudged Tevin who was busy scrutinizing a four-foot tall, golden Chinese Samurai that Brenda had brought back from her New York trip. "Come on."

Brenda requested, "Will you ask him what it means for me?"

"Uh, no. We're not... friends anymore."

"Jeez. What's wrong with you two?" she said, hand on hip. "Wasn't it just yesterday night he was here in my living room with his tongue down your throat?"

I shrugged, then nudged a distracted Tevin again. If the thing wasn't so big, Tevin would've pocketed it already right under our noses. Knowing Brenda, that Samurai was unquestionably made of real gold. "Pretty much. That's just how things are with me."

She rolled her eyes. "Just ask him what the damn cheese means, Sadie."

"Cheese?" Tevin butted in, quizzical.

"He gave her a chunk of cheese in a gift box," I enlightened him. "Tev, *let's go.*"

Tevin tried suppressing a laugh, failed at it, and then erupted into a belly-busting roar.

Both Brenda and I stared at him, lost.

"Dude's tryna tell ya you're a rat, Bren Bren," Tevin informed her between chuckles.

"What?" we both asked.

Tevin's shoulders jerked in a shrug. "You probably ratted him out on something."

Brenda scowled, and I knew she was thinking the same thing I was: her divulging Natalio's identity to me.

Grabbing Tevin's arm, I hauled him through the door before Brenda could say anything else, stifling my own laugh.

That was definitely something *Nelly* would do.

"Be back in about an hour or so. Please, Sadie, don't leave her too upset, 'kay? I *have* to fuck before I sleep."

I flipped my middle finger up at Tev and exited the car, making my way into his grotesquely large, modernistic house. Three stories high with glassed balconies and floor-to-ceiling windows. Tevin was rich. But through dishonest means. His money was bloody, and carried the weight of wretched and innocent souls. It was the reason I preferred taking whatever job I could to pay my own bills instead of taking money he would so willingly give me, or even just live at his place instead.

Because of my experiences with Cali D, I tried keeping my distance from such corrupt wealth. Keeping my distance prevented me from getting splattered when shit hit the fan.

I made my way through the foyer and headed for the stairs. Waking Kelsy with my pathetic problems was never my intentions. It merely entertained me to torment Tevin.

But as I mounted the stairs I heard Kelsy's call: "Tev, baby. Is that you?"

So I changed directions and navigated to her room. "It's me, Kels."

Kelsy's small frame was swallowed up by the puffy, white comforter on the California King, television remote in hand as she switched channels. "Sadie? What are you doing here? Where's Tev?"

"He just left. Said he'll be back in an hour."

Light from the television blinked through the darkness of the air-conditioned room. "Why aren't you asleep?"

She let out a long groan as if in pain. "I just can't, Sadie. I can't sleep knowing Tevin's out on the streets and anything crazy can happen. So I always stay up until he gets back. He doesn't know I fake sleep, though. So don't say anything."

"Maybe I *should* say something." I ambled over to the bed. "He should be in bed with you."

She shot me a warning glare. "Really, though, how on earth do women marry cops and soldiers and firemen? This is worst feeling ever. Worrying all the time."

"Their peace comes from knowing their men are out there saving lives. Tev's out there *destroying* lives."

Kelsy eyes went to the ceiling and stayed there. "You think he'll ever give up this life?"

"That's something you two need to talk about. Lay your cards on the table. Let him choose."

Who am I to give advice when my love life is...hell, I don't even have one. My present turned out to be my past. My past had collided with my present. My present is my past and my past is—oh shit, now I'm going crazy.

We lay in silence for a few meditative minutes before Kelsy turned her gaze to me. "Hold up, why are you here this late? Isn't tomorrow your first day at GLFH?"

Before I could even answer, Kelsy's eyes widened. "Oh no. Is this about Natalio?"

At the very mention of his name, my eyes misted, lips trembling. Tevin's craziness earlier had held off my tears a bit. But now the floodgates re-opened, hot tears gushing out as my friend took me in her arms.

"Shhh," she soothed. "You don't have to talk about it if makes you this upset, sis."

"He's from my past, Kels. He hurt me. My memories are a bit scattered, but I know he hurt me. He...left me."

"So you *can* remember?" Kelsy asked in disbelief. "Like, all he did to you?"

"I can, but it's all so scrambled I can't even...It's just flashes...but the pain is so palpable. It's so *there*." I placed my hand over my heart. "It's here, Kels. This is where I feel it."

Kelsy tightened her arms around me, and I'd never been more grateful to be held. I was torn, confused, pained. But the one emotion I searched for—anger—remained elusive.

"What do you think he wants?" Kelsy asked. "Why do you think he came back?"

"I don't know. To hurt me some more, maybe? He insisted I fall 'helplessly' in love with him. Just like he pressed me to admit I love him seven years ago." I sniffled. "But he'd already broken me. Why does he want to do it twice? Why did he *want* me to remember something so painful? He's a sick, twisted, heartless asshole, that's what I think."

Kelsy sighed. "Don't hate me for saying this, but I think you two need to *talk* about what happened back then. Answers may help. Have him explain why the hell he did whatever he did to you and why on earth he came back. You don't have to be with him anymore, Sadie. You just need answers. Trust me, clarity is the best remedy right now."

"No. I'm not interested in an explanation. I just wanna go back to not remembering." I pulled away from her arms and wiped my eyes with the back of my

hands. "I don't w-want to"...*sniffs*... "t-talk about him"...*sniffs*... "anymore. Please." I stood up from the bed. "It's late and I have work in three hours."

As I headed for the door, she offered, "I'll come stay with you."

"I don't think Tev will be on board with that."

"Screw Tev!" she angered, peeling back the comforter.

I afforded a small smile. "Kels, trust me, I'm good. I love you. Goodnight."

I dragged myself upstairs and chose the first bedroom I saw. Tossing my bag down on the floor, I climbed into bed and cried until I fell asleep.

"I still think we should wait, Sadie. We don't have to do this."

Determined, I yanked Nelly's arm, pulling him in the direction of his bedroom in his rented flat. To which I held the keys, considering he was only there on weekends. During the week, it was mine to do with as I pleased. My second home. "I know. But I want to."

Nelly inhaled, closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were blazing with lust, his tenuous reservation unraveled. Cupping my face, he plunged his tongue into my mouth, taking what was willingly his. Our tongues tangled in a sensuous dance.

Never breaking, he moved across the bedroom threshold and kicked the door shut. Then the kiss got deeper, more desperate, as he took small steps forward, forcing me backwards until I felt the bed behind me. I toppled backward, and he fell with me, our lips never parting.

I love him so much.

When he finally parted ways with my lips, we were both panting, breathing ragged. "On one condition."

"What?" I rasped. "Anything."

His blue eyes burned into mine, holding me captive. I felt like I was nailed to him. "I wanna know that you love me."

I was silent. Thoughts and breathing stilled.

"Why? Why won't you tell me? You're driving me insane, Sadie. I need to know. I need to hear the words. I sound like a bitch, I know, but I *need* to hear it," he said. Then a sudden look of horror crossed his face. "You don't love me, do you?"

My mouth went dry. No words. I could only stare.

"Fuck!" He punched his fist to the mattress, next to my head. "I'm *such* an idiot."

He started to push up off me, but I gripped onto his biceps and wrapped my legs around his waist, keeping him in place.

"No. Don't go."

His voice was cold. "Gimme a good damn reason I shouldn't."

"Because I'm crazy in love you."

Instantly, his eyes softened, his lips fighting a smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"That's the ultimate truth? You're not just lying because you wanna have sex?"

"It's the truth, Nelly. I don't love you. I'm *in* love with you. I've just been afraid to admit it out loud because I have this feeling that once I do, everything will end. I'll wake up and find this was all a dream. You mean so much to me, Nelly, and I don't want to lose you. If you ever leave me, I don't know what I'd do. I'd lose it. I'd stop believing, stop dreaming. I'd give up on everything."

Nelly stared down at me, quiet, contemplative, and I wished I could tell what he was thinking.

"Tell me," he finally said. "Tell me you love me."

This time I didn't hesitate. "I love you, Nelly."

"Are my eyes still in place?"

Puzzled, I slowly answered, "Yes."

"My nose still there?"

I nodded.

"Eyebrows, lips, ears?"

Another nod.

"So I'm *not* disappearing, then?"

I giggled. "No."

"Good. Now can you promise you'll stop worrying? I'm *never* going to leave you. You're my life, Sadie. Without you, nothing at all won't ever mean shit to me. To the grave, baby. I told you I'll love you to the grave.

"Okay. I'll stop worrying."

Nelly hauled my blouse over my head and buried his face to my neck. Tipping my head back, I exposed it all to him, surrendering, encouraging.

"Your neck," he mumbled, "I love it."

And he spent an eon there, worshiping, kissing, licking, tasting. He sucked at my skin, leaving a stinging sensation. "My neck. My mark. You're *mine*. Whenever you see this mark, you'll remember me."

With deft fingers, he unhooked my bra, then suckled my breasts, squeezed them, licked my nipples.

"Nelly..."

He meandered down my flushed, inhibited body, his kisses keeping me hot and squirming.

Unzipping my denim skirt, he made quick work of removing it, easing my legs apart. As he trailed kisses up my inner thighs, I screwed my eyes shut, feeling bare and wanton. This was too intimate. Too raw.

He hooked his thumbs in the sides of my panties, and paused. "Open your eyes, Sadie. Look at me."

I did.

"This, being your first, means more to me than you can imagine," he said, serious. "And I fully intend on being your last. Your always."

Inch by inch, torturously slow, he pulled off my underwear. "Christ. You're beautiful."

Lowering his head, he nosed my curls. "And your scent...so good."

Too aware and self-conscious, I covered my face and tried to close my legs.

"Don't hide from me, Sadie." He won the battle in keeping my legs apart. "You're mine, remember?"

With that, he dipped his head and in the next second I felt his tongue on me.

Ohmygod...ohmygod...this feeling...

So alien. Unprecedented.

"Nelly...this...this feels so...ah...ohhhhhhmygod..."

He lapped at me, and I writhed and twisted as the exotic pleasure increased, heightened. This worldly, delightfully sinful feeling made me want to scream and beg him to stop. But no, I didn't want him to stop. I wanted him to go, and I wanted him to stop at the same time. I wanted...I wanted...I didn't know what I wanted. I just knew I felt *really* good.

Something was about to happen. I could feel it. I could feel it coming, rolling, roaring, but I wasn't sure what it was. Of their own volition, my legs stiffened, my fingers gripping the sheets in preparation for what was about to happen.

Nelly propelled on. He wouldn't stop. Even as my moans grew louder and louder and my hips rocked up and down. He didn't stop.

And then...and then...my whole body began to vibrate.

Shit. I didn't know my body could do that.

"Nelly..." I cried. "I...I..."

Soon, all consciousness was gone as the darkness behind my lids turned to light. Bright light splashed with bright colors, and I went smashing into a million fragments. "I...ohgod, Nelly...baby, I love you!"

Soon, the bright light behind my lids dimmed into a small circle, smaller and smaller until it was gone. Then there was only darkness, consciousness.

At the sound of soft music flowing from the surround system, Beyoncé's *Dangerously In Love*, I opened my eyes. Nelly was standing at the end of the bed, stark naked, a small packet glinting in his hand. "You vibrate like a fucking cell phone when you're about to come. That's...sexy as hell."

And it was freaking amazing! Damn, I want to do that again. And again. And again.

I gave him a satiated grin.

"You okay?"

Nodding, I stretched out my arms for him to come back to me.

He bit his lip, studied me for several beats, then mouthed, "I love you," before climbing back into bed and settling between my spread legs.

Placing his hands on either side of my head, he bent and kissed me softly, tenderly, gently, passionately. My nipples hardened at the fire rekindling.

"Here." Nelly held the packet out to me.

I frowned at it. But he kissed my lips again and whispered, "I'll show you how."

It was only then that my eyes were drawn to his dick. Or should I say, riot baton. It was huge. *Holy Shit*, where the hell was that going to fit?

Nelly chuckled at my wide-eyed expression. "You stretch. Don't worry. I won't hurt you."

That didn't soothe my fears. I found it very hard to believe I could accommodate that.

"I'll teach you how to open and remove a condom. If you ruin it, no sex. Understand?"

I nodded.

"Hold it here in the center with your thumb and index finger," he began, demonstrating to me as if I was in a hands-on sex education class. "Using your other hand, situate your thumb and index finger right here at the corner and tear. Don't tear it off completely, just halfway. Then remove the latex."

I took the packet and, with steady concentration, did as instructed.

He kissed me as a reward. "Good girl."

"Now hold it at the tip and gently roll it unto me. Don't let go of the tip until you've unrolled it completely."

My eyes darted between his shaft and the condom dubiously.

"Do it, Sadie."

Gingerly, I complied, not missing Nelly's sharp intake of breath in the process.

I blinked up at him when I was finished, chewing on my bottom lip.

"You are perfect." He awarded me another kiss, a kiss that deepened and melded into a continuum of tongue-knotting passion. I squirmed and arched beneath him, a slick heat between my thighs.

Nelly shifted his weight to one side, supporting himself on his right elbow, his other hand smoothing down my stomach, down into my slickness, fingers massaging my bud.

I moaned into his mouth, eager to experience that exhilarating feeling again.

He eased a finger inside me, and the intrusion stung a bit. Feeling awkward, because I've never had anything inside me before, I shifted on his finger.

"Keep still..." he whispered against my lips, "I want this to be as painless as possible for you. So when you get used to the feel of my finger being inside of you, bite my lip and I'll insert another, okay? I'm preparing you."

"Okay." My heart pounded in my chest.

Nelly carefully moved his finger around inside me, and when my body started responded to his, getting hotter.

Delicately, he slid in another finger.

I winced. But it wasn't all painful; it just felt strange being stretched. For the most part, it was pleasurable.

Nelly worked his fingers in and out, and my eyes fluttered down, savoring the exquisite feel of his fingers inside me. Knowing they were his and no one else's. *My Nelly*, touching me so intimately. I felt like crying—but only because I was deliriously happy.

All too soon his fingers were out, and he shifted above me, supporting his weight on his forearms. "Ready?"

I think so. "Yes."

His crest poked at my entrance as he lowered his lips to mine, whispering, "Don't stop kissing me."

Then I felt him, his wide head, pushing, crowning. Slow and controlled. His mouth held mine in a kiss as inch by inch he pressed into me. I whimpered in his mouth at the burning sensation, but he ate all my cries, keeping my mind off the strange and intense pain.

Soon, he was fully inside me, and my toes curled at the intrusion, my eyes pricking with unshed tears.

Nelly ate all my moans. Kissing away the pain.

He stayed still above me, allowing my body to adjust to his interloping shaft. When my tense muscle began to relax, warming up to the feel of his size inside me, I nipped his lip.

Comprehending, he began to move. Determinedly controlled. Slow, steady strokes. The stinging, burning, abrasive sensation began to subside, being supplanted by euphoric pleasure.

I instinctively thrust my hips up to meet his and...*Shit! That hurt.*

"Don't," Nelly said through a strained voice. "Too soon to be avid."

Agree to that, I closed my eyes and allowed myself be consumed by him.

In no time, it was about to happen again. My body grew more and more excited with each delicious thrust. I cupped Nelly's face and demanded more of his tongue.

Until I could no longer feel the bed beneath me, could no longer feel him in my arms, could no longer tell where I was. In nirvana, my body vibrated, signaling my approaching orgasm.

I detonated. Jerking and pulsing and crying out as I came. Ripples and waves of pleasure washed over me. Drowning me.

But all too soon it faded, dragging me back to consciousness. I became aware of Nelly's incrementally harder strokes and his muffled groans.

Losing all control, his elbows gave way as he fell on top of me and held my face fixed between his palms. Flexing in and out of me, his feral moans escaping down my throat, he kissed me like he was trying to rip my tongue from my mouth.

With one hard plunge, bucked deep inside me, he stilled, mouth sucking hard on my neck with a throaty groan, shaft pulsating inside me.

His body soon relaxed, and he stopped sucking on my neck. It stung. Hurt, even. But who was complaining?

He pressed his face in the curve of my neck, and whispered to my skin, "*Dangerously* in love with you...Sadie."

Later that night, I woke up alone.

Mild stings from various parts of my body reminded me of our passionate exertions. My neck—the love bites. Between my legs—my lost virginity. My lips—from endless kissing and lip biting.

Where'd Nelly gone off to?

I lazily swung out of bed, searching the apartment. No Nelly. But I could hear the rowdy jeers of boys outside, and knew his crew was under The Big Tree out in the yard smoking marijuana and talking about girls and guns as usual.

Yeah, I get that they were his boys and all that, but were they really more important than me right now?

Snatching up my cell phone, I sent him a text.

***Baby,
I'm awake.
I need more.
Please come back inside.
Love you.***

The bed sheets were stained with blood from my broken hymen, so I changed them and grabbed a quick shower, then slid back into bed, waiting.

Half-an-hour later, Nelly still wasn't back, neither did he respond to my text. Then it was an hour. An hour and a half.

No Nelly.

But I could still hear the boisterous boys out in the yard.

Determined on dragging Nelly back inside by his braids if I had to, I was out of bed and dressed in a heartbeat, then through the back door, heading for The Big Tree.

The scent of marijuana was strong on the air, puffs of smoke levitating in the darkness. The Big Tree was barely lit up by the light coming from Nelly's back porch.

As I walked toward the tree, I scanned for Nelly, but he wasn't there. And neither was Darren or Larry. Wherever Darren was, that's where Nelly was. Darren was Nelly's right-hand man.

"Uh, hey guys," I spoke up through the chattering. "Have you seen Nelly?"

They all got quiet as if they'd never even noticed me until I spoke, stared at me, then erupted in howls of laughter.

"*Have you seen Nelly, Jason? Have you seen Nelly, Max?*" they mockingly asked each other. "Stupid bitch."

Confused, all I did was stand there, staring back at them.

Travis, the one who scorned me the most, stood up from his plastic chair and stepped forward. "Yeah. I saw him."

"Where?"

"Down by Mrs. Forrest. With Tanya."

Crack.

That was my heart.

"Want me to tell ya' what they're doing right now, Sadie?" he continued, twisting the knife deeper. "Or can you guess that one for yourself?"

The boys broke out in another fit of laughter and jeers.

Travis said, "You didn't actually think he'd stay with you, did you? Thought you were special? Told you he loved you?" He sniffed, shook his head. "Nelly *lies*, Sadie. That's who he is. What do you know about him? Nothing. You know nothing. Bet Tanya knows everything, though."

I wrapped my arms around my stomach, feeling sick, feeling...used. I looked down at the ground, blinking back tears.

I felt Travis's finger under my chin, tipping my face back up so he could look down at me. The touch was surprisingly gentle, and his eyes had somehow softened, as he whispered so only I could hear, "Never hated you, baby girl. Was just tryna protect you from him."

Someone called out, "Nelly's done wit' that pussy, little girl. Got what he wanted. On to the next bitch."

Hands still wrapped tightly around myself, I turned and darted back into the flat. Scooping up my cell phone, I rang Nelly's number. But it went straight to voicemail. Refusing to believe any of what the boys said, I rang him over and over again.

Voicemail.

It was true. Everything Nelly had ever said to me was a lie. *Lies, lies, lies.*

He. Did. Not. Love. Me.

My knees gave way, failing me, and I collapsed to the ground in a heart-broken heap. My body rocked with sobs, uncontrollably, so I curled up in a ball, squeezing tight, trying to contain myself.

But the pain was too great. It didn't matter how tight I knotted myself, the tears came in heavy, rattling streams. And as the hours went by, the noisy voices outside faded.

I cried until dawn broke. I cried until the sun rose. I cried and I cried and I cried.

I cried until I was drained, depleted, until my throat was sore.

Until I was out of tears.

Reluctantly, I hauled my pathetic self up, left Nelly's flat, and walked dejectedly home. The sun shone bright in the sky, its heat penetrating my skin as if mocking me, too.

The neighborhood was quiet, as was customary on Sunday mornings. No life, except mine, walking the streets. Just me and my stampeded heart.

When I finally got home, Dad was livid.

"You sleeping out now, Sadie? Since you started hanging out with that cocky ass little boy, I noticed you've been acting like you're grown..."

I dragged past Dad in his apoplectic state, without a care for the consequences. I wished he *would* hit me. Put a bag over my head and suffocate me. Because I deserved to be beaten for being so stupid.

I went upstairs and locked myself in my room, climbed right into bed and hid under the covers. All my worst fears had come true. *I knew.* I knew this would happen. I knew once I admitted my love out loud, he would leave me.

He'd been so cruelly convincing. Professed his love for me in ways too numerous to count. And it was all for...what? To break me? Had I been a challenge to him? A bet? Get the girl no one else could?

I refused to believe this.

Nelly? No.

Nelly was too sweet, kind, gentle. Slow, passionate, dedicated. Attentive and cautious. He promised he'd never leave me. He promised me he'd never hurt me. He said I was his everything. I just...I just couldn't understand any of this.

I remained locked in my room for days. Ignored the constant banging on my door and the threats from my father.

Dad had somehow forced his way in on the third day, barged in yelling. It all fell on deaf ears, because I didn't budge, hoping he would do me some damage. But he didn't hit me. Now when I most needed him to, he didn't hit me.

I didn't eat, except for the Snickers and M&Ms I had stashed away in my school bag. I hardly showered because I just didn't have the energy. I didn't even go to school. All I did was cry and sleep. Cry and sleep.

Eventually, I had to get my act together, because dropping out of school was not an option. My mom had seen the hickeys on my neck and calculated what happened, but she never forced me to talk about it. I told her everything anyway, because I figured of all people, she would understand.

It was a whole week later that I finally got it through my thick head that Nelly was truly done with me. That I finally decided to accept it and move on. But it was also the day my father chose to be his old self.

Nelly was the one who broke me into a thousand pieces, but Dad would be the one made sure I remained broken.

I was at my study-desk packing my bag for school when my bedroom door burst open, and standing in the doorway, gripping a baseball bat, was my father. Tall and muscled, hardened face and unlovable cognac-brown eyes.

"You wanna be a *woman*, Sadie?" He was frightening as ever. "Then I'm gonna treat you like one."

There was nowhere to run, so as he charged forward, I squeezed my eyes shut, and braced myself for the first blow...

Seven days after my beat down, I was discharged from the hospital. I'd been comatose for forty-eight hours, remained hospitalized for five days. I came out with fractured ribs, a broken arm, a sprained ankle, a battered face, and retrograde amnesia.

I was in a wheelchair, confused and miserable, with absolutely no memory of how I ended up the way I was. It was when I got home that my mother told me the truth about what happened...

But there was Dad, my supposed abuser, sitting cool and unworried in his old recliner, watching sports on television.

"If he did this to me, shouldn't he be in jail?" I asked my mother.

"Yes. But how would we survive if that happens, darling? He's the breadwinner. How would we survive without him?" Her overly-long brown curls flowed down her shoulders as she dressed one of my facial scars with prescribed ointment. She was beautiful. Calm and composed, and I wondered if she was being that way just for me. Just to keep *me* calm and unworried.

"But...But what did you tell them?"

"That you were attacked on your way to school." She never looked me in the eyes. Because she expected me to understand. She expected me to forgive Dad, because we couldn't survive without him. And I wanted to yell at her and tell her we wouldn't be alive much longer *with* him. With Dad, we *wouldn't* survive.

The next day I was out on my porch in my wheelchair, sketching with my uninjured hand while mom chatted with Mrs. Forrest down at the gate.

Molly, my classmate who lived a few blocks up the street from us, skipped past the gossiping adults at my gate and up to my porch. Molly was tall with fiery red hair. She had volume in the right places, and slimness where it should be. She was strikingly attractive, lusted after by all the guys around here. But Molly wasn't a fan of guys. She shared her curves with the girls.

My only friend in the community, but I often times shied away from her because she wasn't afraid to let me know all the freaky little things she wanted to do to me. Now, however, I was glad for some company. Because I felt really alone with my missing memories. And having Molly there to remind me about things that happened in recent times was life-giving.

Molly filled me in on all the important things, until she got to telling me about my 'boyfriend'. A boyfriend who I had absolutely no memory of. Molly called this boyfriend of mine 'The Rich One', and told me of all the rumors surrounding him at present.

The Rich One, she said, didn't come to the neighborhood anymore, leaving behind all sorts of rumors. Mrs. Forrest's daughter, Tanya, was pregnant, as was another, and another. Gossips assumed The Rich One was the one who'd knocked them all up, and that was the reason he no longer came around.

Darren—who hadn't been seen either—relocated his family to some upscale neighborhood in the west. It was nothing he could afford, so rumor had it The Rich One bought it for him—considering Darren was The Rich One's closest friend.

Travis was now Clique leader, and he'd stopped by my house asking to see me on multiple occasions when I'd been "locked away"—whatever that meant.

"He just vanished from the face of the earth, like he never existed," Molly whispered, twirling a string of gum around her finger. "And the Nine Lives Clique, they're all being tight-lipped."

Everyone, she said, wanted to know where the Mysterious Rich Boy from the west was. Everyone except me.

For it was then I found it in my heart to forgive my father. My hate for his brutality had morphed into appreciation. Because by the end of Molly's updates, I was pretty sure the lost memories of my 'boyfriend' weren't sweet memories.

And I prayed to God they never returned.

The high-pitched sound of my alarm yanked me from my dreams. Sunlight spilled through the wide bedroom windows.

It was morning. A new day, a new job, a new start.

Not entirely new, though, I thought, as I flipped back the covers and got out of bed. Because, of all the dreams I'd had since I met Natalio, this was the one that decided to *stay*.

There were no flashes, no flitting in and out. This one, the worst of the memories, elected to remain.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Geo Lee was a joy to work with. He was bubbly, charismatic, jocular and gay—occupying both significances of the double entendre. I'd left Tevin's house a sapping mess that morning but was instantly invigorated once I stepped through the doors of GLFH.

I was in my zone there, around an immense oak table in an all-glass room choosing fabrics and patterns for an upcoming fashion show. Geo Lee was crazy about a few of my designs and decided to model them in his show. Even though my designs would be carrying his name, I was thrilled and honored that I could actually wow a fashion icon like Geo Lee.

Kiwan, an Asian beauty with jet black, bobbed hair and small squinted eyes, was nodding furiously at Geo Lee's rapid words. She was an accessory designer—a hell of an accessory designer, actually. But she seemed overwhelmed by Geo Lee's new requirements.

It appeared he'd canceled his previous ideas for the Fashion Show and was now taking a completely different turn on a very slim timeline. And I assumed that's why we were around this table all day with racks, fabrics and accessory materials littered all over.

My calculations were verified an hour later when Geo Lee finally collapsed in his white wing-back, and beamed at me.

"You're like my savior, Francé. I should damn well strangle Natalio for keeping your talented ass away from me!" He sent his eyes to the heavens. "You remind me of myself when I just started out and my head was jam-packed with ideas. Up until last week, I thought I'd lost my touch. You see those bland work suites on display down there?" He pointed to the floor; on the first floor were mannequins displaying dull, gray, black and beige work suites, for both men and women. The typical banal garbs.

"That's what I've resorted to." He made a face. "Me. *Geo Lee!*"

I snickered.

"But then I saw your vibrant, out-of-the-box sketches. And I was inspired. Like finally! Someone who understands me."

"I'm most honored to be working for you, Mr. Lee."

"Oh, it's my pleasure, Francé. How's Natalio by the way?"

I looked away. I'd left my phone at Tev's to avoid any calls or text messages from him. I'd been so well distracting myself... "Um, he's fine. I think."

Geo Lee regarded me perceptively. "Found out he's a vampire and dumped him? Can't be his Bella?"

I subconsciously brought my hand up to my neck. Probably should've worn a turtleneck top.

"Explains why he's always in black," Geo Lee teased. "But going by that mark, it can't be more than twenty-four hours since he's sucked your blood."

Okay...so...apparently my new boss's mouth had no filter.

Sensing my discomfort, he curtailed the teasing. "Well, I guess that's it for the day. You girls should go get something to eat."

I nodded and stood, while Kiwan made a sound akin to a grunt.

True, it had been a busy first day, but it didn't feel like work to me. I enjoyed every minute of it. I'd been designing costumes on demand for dancers for the past three years. And dancers were impatient. If they had to wait any longer than two days, those sales were lost. So I was used to working long hours without breaks.

"Any new sketches?" Geo called after me as I was headed out the door.

"Lots."

He held out his hand.

Oh crap. They were at my apartment.

Geo gave me knowing look. "Francé, I'll be nice because it's your first day, and I've deprived you of lunch. But if you're going to work with me, you must *always* be prepared. Got it?"

With a "got it" nod, I shuffled out the door.

As I drove home in Tevin's Chevrolet Trailblazer—the least flashy of his four vehicles—I fought a losing battle keeping my thoughts free of Natalio. In the short

space of time since I re-met him, I'd grown so attached. Now only to discover he's the man who'd once been the center of my world. The man who broke my heart. Broke *me*.

What was he doing right now? Did he care that I found out and left? If he'd returned to break me all over again, then I doubt he'd care. Mission accomplished, right?

A sudden urge and desperation to know if he cared took over. To know if he called or text. To know if this time was different.

I hit the gas, hastening the trip to Tev's, stopping at *Burger King's* drive thru to grab a Chicken Club Sandwich with Swiss cheese, a strawberry milkshake, up-size on everything. Yep, I was famished.

I burst through Tevin's front door, muttered a breathy "Good evening" to Kelsy who was busy in the kitchen preparing something with a yummy aroma. Hopping from foot to foot, I wrenched off my heels and bolted upstairs to get my cell phone.

I needed to know this time if he tried reaching out to me.

He did.

Twenty-five missed calls. Four text messages. One email.
He. Cared.

How long have you known?

***Sadie, PLEASE, don't run.
We need to talk.***

***Talk to me, Sadie.
I'm going crazy here.***

***ANSWER THE FUCKING PHONE.
You need to hear me out.***

I bit my lip, willing myself not to cry. I shouldn't be feeling anything for him. I shouldn't want to see him, call him, take him back. I should be hating him. Instead, all I wanted was to be with him.

No.

I would not allow myself to be deceived again. I wasn't that stupid, vulnerable little girl anymore.

My fingers trembled as I opened his email.

Sadie,

I know you're at Tevin's. Your running away is an obvious message that you don't want to see or talk to me.

I get it.

I went by your apartment this morning. I passed by GLFH three separate times but didn't have the guts to go inside. I've ceded to your silent request that I keep my distance, because I don't want to overwhelm you. But I also don't want to lose you all over again. I didn't willfully hurt you.

I loved you and only you.

Seven years later, I am still in love with you and only you.

To the grave, remember?

Don't run.

We NEED to talk.

Natalio Nelson

I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not cry.

No more tears. No more weakness. I was not that girl anymore.

I do not love him. I should not love him.

I just wanted him to be gone. The memories to be gone.

With a sudden loss of appetite, I curled up in bed, wrapped arms around my middle, and *did not cry*.

"Sadie."

Soft hands coaxed me from the comforting darkness of sleep.

Kelsy.

"I brought you some soup." I blinked at her sitting at the side of the bed. "You've got to be hungry, Sadie. You came home with a Burger King meal and it's still untouched."

Rubbing the blurriness from my sleepy eyes, I sat up. "What time is it?"

"Around nine. Here, eat something." She carefully set the tray on my lap. A big, red bowl of delectable gumbo. Kelsy was a consummate cook—not at all congruous with her 'spoiled girl' personality. But it was a trait inherited from her mother, Mrs. Mitchell, who was master in the kitchen.

My stomach grumbled in reply as the aroma rose to my nostrils. "Thanks, Kels. You're right. I'm famished."

I took a spoonful of gumbo to my mouth, and as always, preparations by Kelsy's hands were delicious.

"So, how was your first day at work?"

"Fun." I managed a smile. "Geo Lee's all work, no play, and no lunch breaks."

Kelsy had a horrified expression. "And that's *fun*?"

I laughed. "For me, it is. I'm in my zone, feeling like a kid in a candy store."

"Hmm. Well, I'm really happy you've gotten the chance to do what you're passionate about."

"Not as happy as I am. I feel like I can breathe again, you know?"

Kelsy nodded, understanding.

I sucked down some more gumbo. "Anyway, how's your house hunting coming along?"

"Oh, you've been so busy with...*him*, that I forgot tell you I settled on a three bedroom at Esprit. It's gorgeous, with an amazing sea view. Still not crazy about moving, though."

Knowing what her next words would be, I preemptively said, "Not moving in with you."

"But you won't have to—"

I held up a hand to stop her. "Where's Tev?"

"Uh, sorting um...some stuff out in the basement."

I arched a brow at her weird reply, but she ignored my suspicious glare and asked, "Has he called you?"

Oh God...Him. My heart curled into itself, hiding. "Twenty-five times. Plus texts and email."

"What did he say?"

"He wants to talk."

"You're going to?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I want nothing more to do with him, Kels," I snapped, annoyed. "I just want to forget about him, make him dead to my mind like he'd always been. I already

have to live with the fact he got me this dream job. I don't wanna talk about him anymore, okay?"

"But what if—"

"I don't care why he came back, Kelsy!" I half-shouted. "I'm done! You understand? *Done.*" I paused, took a breath, and counted to ten, trying to contain myself. "Now, tell me about your new apartment."

Natalio had promised he'd keep his distance, so trusting he would keep his word on that, I was back at my apartment within an hour.

Brenda had turned in for the night. Thank heavens for that, because ever since she found out about Natalio, she'd adapted the mannerisms of a pest.

I unpacked my duffel and collapsed on the bed. Despite my three-hour brush-up sleep, I was still flagged out. And Kelsy's gumbo was like a relaxant.

My cell phone buzzed in my back pocket and I held my breath as I took it out, praying it wasn't him.

It was.

I miss you.

Delete.

But my phone immediately buzzed again, another text following right behind that one, as though he somehow knew I deleted the first.

You're back home.

Don't worry, I won't come knocking.

But will you just talk to me, please?

Seriously? Was this man serious?

Stalker much?

I made to power off my cellphone, then stopped, because as much as I didn't want to admit it, I missed him, too.

Another text.

I can't move on without you, Sadie.

And before I could even read that text properly, my phone started ringing, Natalio's name blinking on the screen. Christ is heaven, the man wasn't giving me a chance to breathe. It's like he was panicking.

Rejecting the call, I set my phone on silent, switched off my bedside lamp and snuggled up in bed, fully dressed.

There were so many things I wanted to say, but at the same time, I had nothing at all to say. I was just lost in a whirl of confusion. My world being upturned all over again. Why did he come back? *Why?*

Tired as I was, I couldn't fall asleep. Because my body was burning, on fire, yearning for him. And *that* was the real reason I didn't want to see him. Because I knew, I knew I wouldn't be able to fight it. I knew being in his presence would undermine me completely. Just one look at me through those commanding blue eyes and I would give in. Believe whatever bullshit explanation he gave me. Melt at his meaningless words.

I would not be able to resist him.
Because I still loved him.

It was day number four for me at GLFH.

Day number five since I'd last seen Natalio.

He'd called, texted, emailed. Repeatedly. And I'd continued to ignore and delete.

As promised, he never showed up on my doorstep. But there were times when I wished he *would* show up.

My eschewing him only served to make me crave and think of him more, not less. He was constantly on my mind, the second I woke up in the mornings, and before I closed my eyes at night. Even in my dreams/memories, he was there.

My new job helped. Geo Lee did a fine job at keeping my mind occupied. So I craved work hours.

"I think he's trying to kill us," Kiwan whispered across the table. "My God, I'm *starving.*"

I tried not to giggle, but it couldn't be helped, and we both giggled, causing Geo Lee to eyeball us suspiciously from the far end of the room where he was on a telephone call, chatting at bullet speed about models and runways.

Kiwan was warm and cordial and we worked well together. She wasn't a fan of elaborate designs and colors like Geo Lee and me, but she was a mean accessory designer who could easily adjust to any requirements.

She was right, Geo Lee was trying to kill us. My stomach was growling. But I wasn't complaining. I was in my element.

Hours later we were set free. I was beat, dragging on weak legs through the reception area. An undisturbed forty-eight hours of sleep would do me well.

"Miss Francé," I heard Cara, the receptionist, called to me.

"Yes?"

"A small parcel was left here for you today."

Cara retrieved a leather manila envelope from behind the desk and held it out to me.

"From who?"

"A really handsome African-American guy," the awkward, blue-eyed blond informed me. "He didn't leave a name."

Thanking her, I took the envelope and continued on to the exit. But curiosity got the best of me before I could make it out the door, so I stopped and hastily opened the damn thing.

Inside, was a car key—a Mercedes car key—and a very aged but expensive-looking scroll of paper, tied with a red cord. When I untied and unrolled the paper, a picture, curled up from being rolled and tied, fell out, landing on the ground.

I bent down to recover it, and a short sob escaped me when I realized it was an old photo of Nelly and me. We were laying forehead to forehead on lush green grass in the park, Nelly's outstretched arm holding the camera, as we stared in each other's eyes instead of the camera, grinning like two stupid fools in love.

I remembered that day. We *were* two stupid fools in love.

At least *I* was.

Tears threatened, but I rapidly blinked them back. With shaky fingers, I straightened out the roll of parchment paper. Words in cursive handwriting flowed down the page in rich black ink.

Seven years ago, I fell head first in love with the most beautiful human being I've ever known.

She had the loveliest chocolate-brown curls, long as Rapunzel's, rippling like the waves of the sea, yet smooth as silk.

I was attached to her. Felt at complete peace with her. Would've done anything for her. Would swim through lava if she asked me to, walk on hot coals. Anything at all to see that breathtaking smile of hers.

Her beauty was unimagable. Killed me a million times over.

She was the source of my happiness. The reason I smiled. The reason I breathed.

But I had a secret I couldn't tell her. She knew me better than anyone else, but at the same time, she didn't know me at all.

It didn't matter, I'd thought. That secret would keep us together. If that secret was ever revealed, he would tear us apart. It didn't matter, I'd thought. I loved her, and she loved me. No matter what, she would be my wife and the mother of my children.

She promised me.

I loved her too much. I needed her too much. I thought about her, only her, too much. And no one should ever need anyone that much. So I feared, every hour, every day, every week, every month, that one day I would lose her.

And I did.

When I found her again, it was a nightmare...she didn't remember me.

She. Didn't. Remember. Me.

So I made her remember me. And when she did...she ran.

She doesn't love me anymore.

~

Why do I keep losing you?

Why am I always chasing you?

Could it be we just don't belong together?

Am I fighting for something that's just not meant to be?

I've waited a lifetime, Sadie. Begged, fought, and groveled. But I can't keep doing this to myself. And I can't force you to want to know what happened.

I know you must have been hurt in ways I can't even imagine. If it makes you feel any better, I've suffered, too. In more ways than one.

I am still suffering.

But the difference with me is this: I've never forgotten you. Never even tried to. On the contrary, I've fought to keep you alive in my mind. I couldn't forget you even if I tried. I loved you too much.

Still love you.

And always will.

But sometimes, love just isn't enough. I can't make you want me. I can't make you love me. I just have to let go.

For my own sanity, I'm letting you go.

~

Please accept the car and the apartment. It's at Esprit, three bedroom, just across the hall from Kelsy's.

*Don't be pig-headed now, Sadie. Think of it as an atonement.
I promise I won't call, stalk or bother you anymore. But don't ever be afraid to
call me if you need help with anything. I'll always be here if you need me.
I hope life takes you to the places of your dreams.*

*Love,
Natalio.*

Good thing this was some expensive paper, because it was completely unaffected by my tears that were dripping down on it in big, fat drops.

Natalio was leaving me. Again.

Why wasn't I overjoyed, though? Wasn't this what I wanted? For him to leave me alone? Be gone?

"Miss Francé?" I heard Cara call from behind me. "Are you alright?"

Straightening up, I quickly wiped my tears away and rushed out of the building without answering. I all but ran to the parking lot. I couldn't let anyone else see me like this. I felt weak and lifeless. Broken, lost and confused.

As I approached Tevin's Trailblazer, I noticed a white *Mercedes Cabriolet* parked next to it. So sleek, polished, and glistening, standing out among every other dusty car in the lot.

Out of curiosity, I pressed the unlock button on the key fob from the envelope and jumped back when the car beeped in response.

Whoa. He bought me a freaking Mercedes-Benz?

On impulse, I walked around it. She was...beautiful. I hit another button and the roof folded backwards, the scent of new leather traveling on the air. Quickly, I backed away. I couldn't accept this. But where do I return it?

Then I remembered him mentioning something about an apartment in his letter. I shook the envelope, and yep, a set of keys on a heart-shaped key ring slid out.

How did he even know Kelsy bought an apartment at Esprit? Jeez, the man was omniscient. Did he really expect me to accept these?

Fighting back tears, I climbed into the Trailblazer. How could I move on and forget about him if I were to live in an apartment and drive a car *he* bought? Did he not see how stupid that was?

Maybe he doesn't want me to forget about him...

Without even knowing for sure what happened that night, I'd pushed him away. He never had a chance to explain because I wouldn't give him one. I was too hurt. Too unforgiving. Too confused.

Now he was gone. Out of my life. Again.

Was this what I wanted?

Yes.

No.

I don't know.

I fished for my Blackberry and dialed. A smooth Hispanic voice answered, "Sup, baby girl?"

"Tev, I've got a gift for you. Brand new. You're gonna love it."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Five weeks passed...

The second I stepped through Geo Lee's office doors with the Chinese food I'd picked up for lunch, he was talking to me, as though whatever he had to say just couldn't wait. "Francé, I don't normally do this, but I think you're ridiculously talented. And this talent doesn't deserve to be stifled. It needs to breath."

I walked over to the small eating table in his office and set the food bags down, wondering where his ramblings would lead to today. He was my boss and I love him and all that, but sometimes he just yapped way too much. Though, I was introduced to one of his close friends last week, and he told me Geo Lee was only this talkative with people he's comfortable with...so I guess I should be grateful for that?

"There's this fashion bidding on Monday. It's an annual thing, where talented but nameless designers, like yourself, gets the chance to model their pieces on the runway. There'll be a host of eminent buyers—I'm not sure what enterprises just yet—who will bid on the designs they like and want to carry in their stores. If they like a piece, bids start at no lower than forty thousand dollars. When a piece is coveted by multiple buyers, a bidding war breaks out and the price can escalate up to two hundred thousand dollars."

My mouth dropped open.

Geo laughed at my astonished expression. "That's right, Francé, you could make *a lot* of money. That's if you work your ass off this weekend on some killer pieces. I pulled strings and got you in. Someone gave me a chance in life once, so I'm doing the same for someone I believe is worth it. Now, don't let me down. Opportunities like this don't come often."

I left GLFH in a daze. Working with Geo Lee had major advantages.

Why did he have so much faith in me, though?

His fashion show had been a success and we've only been busier since then. Stolen clients were returning because the renowned Geo Lee had gotten his mo-jo back. A collective mix of celebrities: movie stars, singers, rappers, etcetera. I'd come face-to-face with some of the most famous faces. My job was amazing. And now Geo Lee was giving me a fiercer push forward.

I could hardly wait to break this news to my mom. It was Thursday, and her visits were pushed to late evenings because of my job. I wasn't visiting her at Miss De'Lacy's anymore, but her new home. Yep, *he* went there. Bought my mother a brand new house. Behind my back. This had me sorely vexed, but I could do nothing about it because it was *my mother's* gift, not mine. And she'd gleefully accepted it.

It had been over five weeks ago, but I could still hear the joy in her voice. The day after Natalio's letter. In my solemn, heart-broken state I'd made my usual stop at Miss De'Lacy's, but no one was there. Her nor Miss De'Lacy. And when I phoned Miss De'Lacy, she had succinctly told me my mother was "Busy."

Busy doing what? The woman barely even spoke.

The next day when she was, well, not busy and was able to chat with me over the phone, I found out not what but *who* had her busy: Natalio.

"Oh darling, he's such a charmer!" she'd gushed.

And I was staggeringly taken aback by the liveliness in her usually frail voice. "Who?"

"Your Natalio."

"*What?* How do you know Natalio? You've seen him?"

"Yes, darling. He came by to see me yesterday morning. Such a polite young man. He offered to spend the day with me, and you bet I accepted." She giggled. Yes, *giggled!* "Not like he had to try too hard. I mean, he's one helluva man."

Mouth agape, I just silently listened on the other end. More for the fact my mother spoke with such vivacity than for the irritating fact that Natalio had visited her. "We had an amazing day, love. He's just so intelligent and attentive...But there's something oddly familiar about him."

Yeah, not going there. She was better off not knowing Natalio was Nelly.

"My evening culminated with the keys to my *own* house. How generous for a sickly old croon like me, huh?"

"Uh, what?!" I'd screamed, appalled. *I could kill asshole!*

"You have to come see it, darling. The basement is furnished as a design room, loaded with fabrics and designer's tools. It's... a dream!"

"Mom, Natalio and I are not together. We broke up. And I can't believe you accepted a house from a complete stranger!" I could barely contain my anger at Natalio's presumptuousness and my mother's lack of discretion.

"Darling, calm down. He never once made me feel like an infected human. Not for one second. The whole time I was with him, I never thought about my sickness or situation. Yesterday was one the best days I've had in years. I accepted because this insidious illness will claim me soon. You try very hard with me, and I don't make things any easier for you. I'm sorry. My state is disgraceful, I'm not at a point in my life to be prideful. If some handsome rich man wants to buy me a house to put a smile on my face and make my last days worth living, I'll accept. He told me you'd be angry, and that when you were calm, I should remind you his brother's a real estate tycoon, so this was nothing for him."

"Mom, you have no idea just how angry I am!" I'd yelled. "I can't believe he did that! He promised me he'd stay away."

When she spoke again, her soft and delicate voice was reborn. The voice she'd told me stories with when I was a child, the voice she'd sang to me with, the voice that always assured me of a mother's love, the voice that belonged to *her*, Theresa Francé. "You are so much like your father: stubborn, full of pride, abusive and *blind*."

I felt like I'd been slapped. Hard. And my voice was near inaudible with I said, "I can't...I can't believe you just compared me to that man. How am I abusive?"

She sighed. "How do you not see how much that man loves you? Every time he says or hears your name he winces. He loves you to the point of pain, Sadie. It's so glaringly obvious."

Tears pooled. "You don't know what he did to me, Mom. You can't take his side." Well, she *did* know. I just wasn't going to remind her.

"I'm not taking his side, honey. I'm only taking what he offered." She laughed. Oh, the sound of Theresa Francé laughing again. "He told me you left him and he's accepted it. He explained to me that he understood you wanted nothing more to do

with him, but he just wanted to make sure you faced no more hardships because you've already been through so much. And I agree, Sadie. I encouraged him to come see me again, but he said he was positive you wouldn't want that.”—*Damn, Mom was talking more than she's ever done since her suicide attempt.*—“From what I've seen so far, he's a genuine one. And he obviously cares about you. Too bad things couldn't have worked out.”

"Looks are deceiving, Mom. You don't know the pain he's caused me."

"Come by, then," she said. "Come tell me about it. I want to be your mother again. Please let me."

I did visit that day, and we talked and laughed like we used to. Natalio's interference, I had to admit, helped my mother's disposition. She started sewing again. Laughing again. Cooking, gardening and enjoying her new home. And she was ecstatic when I told her about the fashion bidding coming up. This had once been a dream of hers, too. But she'd been stagnant at a small fashion house working for an ungrateful designer who didn't believe in giving others a chance.

I'd been given one.

Looking back, I'd been so low, lost and empty that I'd subjected myself to swinging on poles half-naked for the entertainment of bored husbands.

But I was rescued. By someone who saw that I needed to be. I only wished he'd come rescue me from the heartache he'd caused, too. Because while he helped me, he'd also hurt me.

Things were all fun and bright while I was busy inside the building of GLFH. But as soon as work was over, it was all tears and pain. It's been over five weeks since The Letter.

Natalio kept his promise and didn't call, text or bother me at all. But I kept praying for the opposite. Every time my Blackberry chirped, my heart leapt, hoping it was him. But it never was.

He was truly done. Given up. Gone.

That's what I'd asked for. Yet five weeks later I was still crying myself to sleep.

I finally realized I'd never really stopped loving him at all. My memory had, but my heart hadn't. When my eyes first saw him, my body knew before I did who he was.

That's why I'd felt so close to him, so at peace with him, so content. My soul knew his. And now I knew why it had been so easy for me to fall and melt in his arms.

Long ago our souls were entwined, and they remained that way, and nothing our flesh did would ever change that. We would continue loving each other for the rest of lives whether we wanted to or not, because our souls were knotted together since the day we first met, and when souls that were made for each other found each other, the heart, the flesh, the body no longer had any say in love.

I loved him.

I missed him.

And I loved and missed him even more with each passing day. Because the memories, the good ones, had returned to stay.

Why hadn't I allowed him to explain? Whether he'd be lying to me or not, any excuse would've sufficed because I still wanted him. Still loved him. It no longer mattered why he did what he did. For me, it had faded into insignificance. What mattered was that he'd come back to find me. But my stubbornness had muscled him out of my present and right back into my past.

In the parking lot, I hopped into Tevin's Trailblazer, but the car wouldn't start. I tried for about five minutes with no luck, until I realized the gas tank was on E.

Crap.

I called Tevin Trouble for a lift.

"Gotta keep gas in the car if you want it to drive, baby girl," Tevin admonished as I clambered into his ride when he came to get me.

I laughed, feeling stupid. "I said I'm sorry, okay? I've been so busy—"

"No worries. I'll come get it tomorrow. Right now, there's somewhere I need to be and I'm late as shit."

Tevin all but stomped on the gas pedal, weaving through the heavy traffic. It was that time of the evening when everyone was wearily leaving their jobs and impatient to get home. The air thick with carbon dioxide emanating from mufflers, car horns

honking inharmoniously, people jaywalking, bikers squeezing through tight spaces, justifying the name for this time of the evening: rush hour.

I wisely buckled up, because if Tevin was in a hurry, he was about to navigate his way out of this chaos by hook or by crook. "You could've told me you were busy, you know," I said, bracing back in the seat. "I could've called Kels."

"'Cause you're like my little sister. Can't say no to you. Ever. Even when I try." He reached over and patted my thigh. "I love you, baby girl." With a basketball black hat on his head and his long, heavy gold chain panging on the steering wheel with each rough, one-armed maneuver, he concentrated hard to meet his deadline to...wherever he needed to be. "Plus Kelsy's busy unpacking at the store. She wouldn't be able to come get you."

"Oh crapola. I forgot about that." I promised I'd help her out tonight.

Kelsy had taken an interest in something—for once—and was working on opening her own fashion store. Perfect for her, since shopping was her hobby—er, since shopping was *all* she did. I was excited for her and could hardly wait for the lavish grand opening. Just like her parents, 'doing it big' was compulsory.

Tevin hit the brakes, preventing a collision with the car in front of us. Thank hell I'd buckled up. The guy was driving like a maniac.

"East?"

"Yeah," he replied, distracted. "When was the last time you been there?"

"It's been a minute." My tone restricted further talk on the subject. To remember the place was to remember Natalio, my heartbreak, my father, and my mother's near death.

As Tevin forced his way out of traffic and onto a jam-free side street, he floored the gas. Boy, he must be *really* late. Most people didn't drive this route because of the 'unsavory areas' it led to. The more affluent people in this county preferred to forget these kind of places existed in their backyard. But, even though I now lived in a better part of town, I never forgot, because I grew up there.

"Shit!!!" Tevin exclaimed when a police siren suddenly went off behind us.

He didn't stop. He sped up.

"Tev, what are you doing?" I asked slowly, as if speaking to a child. "Just pull over. You're just makin' it worse." But even as I said it, I knew Tevin Trouble wasn't having

it. And the fact he was driving a fully tinted, pitch-black Escalade just made the cops more suspicious.

"I can't," he muttered, making a screeching turn onto another street.

The cops didn't ease up.

Realizing the futility of his attempt to outrun the cops, I tried reasoning, "Why the hell not? You'll get us killed, Tev."

Tevin glanced at me, and for the first time since I'd known him, he looked scared. "Because I've got fifteen kilos of coke in the back. Twenty pounds of marijuana, two muzzleloaders, two shotguns, a pistol, a nine millimeter and a case of copper bullets. I was making a *delivery*."

My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. "What the hell, Tev!!" I screamed. "Shit, shit, shit!!"

Soon there were two police cars chasing us.

This was my third time being involved in a police chase. The first two were with *him*, Cali D, *but* we never got caught. Plus Cali D wasn't one to carry enough product to land us both in jail!

Well, shit, we were toast.

Tevin screeched onto another street and the truck's ass slammed into the side of a car parked on the curb. Still, he didn't stop. I glanced at the meter; he was clocking eighty miles per hour. The cops were there, sticking on our tails. Red and blue lights flashed in the settling evening.

This was it. I was either going to die in a car crash or go to jail. And I'll never see Natalio again. I should've forgiven him. Now I may never get the chance to tell him I was still in love with him.

"I dunno where the fuck I am!" Tevin panicked. "You know what's aroun' here, Sadie. Where do I go?"

"I have no idea. But you better find a goddamn way out, asshole!!"

It's been ages since I'd been in ELA. Everything looked different and a lot more structured, more developed than when I lived on this side.

"Oh no, baby girl. Don't be mad at me. I need you right now," he said through a half-sob. Tevin was afraid. More than me, it seemed. And it couldn't just be about getting caught and put in prison. He feared something else. The men waiting for this delivery, maybe?

The loud sirens behind us and honking car horns accompanied by vitriolic shouts as we brushed or bumped nearby vehicles would send anyone into a panic. And that wouldn't be good. He would crash and kill us both.

Someone needed to have their wits about them, so I took a deep breath and spoke in a much calmer tone, "You've never been in a car chase before?"

He wagged his head wildly.

In spite of the situation, I laughed. "Some gangster you are, huh?"

"Sadie, this shit is serious. This is fuckin' life-and-death. Aren't ya scared?"

"Was." I giggled. And when I looked ahead, I laughed even harder, as loud and crazy as a hyena. I couldn't help it; hysterical laughter was how I reacted whenever I was frightened out of my pants.

"What?!" Tevin snapped.

Obviously he hadn't been paying attention to where he was going, so I nodded for him to look ahead.

Tevin slammed the breaks, jerking us forward. "Dios Mio!!"

Wrapping my arms around my stomach, I hooted in the face of my terror. Soon my laughter morphed into tears as I stared at the towering red-bricked wall in front of us while the flashing lights approached from behind.

Dead end.

Our ass was grass.

The grotesque Amazon flicked out a slimy tongue and winked at me. *Yuck*. That has got to be the longest tongue I'd ever seen. Meekly I walked over to the bars and stuck my face there. The place reeked. A mixture of urine, feces, and possibly dead corpses, who knows?

For over twenty-four hours I'd been locked in this stinking jail cell with the flirty giantess and a petrified wafer-thin brunette, hair greasy, skin pale as porcelain

I needed to get out of there. Like yesterday.

I wasn't even allowed the chance to explain that I was oblivious to the contraband on board because 'anything I say or do may be used against me in court of law'. *Ugh*.

I was hoping Tevin would do me a solid. If he cared about me at all, he would. I wondered how he was holding up, though. Probably piss-scared since he'd never been

in jail before. Some men are tough only until they get caught. That's when they cry like a female cat getting fucked.

The fashion bidding was on Monday and I had absolutely no idea how long they intended on keeping me here. Geo Lee would be so disappointed in me if I missed that opportunity. And so would I. Why did things always go to shit for me? Was I cursed or something?

My knuckles paled as I gripped the bars of the grill, willing myself not to break down.

Don't cry, Sadie, you're stronger than that, was what he used to tell me.

I'm stronger than tears.

"Sadie Francé," a crusty female voice called.

I raised my eyes and saw a plump, dark-haired female officer keying the grill. "You're good to go."

My shoulders relaxed as a too-loud exhale left me. Relieved, weak, sleepy and worried, I stepped out of the hell-hole and followed the officer.

"Friends in high places, eh?" the officer whispered over her shoulder.

I frowned, confused.

"Just...keep out of trouble, aight?" she said. "You're too pretty for these places."

Ah, okay?

The bald-headed man behind the counter glared at me, face grim as he shoved my belongings to me. With a sheepish nod, I scooped them up and slipped into the filthy bathroom to change out of my jail clothes, then I was buzzed out.

In the waiting area, Kelsy paced back and forth. "Sadie! Oh my god." She rushed towards me and locked me in a stifling hug. "Oh my god, I was so worried."

"I'm fine, Kels." I added, "Now."

"I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do. They're keeping Tev. You think he—"

"Not with all the stuff he had onboard." I shook my head. "Come on, let's get outta here."

As we exited the building, and lazy cops in passing police cars gave us the judgmental eye, I asked, "How did you know to come?"

Kelsy's brows drew together. "I got a call. From some guy. Said I should come get you. That you've been bailed out."

Confusion clouded my already weary brain. I never called anyone. Maybe Tevin did? "Some guy?"

"Yeah. I thought it was strange, too, because it wasn't a police officer, but I was so thankful you were getting out, I didn't think to ask questions."

This was making no sense. "Bail isn't possible so soon. Not unless Tev told them I was innocent." And as I said it, I remembered the officer's rambling about 'friends in high places'. It had to be Natalio. But how would he know?

I immediately discarded that dumb question. Natalio knew everything.

At the moment, I didn't care how I got out. I was just grateful. Maybe after I've gotten a nice, warm bath, have me a nice, warm meal, and a nice, long sleep, I can start asking questions.

Kelsy was a sobbing mess as I told her about the ill-fated car chase yesterday while she drove us home. She wailed about us chasing death, how stupid Tevin was, and most of all, lamented on the possibility she may not see Tevin for a very, very long time. Whenever my discombobulated mind was functioning right again, maybe I could telephone my 'friend in high places' and see what favors he could work?

Would be interesting to see how that turns out.

Kelsy swiped her forearm across her running nose. "I have to make a quick stop by Tev's to pick up my stuff. No way I can stay there by myself tonight, knowing he's not coming home."

"You can stay with me," I offered, knowing she wouldn't be able to rest by herself whether it was Tev's home or hers. Kelsy didn't care for being alone, she couldn't enjoy her own company if she tried.

Sniffles. "I'd like that."

Traces of the sun's dim orange glow slowly faded as darkness consumed the remaining daylight. Kelsy steered the vehicle into Tevin's sprawling complex, muttered she'd be back in a minute, and swung out of the car.

My stomach churned as I waited, from not eating for close to two days. And my eyes burned from lack of sleep. This was not how I envisioned my weekend going after receiving that heart-swelling news from Geo Lee.

Geo Lee! Shit. I'd missed a day of work and I hadn't called in to say why. Would he be pissed? I've never seen him pissed off before. I fished for my Blackberry. It would be too late to call him now, but it was better than not calling at all.

And dammit, the battery was blank-screen dead. I was so ready for this day to be over.

I was waiting in the car way too long. Dying of hunger and sleep-deprived.

For fear I might faint from dehydration, I hauled my ass out of the car and lethargically went into the house.

An eerie feeling came over me as I stepped across the threshold, but I dismissed it, too out of it to care. Kelsy was supposedly packing, but I heard no noise coming from the bedroom. The house was strangely quiet.

Desperate for even just a drop of something on my tongue, I journeyed into the enormous kitchen and opened the fridge to grab a drink. "Hurry up, Kels," I yelled, as I scanned the contents of the refrigerator. I need a shower, like now. And sleep."

Opting for a *V8 Splash*, I popped the cork and brought the bottle to my mouth, depleting half the contents in one drink.

Ahhhh, I sighed with gratitude, wiping my lips with the back of my hand. I kneeed the fridge door shut and found myself staring into the nozzle of gun.

Shhhhhhit!

The bottle slipped from me and smashed to the ground.

Now what?

"Shhh," hissed the bulky intruder, clad in black from head to toe, a mask revealing only his eyes and lips.

This was the last straw, because suddenly I didn't care what the hell this man could do to me. I was done; tired of my cursed life and everything in it. Things couldn't get any worse than this.

I sighed tiredly. "Kelsy?"

The intruder blinked at me, evidently stunned by my indifference. If he expected me to beg and plead, then he had another thing coming because I had no fucks left to give. The last forty-eight hours beginning with a long day's work punctuated with adrenaline-rushing news, that later morphed into a heart-palpating car chase and a

sleepless, nail-biting night in a stinking hell-hole had rendered me emotionally and physically depleted.

So this man could do whatever the fuck he wanted. I really didn't give two shits. Death would be a welcomed respite.

"I'm right here," Kelsy's voice was small and shaky behind me. When I turned, my heart constricted. She was trembling, ashen-faced, held at gunpoint by another hulky intruder in black and a mask.

"Let her go," I told them. "Take me."

If they didn't, I was pretty sure Kelsy would faint in their hands soon. She was a spoiled girl from a well-known, affluent family. This wasn't her scene. On the other hand, it was good for her to see and understand the risks she was taking when hanging with a man like Tevin.

"Shit, T. *Shit*," Kelsy's assaulter said. "You don't see that Nelly's girl?"
What?

"Fuck, I didn't—" My assaulter swore again and pressed the gun against my skull. "You weren't supposed to be here!"

My head was spinning. I honestly could *not* take any more bullshit. "What do you want?"

"Hurtin' you would be trouble. So injury's off tha' list. Though, it would give me *great* pleasure to break your delicate bones," said my assaulter through clenched teeth. "You're Nelly's bitch and his men watch your ass twenty-four-sevens. So though we really don't wanna, we'll have to let ya' go, because we ain't tryin' to trigger some unnecessary shit. Your watchers are probably outside right now as we speak. So help us get what we want, and we'll make sure you leave here in one piece. You both just stay cool and everybody'll be happy. Got it?"

What the hell? I had bodyguards following me around? Well that would explain how Natalio knew everything. My God, the man was...ugh! "Yeah, sure. But *what* do you want?"

"Tev messed up big time. We lost our shirts tonight, but we know he has an underground stash that more than makes up for it. When we find that, we'll be out of your hair."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. Tevin had an underground stash?

"I don't—"

"She does," growled my assaulter, nodding to Kelsy.

Shocked, I glanced over at Kelsy and waited for her response. But she just stared at me, eyes wide.

Kelsy suddenly screamed in pain as her assaulter twisted her arm. "Spit it out, bitch!"

I had to ask her, "You want to live, Kels?"

Her head frantically bobbed up and down.

"Then tell them where it is. Tev would lose his mind if you died trying to save his *dope*." I struggled to remain serious, fighting the inexplicable urge to laugh. What was it with me and this inappropriate compulsion to laugh in deadly situations?

Do not laugh. Do not laugh. This is serious.

Kelsy's assaulter pressed his gun against her temple, his finger twitching on the trigger, and I swallowed. "Hurry up, bitch! Our beef's with Tevin, but now you've brought Nelly's bitch into this." He looked over at me. "We don't want no shit with Nelly, okay? We just want back what Tevin lost us today."

Why did they keep saying 'Nelly'? And how was / his bitch? I hadn't spoken to the man in over a month. I wonder if they knew that, and how clueless I was, if they would rethink hurting me.

Kelsy's soft, crackling voice spoke, "Okay. This way."

With rough fingers grasped tightly around my upper arm and a gun pressed against my skull, I followed where Kelsy led. We traveled down to the basement where three more men seemed to have been searching to no avail.

"Under here," said Kelsy, pointing to an overly large red rug that dominated Tevin's man cave.

"You two," Kelsy's assaulter ordered two of the guys, "roll it up. Hurry!"

The men rolled away the carpet, and all eyes shifted back to Kelsy in question when they saw nothing but the wooden floor beneath it.

Kelsy pulled out of her assaulter's grasp and walked along the area in a concentrated pattern, then stepped back. Ten seconds later, a rectangular trapped door automatically opened. I instinctively leaned over to take a peek and observed a wide wooden ladder leading down.

Whoa. Tevin had a freaking underground cellar and I hadn't known? I could guess why he hid it from me; he knew I'd ramp up my efforts in convincing Kelsy to stay

away from him. But seeing how she also kept me in the dark, I now knew she evidently wasn't interested in hearing what I had to say. I couldn't believe after all the craziness Kelsy witnessed with me and Cali D, she still decided to go down this road.

Oh well...

I was roughly tugged back. "Keep still." He waved his gun at the other men. "The fuck y'all waiting for? Start packin' that shit up!"

For the next fifteen minutes, I stood impatiently, shifting from foot to foot. Watching as the men came up with bags and bags of cocaine, guns and ammunition.

Sweet mother Mary, what the heck was Tevin saving up for? Not a rainy day by the looks of it, but a freaking tsunami. The dude was on some American Gangster meets Scarface vibe.

"You know, I was really looking forward to fuckin' your lil friend. We had plans for her," whispered my assaulter. "But here you come and fuck everything up."

Carelessly, I shrugged. "Sorry."

"You think 'cause you've hanged with men like Cali D and Nelly, you've seen it all?" he growled, obviously pissed at my indifference. "I can still fuck you up, trust and believe."

Wow, so he also knew about Cali D. What a history I already had at age twenty-four. "Go ahead. Do me the honors. Believe me, I'm not faking. I truly don't give a shit."

"You lil bitch." He laughed bitterly. "Your life means nothing to you?"

"Asks the criminal who's holding a gun to my head."

"Even though I'm forced to live like this, my life means something to me." His tone was suddenly soft and, if I wasn't not mistaken, sad. "Some of us ain't got a choice."

One of the men spoke before I could respond to that. "That's it. We're good to go."

Both men released Kelsy and me, shoving us towards the stairway. "Good work, girls. Now, leave with smiling faces like nothing happened. Just in case the punks watching your ass are outside." He waved the gun at me. "Once you leave, they'll follow. Then we can get outta here under the radar. No one gets hurt. No alarms raised. Got it?"

"Are you take anything else from the house?" I inquired. Tevin's house was huge, loaded with valuables and a garage of cars and bikes. He was my friend—no, my *brother*, as much as it pained me to acknowledge such. And rotten as he was, I loved him, and I'd hate if these guys cleaned him out entirely.

"No. We ain't that greedy! What we got here is worth fifty times more than what Tevin cost us. But serves him right," he said. "Now get ya tight asses outta here!"

I glowered, readying to fire back with something nasty, but Kelsy tugged my hand and dragged me up the stairs.

We tried to look as casual as possible as we exited the house. Hearing that I had guards who followed me around was unnerving.

Oh joy. Best. Weekend. Ever.

"I'll drive," I said.

Kelsy was still shell-shocked and shaky, and I worried she might crash us into a wall or something. I'd escaped death twice in less than two days, I might not be so lucky the third time around.

As I slinked into the car, I glanced around for any suspicious-looking men or vehicles. Nothing. No one. Night had fallen and the evening was still and dark. Where were these men who were supposedly watching me hiding? Where was Natalio? And why would he still have me watched if he'd 'moved on'?

Putting the pedal to the metal, I sped off, trying to convince myself the inert Kelsy, whose head was slumped onto her shoulder, was asleep and hadn't actually fainted.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“They just left, Sir. Unscathed.”

“Those men aren’t stupid,” he gritted out. “Get in. Disarm them. I’m a minute away.”

“Want us to drill them, Sir?”

“No. I want to know who really sent them, and they’ll only tell you the first name that comes to their lips. They see me, they’ll know better than to bullshit.”

“kay, Sir. On it.”

Natalio hung up and glanced out the window just in time to see Kelsy’s convertible zing past his Bentley in the opposite direction. His heart constricted. *She* was driving.

Even as the car shot by, he noticed the black circles under her eyes and how unhealthily pale she was. When it came to her, all his senses were sharp. She was *that* important to him.

That she even had to spend time in a stinking jail cell made him hotheaded. He’d warned her about Devon, but he guess he should’ve warned her about her own best friends, too.

A few weeks back, he’d gotten wind of plans to clip Tevin’s wings. The fool had painted a bull’s-eye on his forehead when he bragged to the wrong people about his bunker. He’d never paid much attention to the news of Tevin’s inevitable reckoning, because he didn’t back druggies even if he was Sadie’s dumb ass best friend. However, when he’d gotten the call about Sadie being embroiled in a police chase with Tevin, it began to matter. Within the hour, he jetted out of Tokyo.

Arriving back in the States a couple of hours ago, he learned that the plan to raid Tevin’s place was going down tonight. By the time he left Sergeant Smith’s office where he’d cashed in his favor to have Sadie released from that filthy jail cell, he was alerted she and Kelsy were heading straight into the men’s hands.

He wasn't worried because, though Sadie wasn't aware, she was *known* and respected by all gangstas in LA. When they saw her, they thought twice about touching so much as a hair on her head.

It was an indisputable fact. She was Nelly's.

Taking the props for her street cred wouldn't be fair. She'd earned it on her own. She'd spent the last six years being a don's Donna. Of course, Cali D wasn't on his level, but he'd still been a don, at least, for a minute. He couldn't speak on behalf of their relationship, but he knew respect for her came from her ride or die mentality. In the midst of Cali D's deals, chases and shoot outs, she was there.

Those characteristics were what every leader looked for in their woman, and all had rated her for it. Nevertheless, Cali D was dead now and couldn't have saved a single bone of hers from being broken. So it all came down to the fact she was Nelly's. She was Nelly's seven years ago; there'd been a hiatus with Cali D, but she was Nelly's again and it would stay that way. Cali D's claim was short-lived; just like his life. When you lived life fast and illegal, your days automatically became short-term. There was no growing old in that shit.

As his driver careened into Tevin's complex and came to a brief halt at the front of Tevin's house, he unzipped his duffel bag and retrieved his disguise: a custom-made hat with attached fourteen inch braids. His immediate transformation from Natalio to Nelly.

It was a secret he'd fought to keep.

For the majority, Nelly's identity was linked to the description of blue eyes and fourteen-inch black hair; not the low-cut billionaire he really was. To maintain that image, he'd had the hats custom-made after his long hair had been cruelly trimmed back then. Whenever he had to make any kind of appearance to certain unsavory people, the hat was the effortless trick between Nelly and Natalio. One no one had yet to figure out.

He checked his weapon in his ankle holster, then checked the CZ 75 Matte in his hip holster. Not like he really needed weapons. He was confident enough in his rank to know none of these fools would try anything stupid.

Unfolding from the car, he held up five fingers to his driver, Moore. It shouldn't take him more than two minutes to get a name out of these klutzes, but five minutes was Moore's cue to send off an alarm, should shit go south.

Firm, purposeful and determined, Natalio headed into Tevin's house, a house he was more than familiar with.

The very night Sadie had told him Devon had been shooting off suspicious questions about Tevin, he'd sent his men to place the house under surveillance. He'd wanted to know what Devon was after, so he'd had cameras positioned strategically in the house, all unknown to Tevin.

Being a so-called Spanish thug, Tevin didn't seem to care to protect himself. Guess he thought himself invincible. If Natalio's men could have strolled in and out of the place with Tevin none the wiser, then anyone else with the proper savvy could've done the same.

The sound of his heavy boots thudded off the laminate stairs as he descended to the basement. There were five men, unmasked and on their knees with their heads bowed as his men held them at gunpoint.

His eyes made a quick sweep of the sizeable basement, taking in the stacks upon stacks of cocaine, guns and ammunition.

"Heads up," he ordered.

The crooks snapped their heads one by one.

Utter quietness.

And then came a string of swear words and self-beatings of "Fuckin' knew this would happen." Fear prominently etched on their faces, eyes begging.

"I swear, Nelly, we had no idea your girl would be here," spoke the last man on the left. "We didn't hurt her."

"Who sent you?"

Quietness again as they all traded glances, weighing whether they should lie or not.

"Think well and clear about the consequences if you give me a false name," he warned. He had not much else to say to these guys, they were just the minions. And he knew well enough that some of them hadn't had a choice. He also knew that giving the right name of their boss could cost them their lives just as much as giving the wrong name would. But so far, as long as he'd played this game, he's never been bullshitted.

He was *Nelly*.

"Just tell him, T," one of them hissed.

The one called T stuttered, "D-D-De-Devon."

No surprise there. He'd guessed it was Devon, but wanted solid proof.

Plus with the knowledge of Devon's new activities in human trafficking, Natalio was livid at how easy it could've been for them to take Sadie and Kelsy and...“What were the plans?”

“Just to get the stash,” one man quickly offered. But when his cohort next to him elbowed his ribs, he added, “And...and kidnap Tev's girl...to sell to Mashan.”

“Mashan's in LA?”

“No. Devon was delivering girls to him next week.” The guy swallowed. “Nelly, we ain't stupid enough to do that to your girl. When we saw her, the kidnapping plan was shot to hell because we wouldn't take that risk. Please, man, we were just following orders.”

Natalio bit the inside of his cheeks to keep from swearing, hands fisting in his jacket pocket. Where the hell was Devon finding these girls so quickly? It was only two weeks ago he'd busted Devon's fifteen-girl trade, based on a tip he'd gotten. Unfortunately, Devon wasn't at the location when Sergeant Smith arrived and they'd only managed to save the girls.

This drug and human trafficking taking over the city was getting out of control. He wanted to rid the city of these little shits as quickly as possible.

He wasn't hypocritical, because he had a lot of acquaintances scattered around the world who dealt in the drug business, but he only kept those relationships because they could be helpful when he needed favors or a listening ear on someone's behalf when they wanted out of the life. Believe it or not, many men were trapped in this shit with the only way out being death. Whenever he came across those yearning for freedom, he'd use his influence to get them out.

But men like Devon just pissed him the fuck off. The greedy piece of shit kept jumping from one illegal vehicle to the next. This human trafficking business had knocked him completely off his acquaintance list and straight onto his shit list. He wanted to see that asshole shut down.

Men like Devon was the main reason he'd partnered with the county's authorities. To lend hand in taking them down whenever they got out of control.

Without another word, he signaled his main man, Ruddy, turned, and started up the basement stairs, Ruddy close behind him.

When they were back out into the darkness of the night, standing by his Bentley, Ruddy made a malevolent curl of his lips as he asked, “What you want us to do with them, boss? Mince them?”

Natalio almost winced at the man’s words. Ruddy was ever eager to take a life, which was where he and Natalio butt heads, because Natalio was no fan of blood-shedding, as much as he was surrounded by people who reveled in it.

“Nobody’s dying tonight, Ruddy,” he said, shaking his head. “Let them go with everything. At least, let them *think* you’re letting them go. Track their getaway vehicle and tip the cops on their location. Also, disconnect all the cameras in the house. Make sure team B gets to Devon’s place before I do. Keep me updated.”

Ruddy rubbed his hands together, nodding. “kay, boss.”

But Natalio knew the man well enough to know those orders wouldn’t be performed as smoothly as he’d spoken them. Ruddy would lay some major damage on those men before releasing them. The man didn’t play *nice*. If he didn’t see blood, his day wasn’t productive.

As Ruddy headed off to do his blood-spilling, Natalio eased into the back of his Bentley, ripped off his hat and told his driver, “Devon.”

No surprise Devon’s high gates were wide open when Moore rolled the car through them and parked up next to a slick black Corvette belonging to his buddy. His second team was overseen by his friend, Darren. A team rarely called on, but with much on hand tonight, both teams were on duty.

Darren no doubt already had Devon just the way he wanted him: cowering.

As he slipped from the car, he had to shake his head at the gushing fountains and marble-tiled pillars of Devon’s Mediterranean-designed house, knowing this posh lifestyle came from the suffering, blood-shedding and soul-stealing of innocent people.

There was really no need for him to make this visit to Devon; he could’ve just let Darren take care of it. But he wanted Devon to see exactly who was about to haul him off his high horse.

Just before he reached the door, Darren, dressed in a sharp gray suit with his thick auburn hair gelled back in a side-part style, swung it open, grinning. He bumped his best friend's shoulder, slapping him a manly hug. "Where's the asshole?"

"In here," Darren answered, leading him into a spacious, leaf-green living room.

A half-dressed and trembling Devon, hands bound in front of him, as seated on a sofa chair, two grave men on either side of him, itching for the order to take him out. As Natalio approached, he glanced up, realized shit just hit the fan, and swore, "Fuck."

Natalio smoothly lowered down into the sofa chair opposite Devon, steepled his hands. "Hello, Dev."

"Look, Nelson, you told me to stay away from your girl, and I did. My shit was with Tev. She was in jail, I had no idea she'd be there."

"But you *didn't* stay away. Avoiding her means avoiding *everyone* in her life. Your plans to kidnap and sell her best friend? Big fucking no."

Devon's eyes widened. He hadn't known Natalio had knowledge of his dabbling into human trafficking, neither had he imagined his men would've spilled so damn much. "I-I...not her, though...I would never hurt her. Despite what you think, I *really* liked her—" Devon snapped his mouth shut when he noticed Natalio's expression darkening. "I'm sorry...I never—who do you think called the cops on Tevin?"

Natalio arched up his brow in a way that silently told Devon to elaborate. He didn't have much to say to the guy. In fact, he normally didn't have to say much to anyone, his presence was unnerving enough. He was who he was.

"Tevin was heading straight into a death trap," Devon rushed out. "The delivery was a set-up for the boys from the east side to get him where they wanted him. Nobody gives a shit if Tevin lives or dies anymore, because everyone's in a rat race for this underground stockpile he's been bragging about. I doubt the dude will make it outta jail alive, and if he does, he'll be dead before the day can end. You know he was in on Cali D's murder with those Cubans, right?"

Natalio's brow went higher at this inane question. What *didn't* he know? He'd just kept his mouth shut on that info for Sadie's sake. Beside, Tevin did him a favor getting that Italian scum out of the way.

Devon hurried on when he got the picture this wasn't a goddamn friendly conversation between them. "When I heard Sadie was with him on his way to make the delivery, I had to stop it somehow. The guys who were after Tevin are trigger-

happy pups who don't know how this game works yet. And they don't know who's who. They would've killed her, Nelson. Of course, you would've made them pay, but that wouldn't have brought *her* back."

Thanks to his well-practiced display of impassivity, Devon or anyone else in the room detected the turmoil roiling inside him at the words "they would've killed her."

They would've killed her...They would've killed her...They would've killed her.

Shaking off the panicky feelings those words brought on, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. This shit needed to be over with. He needed to get out of there and get word that Sadie had gotten home safe and sound. "So what, you expect me to thank you?"

Devon hung his head, tugging at his restraints, not daring to answer.

"Where are they, Dev?" Natalio asked, skipping the middle and jumping to the end.

Devon eyed him warily. "They who?"

"The girls you plan on selling to Mashan."

Devon's face crumpled. "Nelson, please, don't do this. Mashan will have my head if he doesn't get these girls. Shit went south with the last batch and my life is on the line. This trip to Russia *has* to be made by—"

"I don't give a fuck!!" Natalio barked. "Young girls, Dev? Really? You have a wife and two young *daughters*, for Christ's sake! How'd you like it if someone kidnapped your pretty, brown-eyed daughters and bartered them to Russians? Those girls are human beings who have their whole lives ahead of them. They have families and friends who love them and are probably bawling their eyes out right now thinking they're dead!"

A look of embarrassment crossed Devon's features, but Natalio's was out of patience. In one swift flow, he was on his feet and stalking out of the house. The dirty job of torturing for information wasn't his.

"Nelson? Nelson, where you going? I don't trust these guys, Nelson!!" Devon hollered in desperation.

Majority of the time, Natalio was lenient. One of the prime reasons he was esteemed. Sensible people knew it was cowards who killed on a whim. And it was shrewd, strong-minded *men* who left you with rope to hang yourself. But there were those instances when no one could predict his next move. Because of his contrary and enigmatic persona, his unpredictability, to be safe, they tried staying in his good graces.

And that's why Devon was screaming his head off. He knew with Natalio present, there were definite chances of getting off the hook. Leaving him with his men, however, was never a good sign. Because in his absence, his men did whatever they pleased.

But Natalio could care less at that moment. He'd asked Devon once and the man chose not to divulge. Asking a second time wasn't his style. He never asked anything twice. Therefore, Natalio didn't so much as glance back as Devon bellowed his name.

Darren followed him out of the house, and Natalio rubbed at his forehead, feeling a headache coming on.

"Get it out of him," he told Darren. "When you learn where these girls are being held, put Sergeant Smith on it. *Don't* get in the way; that's what the rest of the team is for. I don't want you in any more shit, okay? I want you to remain clean."

Slick and smooth in his suit and gelled hair, Darren nodded in understanding. Apart from his brothers, Darren was the only man he could trust. Hell, he essentially considered the man as his brother. "What about his wife and daughters? They should be back soon. I wouldn't want them walking in on—"

"I arranged a roadblock so they'd miss their flight. They won't be getting in tonight."

Darren nodded again, then eyed him with concern. "You okay, Nel?"

What kind of stupid ass question is that? "Of course I'm not goddamned *okay*. She doesn't want me anymore and there's nothing that I, my money or my status can do to change that. That night screwed us all. But seven years later, I'm the only one still suffering."

He turned and stormed off, leaving a worried Darren staring after him from the doorway. Folding into the back seat of his car, he slammed the door shut.

To Moore, he ordered, "Dial Ralph."

Moore did as told, and seconds later, Ralph's disembodied voice came over the car speakers. "Boss."

"Where is she? Is she safe?" The agitation in his voice couldn't be disguised even if he tried.

"Yes, boss. They both passed out in the car. Probably from exhaustion. But the roommate came out to get them inside. We've got eyes on the building. All's quiet."

Natalio let out a breath, shoulders relaxing. "Okay."

“Anything else, boss?”

“No, that’s all.”

He instructed Moore to take him home, then dropped his head back and closed his eyes, fighting off the sense of powerlessness descending on him. Apart from his brutish father, she, Sadie Elizabene Francé, was the only living person who made him, Natalio Nellandi Nelson, weak and defenseless...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nelly careened his Chrysler 300 onto 3rd Street, cruising to a slow stop at her gate, while dialing her number on his cell with one hand.

“Outside,” he said when her soft, virginal voice answered.

Buju Banton’s rugged voice chanted *Make My Day* through the car speakers, but he quickly ejected his favorite reggae artist and switched to Pink instead. He didn’t exactly care for the freakish, pink-haired girl’s music, but *she* loved her music, and that was all that mattered.

He looked at her shabby, grassless, gardenless yard. The small, crooked bungalow seemed it hadn’t been painted in over a decade, because if he could tell what color that house really was, he’d be lying. Broken chunks of stones led up to the rickety porch, and only about three of the wooden steps seemed safe enough to walk on—he noticed she always hopped over them whenever she was leaving the house.

That decrepit building, it gutted him. But what could he do while she was still seventeen? Her eighteenth birthday couldn’t come soon enough. Hell, the life he wanted to give her. The *love* he wanted to give her. She told him everyday how much she resented her poverty, how she couldn’t wait to become a big name fashion designer, and each time he had to bite his tongue to stop himself from telling her she already had it all.

He was a young millionaire on the rise, and everything that was his, was hers. She just didn’t know that yet. And he couldn’t wait for the day when he could save her completely.

Most would say he was too young to know if he was in love or not. They’d say it’s just infatuation and it’ll pass soon. They’d go on about how it’s a teenage affair, first

crush, summer fling. As much as his father agreed with that line of thought, he *knew* he was in love.

Young as he was, because of his money and status, he'd been with oodles of girls. The pretty and the ugly. The fake and the 'real'. Blondes, brunettes and redheads. Hispanics, Italians, French.

You name it, he'd had them all.

But he'd never, ever been so consumed with anyone like he was with Sadie. When he was around her, the things he felt, he'd never felt that way for anyone else. With every string of his heart, he'd *known* she was *the* girl the first time he saw her. And he was firm in his resolve to have her, would allow nothing to stop him from having her. Not even his father.

The domineering ass had absolutely no idea he hung out on this side of LA. And if he ever found out, he would never see this side of town again. Never see *her* again. So to maintain his secret, he worked harder and longer during the week so he could have the weekends to play; using his brother's real estate business on the west side as a cover. Because the man he called 'Father', he feared.

As his heart usually did whenever he saw her, it flipped, then skipped a beat, and he had to fist his hands to get his head together.

Her abundance of long, wild curls billowed down her shoulders. She was in a yellow sundress revealing way too much of her cleavage, and strappy white sandals. A big smile plastered on her face as she skipped down the steps, heading straight for his car. Her smooth, sun-kissed complexion glowed, and he shifted about in the seat to get rid of his growing hard-on.

She was his. *His*.

Theresa, her mother, walked out onto the porch and waved at him at the same time Sadie opened the car door and slid in. With a honk of the car horn, he waved back at Theresa then turned his eyes back to his heart, who—thank God—was too busy focusing on buckling her seat belt to notice the bulge in his pants.

When the belt finally clicked in place, she looked over at him with a grin that slowly faded when she caught him scowling at her.

“What? What did I do?”

His eyes dropped to her exposed cleavage. “Theresa didn't see that the top half of your dress is missing?”

Frowning, she looked down at her dress then back at him. “Nothing’s wrong with my dress, Nelly. As a matter of fact, my mother *made* this for me.”

“I like the dress, but at the same time, I don’t. You’re a good girl. So dress like one. Not like this, skipping around showing off my goods to everyone.”

She made an exasperated sound as she glared at him, which had him biting his lip to hide a smile, because he always adored that irritated expression. “Seriously, dude, how old are you? You sound like somebody’s grandfather.”

“Old enough to know you’re showing too much skin for your age…”

As Sadie’s cheeks reddened and her nostrils flared, he knew precisely what her next words would be. Protecting what’s his was his only intent, but she saw it as ‘treating her like a child.’

“I’m not a goddamn saint and I’m not a goddamn child! So stop treating me like one! And I’m not changing if that’s what you’re getting at. This is what / want to wear, so it’s what I’m wearing. If you have a problem with that, then you’re free to go and scoop up one of those desperate whores always chasing your insipid ass!”

His brows went up. “Insipid?”

“That’s what I said. *Insipid*. Did I stutter?” She tugged the V of her dress down a little lower to expose more cleavage, all the while still glaring at him. Goddamn little minx. “I. Am. Not. Changing.”

He held her gaze, pissed. But he knew she was as stubborn as a horse and could hold his gaze as long as he could hold hers. A stare-off with her would get him nowhere, so he shifted the gear in drive and rolled the car away from the curb. “Have it your way, Sadie.”

He crawled down the streets of the lively neighborhood he’d grown to love. Busy-bodied residents roamed the streets, men gambling on the corners, women gossiping in their yards, flirts tossing and short skirts swaying…

“Why the long way?” Sadie asked when she noticed he was driving straight ahead instead of making a U-turn which was a quicker route to the main street. Going straight ahead would have him turning through all the streets just to get on the main.

“Because that’s what *insipid* guys do, they take the long way,” he said, sounding like a sulky preschooler.

Telling her the real reason—that the long route was to prevent her from seeing her degenerate father blatantly jacking up his blonde mistress on a column just three

blocks away—was out of the question. He knew if she saw that it would ruin her day. Her father sickened him.

Ignoring him, she took out her cell phone and began texting; her slim, graceful fingers sweeping quietly over the keypad.

He tightened his twitching hands around the steering wheel to stop himself from grabbing the damn thing and tossing it out the window. He wanted all her attention on him and he wasn't getting it. But he knew if he tossed her cell that would just be another argument, and considering he only got to see her a few days a week, he could only afford one argument per weekend. A pissed-off Sadie wasn't easy to cajole, so he knew when to pick his battles. Who the hell was she texting anyway?

His blood simmered, and he had to take a few steady breaths so he wouldn't flip out.

His indignation was mitigated when her texting stopped, but immediately riled again up when she directed her attention out the window instead to talking to him.

He was about to demand her attention when his cell phone buzzed in his pocket.

Steering the car with one hand, he used his free hand to get his phone from his pocket, grinning like a fool when he saw it was a text message from her. His eyes darted over to her, and she was still staring out the window, her fingers fiddling with the straps of her bag.

He opened the text:

***Babe,
HAPPY BIRTHDAY.***

It should've been the first thing I said to you, but Sir Crabbiness had to pick a fight with me. Anyway, you know if the world was mine, I would place it at your feet.

But as I am, I can only offer you myself. I hope I'm enough.

X

P.S. You are anything BUT insipid. Try palatable, and stimulating, and savory, and fascinating, and delectable...the list is endless, baby.

He slid his cell back into his pocket and reached over to take her hand. Lacing their fingers together, he squeezed, prompting her to look at him. The swells on her chest heaved as she took a breath before turning to face him. Captivating cognac-browns peered at him with utter submission.

She was his.

“There’s no one else out there for me. Here, with you, is where I’d rather be—even when we’re arguing. Thank you for sharing yourself with me. I love you.”

She sighed and brought their joined hands up to her delicate cheek. He tried to ignore the unsatisfactory sting he always felt each time she failed to return the words. He knew she loved him. The look in her eyes, deepness of her kisses, said it all. But she’d never actually said the words out loud. And he wanted her to say them, to discharge cynicism and fears and just *trust* him.

Seeing the broken family she emerged from, he knew trust was hard for her. But he would never be able to feel like she was wholly his if he didn’t have her trust, if he didn’t *hear* her love as well as he could feel and see it. He wanted *all* of her.

A familiar figure walked out in the street, signaling for him to stop. He couldn’t put a name to the face, but he knew it was someone wanting something. As he pulled up next to the man, Sadie opened her eyes, checking why he stopped, then made an irritated grunt and settled back in her seat.

He powered down his car window and looked up at the guy, waiting.

“Whatcha’ sayin’, Nelly? How you do?” asked the stout Mexican, while bending to peek in and wave at Sadie who returned a fake smile.

Nelly gave a good-natured salute, knowing what was coming next. In fact, his hand was already reaching to his pocket. “I’m good. You?”

The guy scratched his forehead, and then his ears. “Well, ah, not so good. I got a booklist for ma’ little girl, for back-to-school in a few weeks, and I could afford only two from the list. You know, she’s missin’ out on a lot without ‘em books and stuff. I was wonderin’ if—”

“This should help,” Nelly said, handing the Mexican five one hundred dollar bills. He’d been peeling off the bills while the guy scratched and fidgeted with his winding story.

The Mexican’s eyes smiled when he saw the bills, and so did his lips. Taking the cash, he clasped Nelly’s hand tight. “Thanks, esé. Thanks…Thanks.”

Nelly nodded and drove off, side-eyeing Sadie who was shaking her head as she stared out the window. “What’re you so miffed about?”

“You realize they don’t annoy the politicians this much when they come around?”

“Maybe that’s because the politicians only give them empty promises instead of substance?”

Sadie rolled her eyes and he smiled. That was another expression of hers he found adorable. “They’re annoying!”

Before he could answer, a youth stepped out in the street, signaling for him to stop.

Sadie threw her hands up and scoffed, which only made him smile as he powered down the window. This youth’s story consisted of his mother’s medications being out and funds to restock were non-existent, which meant his mother grew weaker by the day. After handing the youth a reasonable amount of cash and pulling off, he explained to Sadie, “It’s not easy for them to ask, Sadie. They ask because they really need it.”

“I wouldn’t,” she muttered. “I’d rather suffer than shamelessly beg like they do.”

“That’s because you’re full of pride. And it’s easy for you to say that now when you’re young and free of responsibilities. Pride doesn’t concern a man who has not only himself to feed, but others who depend on him. They don’t care who they ask, they just ask in faith that they’ll receive.”

Nothing about helping others annoyed him. On the contrary, he enjoyed knowing he could help others out in whatever way he could. What little he gave away was chicken feed to him and his family. In his world, the kind of money they spent on jewelry, clothing or other inconsequential shit all for show, was sometimes ridiculous.

He was born in an aristocratic family. Wealth wasn’t a choice for him or a position he could deny. His life just came with it. Lots of it.

He’d heard enough sobering stories from successful people about all of the roadblocks and trials they faced on their road to prosperity. But like him, some were just born into it.

Nevertheless, he was one hundred percent grateful. He was blessed, and he enjoyed being blessed. You’ll never hear a rich man wish he wasn’t rich. The advantages of wealth far outweighed the disadvantages.

Sadie tilted her head to the side. “How *old* are you again?”

He just chuckled, then leaned over and smacked her a kiss.

Sweet sins, he fucking loved her.

Nelly sprawled shirtless on the gray L-shaped sofa in his rented flat as he watched *Scarface* on the flat-screen television—well, actually, he was *pretending* to watch the television. On the real, he was surreptitiously watching Sadie as she pattered about in the kitchen, balancing a cookbook in one hand as she tried to bake him a cake.

She had no idea what she was doing, and when he offered to help, she shooed him away. His fiery little girlfriend was hell-bent on getting that cake baked. And he was enjoying watching her make a flustered mess of herself.

When he'd picked her up earlier, his plan was to grab something to eat, take her shopping on Robertson Boulevard and then see a movie. Of course, her choice of food was pepperoni pizza—she was a pizza maniac. But as soon as they'd finished at the pizzeria she began whining that it was *his* birthday and it wasn't right to do things for her on his day. She wanted to do something for him, like bake a cake.

At first he'd been upset and tried to convince her otherwise, because she always, *always* seemed to find a reason not to take things from him, and all he wanted to do was give her the world.

Sometimes he had to remind himself this was Sadie Francé he was dealing with, and not those uppity, fake-nosed, Barbie doll rich brats his father deemed worthy of him. Those chicks spoke only of the latest brands, the next new car, the current hip restaurant or club. Sadie, on the other hand, was real. All of her. She had dreams, she had passion, she had direction. And he could see those dreams were what she held onto, with unyielding hope.

One wouldn't expect someone in her position to be so full of pride, but she was. Pride's not usually attractive...but on Sadie, it was.

He wondered many times what went on in that beautiful head of hers. What she thought of him. What she thought of them as a couple. What she envisioned their future to be. Did she believe, like he strongly did, that they'd be together to the grave? Or did she just view him as a teenage crush? Did she know, like he undoubtedly knew, she was *the one*? Or did she expect him to leave her one day for someone else?

He knew he was thinking like a big, worn-out pussy, but he couldn't help it when it came to Sadie. Yeah, that's right, she turned him into a pussy. And he had absolutely no problem with that.

He was laughing to himself as he watched her, stirring batter in a large stainless steel bowl, flour spots on her nose and forehead. She'd changed from her sundress into one of his white T's and boxers, her mass of curls barely holding back with a hair tie, showing off her long, graceful neck he loved so much.

He wanted to lick his tongue all over it, suck on her smooth, soft skin, and mark her.

The emotion he had at the moment was far more powerful than 'love'. Love, however, was the strongest word out there to describe his feelings, so he had no choice but to call it *love*. The intense, burning, searing feeling, he also knew was unhealthy.

But he was going to marry this girl. He swore to it.

This girl would be his wife. And he would love her with everything he had. Until his last breath.

The doorbell rang, tugging him from his girly, overly emotional thoughts. Sadie was deeply concentrated on her mixing, her pink tongue tipping over her lower lip, her brows furrowing, so he lazily stretched up from the sofa, tugged his ball cap backwards on his head and went to answer the door.

He almost slammed the door shut when he found Tanya there, gazing up at him under her lashes, with a sultry smile and a gift box in her hand. Dressed in a very short, very tight red dress and make-up galore. Way too glamorized for this hour of the day.

"Darren's not here," he said quickly.

When he made to close the door, she stopped it with her free hand and rolled her eyes. "I'm here to see you, silly." Holding the gift box out to him, she lilted, "Happy Birthday!"

Glancing down at the box, he predicted there was either a framed picture of her inside, or a stack of nude ones. Chicks were conceited like that. "You know I can't accept that, Tanya."

Taking a step closer to him, she pouted her glossy lips. "Why not?"

"Cause Sadie'll have my balls, that's why."

She took another step closer, pressed one hand to his bare chest, and whispered, "She doesn't have to know. Let me in, Nelly. I can do things to you that inexperienced child can't." Before he could stop her, she flicked her tongue over one of his nipples. "No one has to know. Her nor Darren. It'll be *our* secret."

Grabbing her arm, he flung her back. "She *will* know because she's here. And I'd never lie to her. I'm *hers*. I'm not up for—"

The door ripped from his grip as Sadie squeezed her way past him. Stopping to face Tanya she hissed, “I *was* here. Now I’m leaving. He’s free. Give him the birthday gift I can’t,” and ran off.

Shit.

Nelly shoved Tanya out of the way and ran to grab Sadie around her waist. Lifting her combing body off the ground, he turned and headed back to his flat, ducking his head to prevent himself from getting whacked from her flailing arms.

Tanya stood at his doorway, a smug smile on her face.

“Be fucking gone, Tanya!” he barked her.

Stepping across his threshold, he kicked the door shut while trying to control a screaming, skirmishing Sadie. “Chill out, babe.”

“Don’t tell me to chill out, you…you…” she railed. “Let me go! I hate you!”

Ignoring that, he carried her back into the kitchen and set her down on the counter, wedging himself between her thighs and wrapping his arms around her in an inescapable lock.

Sadie dug her fingernails in his flesh, yanked hard on his braids, sank her teeth into his skin…

As painful as her abuses were, he pretended not to feel a thing. Eventually, she gave up fighting, folded her arms and spat, “I *hate* you.”

Staring straight into her eyes, which were saying the complete opposite of hate, he demanded to know, “*Why* do you hate me?”

Breaking eye contact with him, she began fingering her long curls that escaped the hair tie during her little episode. “Because if I wasn’t here, you would’ve…you would’ve…”

Unlocking his hands from around her waist, he brought them up to her face. “I wouldn’t have done anything, Sadie. What part of ‘I’m yours’ don’t you understand?”

“I…but…I don’t know how…” she stuttered, “...she’s right, Nelly. She’s better for you. She’s older and experienced. I’m not. I can’t even bake you a damn cake.”

“Who says that’s what I’m looking for? What I want is right here. In my eyes, you aren’t lacking. You’re just perfect. For me. You’re mine, baby. Mine. I love *you*.”

He turned to the cake batter on the counter, dipped a finger inside and licked it off. “Tastes just fine to me. All you need to do is pour it in the baking pan, toss it in the oven and voila’! You’ve baked me a cake. *You*. ”

She giggled, and the sound was downright amazing. But just as quickly, the sound was gone as her face became clouded and troubled again. She opened her mouth as if to say something then closed it, shaking her head against her thought.

“What is it?”

Twining the ends of his braids around her fingers, she whispered, “We’re young, Nelly. So young. Do you think you’ll still feel the same way about me a couple of years from now? It’s… it’s what I’m most afraid of. That this won’t be… forever.”

Nelly hugged her slim, delicate frame, and buried his face in the crook of her neck. “I’ll never stop loving you, Sadie. Ever.”

He thought he heard a sob escape her, but he didn’t check to be sure. He was too caught up in squeezing the life out of her, holding on as if she would just poof and disappear at any minute. While he could control a lot of things, here and now, he had no control over the future. And now she’d gone and planted it in his mind that there might possibly be a future *without* her.

He cried.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I woke up.

I've been doing that a lot. Waking up. From sleep, from dreams, from fairytales, from illusions, to reality.

And all I wanted to do was go back to sleep. Shut out *everything*.

Headache. I groaned at the sledgehammer pounding in my head.

It was morning. And I was in my bedroom, safe and sound, Kelsy sprawled next to me, deep asleep, white lines of dried saliva on her cheek.

The hammering in my head grew more and more severe, forcing me to squeeze my eyes shut, riding it out. I needed aspirins. Preferably the PM ones that'll send me right back to sleep.

Sluggishly, I got out of bed and zombie-walked out to the living area.

Two heads swung around and four eyes looked at me.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're awake," Brenda said, letting out a relieved sigh. She was in Hello Kitty pajamas, cradling a large, black mug.

Her older brother, Tommy, was sitting next to her on the couch, looking equally worried.

Tommy was a nice hunk of a guy. Tall, dark and handsome; the typical. And he was one hundred percent, head over heels in lust with me. The feeling wasn't mutual. He was swoon-worthy handsome yes, but didn't send my heart racing, didn't give me shivers. Plus Brenda was flat-out against us ever hooking up.

"What the hell happened?" Brenda demanded.

Another intense pound in my head jolted my feet into action. I started for the kitchen. "What do you mean?"

Brenda stared at me as if I'd grown a third eye. "Sadie, I found you and Kelsy passed out last night."

I frowned, and even that hurt. Swallowing two aspirins, I emptied a tall glass of water. Snaps shots of yesterday's events came hobbling in. But the last thing I remembered was driving home with an unconscious Kelsy. No memory of how we ended up in bed.

"Where?" I asked.

"In Kelsy's car outside. Tommy had just come over to help me with my paper when we heard a car horn blaring non-stop. We went outside and found both of you passed out inside the car; your head was face down on the horn."

Shit. "Crashed?"

"No. The gear was in Park. So I suppose you passed out after."

"What happened?" asked Tommy, the fledgling lawyer. "Were you two drugged?"

"Maybe. Because I can't remember anything," I lied.

Brenda made a frustrated noise, like she knew I was prevaricating. "We were going to take you to the hospital but then you woke up for about five minutes, moaning about how hungry you were and at the same time laughing like an idiot. And Kelsy, she cried in her sleep all night about cocaine and dying and Tevin. A whole bunch of nonsense."

"I'm not sure what happened. Just glad I'm still alive."

"What's the last thing you remember?" Tommy asked in his serious lawyer tone.

Hell no, I wasn't telling these two anything. Especially Brenda, I didn't trust her. Besides, the nature of what went down last night was nothing to tell.

"Being at a bar," I shrugged. "Having one too many drinks."

Brenda eyed me with distrust. "You're in the same clothes you left for work in Thursday morning. You haven't been home since then. Which means you skipped work yesterday. Spill it, Sadie."

I remained straight-faced. "Maybe we were kidnapped and fucked into oblivion. Then they decided not to kill us and left our senseless bodies outside. What else could it be? I told you, I don't remember squat shit. Thanks for helping us in. Now lay off."

Brenda rolled her eyes. "You're impossible, Sadie!"

Tommy got up and walked over to me, wrapped a solicitous arm around my shoulders and led me to the couch. "How are you feeling?"

"I've got a headache, and I'm miserable."

He watched me with passionate dark eyes, then brushed a thumb over my cheek. "I'll make you some coffee."

"Thanks."

Brenda scoffed as she got up and followed Tommy into the kitchen. "Give it a rest, Tommy. Sadie's screwing billionaires now."

There was a clamor of falling utensils, which told Tommy was not pleased with that news. "Is she now?"

"Yep." Brenda smirked, settling her butt on a stool at the breakfast bar. "CEO of ENEN."

Glancing over at her, I glowered. "That mouth of yours, my friend, is why you got cheese in a gift box."

Brenda snapped her mouth shut, mortified. And it was my turn to smirk.

"That true, Sadie?" Tommy asked, and I could tell his indifference was feigned.

"Nope."

He swung his narrowed glare to Brenda. "Why would you say that, Bren?"

"Because it's true!" Brenda defended. "Or was. The bad-boy billionaire was *here* in my house, sticking his tongue down her throat. They were dating, Thomas. I'm not lying."

"Finally. You've used the right word," I droned from where I lounged on the couch. "*Were*."

Tommy strode over, handing me a mug of coffee. "You were dating a Nelson?"

I took the mug. "Briefly."

He reoccupied his position next to me. "So what happened?"

"Oh, you know..." My shoulders rose in a shrug. "The rich and the poor don't blend well. Each always end up with their own their kind."

I so did not want to be talking about *him* right now. Heaven knows, I missed him. Loved him. Wanted him right here with me to comfort me and assure me everything would be alright. That he was here to stay and wouldn't ever leave again.

Why did I push him away? Why didn't I listen to what he had to say? I bit my lip, quelling the sudden urge to call him and beg him to come back to me. Pride was one of the seven deadly sins, and it's the sin I was most guilty of.

Tommy leaned closer. "You know how I feel about you, Sadie. Think you're of the sexiest women I've ever known. But you're so damn hard to get through to." His eyes hooded. "I want you, Sadie. I've wanted you for a long, *long* time."

I sipped my coffee. "Yeah. I know."

"So won't you give us a chance?"

"It doesn't matter to you that I might've been kidnapped and gangbanged by over a dozen men? My vajayjay must be as wide as a martini glass now. Leather skinned with no grip whatsoever. No tightness. Come on, Tommy, you wouldn't want that." I bit the inside of my cheeks, failing to repress my laughter at the horrified expression on Tommy's face.

"That didn't happen," he said in a soft voice, trying to convince himself.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I told you, I can't remember. Anything could have happened, even worse than that." I tried my damndest to sound serious. That ought to keep his libidinous pursuits at bay.

The sound of Kelsy's voice jerked both our heads around. "Sas' Christ, why do I feel like a newborn baby who's been locked up in a bloody womb for nine months? I feel freakin' miserable and mushed. Someone *please* slap me on my ass."

I giggled. It was good to see my friend awake and back to her old self. Last time I saw a conscious Kelsy, she was wide-eyed, speech-impaired and blanched. Abandoning my mug on the coffee table, I opened my arms to her. "Come here biatch, give me a kiss."

"Am I allowed French?"

With a face-splitting grin, I nodded. "Oh, hell yeah!"

Kelsy leaped into my arms and we landed on the floor rolling and giggling like two teenagers while Tommy looked on in amusement. Brenda appeared in the periphery of my vision with her hands planted on her hips, telling us to be sure and not break anything with our childishness.

But Kelsy and I were in our own world, laughing like there was no tomorrow, as if we had no problems in the world. Not because we were senseless idiots but because after all that happened in the last forty eight hours, we were still here. It was too much to process; too much to even talk about. So we just laughed. Hard, cathartic, bubbling laughter until our bodies were once again back to normal, relieved of stress. Relaxed.

"I love you, bitch," Kelsy said through pants of breaths.

"I love you, too, sis."

I flipped my cellphone over and over in my palm, inhaling the salty sea breeze caressing as I took in the breathtaking marina view from the balcony of Kelsy's apartment at Esprit. Queues of yachts and boats gently rocked to and fro on the blue waves.

It was amazing here. I was yet to tell Kelsy that the apartment directly across from hers was mine, bought as a gift by a certain blue-eyed billionaire. I didn't want it, and Kelsy would only try coaxing me into taking it, because, well, I'd be right across the hall from her. Her dream come true.

Deciding to spend the rest of my weekend with Kelsy so I could focus on designing a few more pieces for the bidding on Monday, I'd packed up my implements and fled my apartment to get away from the inquisitive Brenda and her relentless brother.

Nevertheless, the change of venue didn't help with my concentration, because my independent mind kept wandering off to thoughts of Natalio. And with each thought, a part of me hurt. It made no sense to fight the truth that I still loved him, wanted him, needed what we once had. The separation was killing me. I wanted him back. I wanted him to come after me again so I could tell him I forgave him. *I was ready to forgive him.*

But I knew he wouldn't come after me again. I'd felt the finality in his letter. It was the end for him.

I wasn't the type to beg and chase after people, but for once I was willing to push my pride aside and grovel for Natalio to come back. The crazy love my mind had forgotten for seven years, was right there, living, breathing inside my heart. It'd never left.

He had left. The *memories* had left. But the crazy stupid love hadn't.

But was it too late now?

"Called him yet?" Kelsy walked out on the balcony in a fluffy pink robe, her dark hair damp, green eyes laced with sadness. She was only half a girl without Tevin.

"Don't have the balls," I muttered.

"Groveling isn't your thing, huh?" She sighed, stuffed her hands in the pockets of the robe and gave me her serious stare. "If you love him, Sadie, you *must* let him know. Nothing's wrong with being vulnerable with the one you love. Love calls for vulnerability, openness and truth. Not pride and shutters and feigned indifference. Real love has no lies, no masks, no secrets. It's just you and that person, bare, from flesh to soul. With real love, it's no longer bodies that you share, but souls. Because the eyes have seen past all the fleshly flaws, and directly to the soul, it's no longer about tangibility, but that intangible feeling...that feeling that tells you: *This* is love." She paused to wipe a tear away. "Makes no sense to keep punishing yourself like this. Love is immortal, but life is short. *Call him.*"

Breaking her stare, I looked out to the marina. Not only was she making me stupidly emotional, but she was a melancholic mess with Tevin being locked up. "You okay?"

"I'm anything but. Just trying to decide if leaving Tev would be better for me or not." Her voice broke. "I love him so much. But what happened last night..." Fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I know how you feel, Kels. I've been there. We know what's right but the wrong feels better. Don't worry about it. Just give it a few days and when your mind is all clear and relaxed you'll know what decision to make. Besides, Tev won't be getting out anytime soon. I'm gonna visit him on Tuesday and find out how things are looking."

More wiping away of tears. "I need a run. Gonna go to the gym downstairs. Coming?"

"Nah. I still have a shit load of pieces to put together for the bidding."

Kelsy nodded and walked back into the apartment.

Taking a deep breath, I dialed Natalio.

A woman answered on the second ring with a smooth, clear voice. "Natalio Nelson's line, Tiffany Forbes speaking."

Okay, I know he's all billionaire extraordinaire, but I sure as hell wasn't expecting anyone to answer his *cell phone*.

"Hello?" the woman prompted.

"Um, good afternoon, Miss Forbes. I'd like to speak with Natalio, please."

"Mr. Nelson is in a meeting at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Uh, yes. Tell him Sadie phoned. Sadie Francé."

"Okay, will do Miss Sadi—" her pleasant, business-like tone stopped short. "Sadie Francé, you say?"

"Yes."

"Fine," she bit out this time. "I'll be sure he gets your message." And the line went dead.

I stared at my cell, bewildered. That was not what I expected at all.

Shrugging it off, I realized now that I'd made the call, I felt a lot lighter. Progress.

I was so giddy I practically skipped inside and began working like crazy on my pieces.

Three hours later, there was no return call from Natalio.

Sagging, I picked up my cell and rang him again.

The same woman answered.

"Sadie Francé, again. Is Natalio still in a meeting?"

"Yes," she replied curtly. "*Mr. Nelson* is a very busy man, Miss Francé. Is it important?"

She stressed the 'Mr. Nelson' as though I were being too personal calling him Natalio? "Somewhat."

"Well, as I've assured you before, I will let him know you called."

Again, the call abruptly ended. If she was an assistant, receptionist, or whatever of his, she deserved to be sacked for being so damn unprofessional. Maybe he was sleeping with her?

My heart hiccupped at that thought.

The sun set and the earth darkened and still there was no call from Natalio. Was this a sign for me to give up and *try* to forget him again? Was he really done? Wanted nothing more to do with me?

That wouldn't work. No way could I move on knowing he was alive and breathing, living in the same world I was. He was mine. He needed to remember that.

Determined, I continued preparing for Monday. There was a vast amount of work to be done, so I would definitely be boosting up on caffeine to pull an all-nighter. I wanted Geo Lee to be proud of me. My mother, too.

Mom.

She had wanted to help me design the pieces, but I wanted her to spend more time paying attention to herself, considering she'd been torpid for years. And she was doing just that. Miss De'Lacy practically lived with her now. Their relationship wasn't caretaker to infected woman, but friends. Actual friends who went out together, gardened together, and just...lived.

My mother had finally made her choice.

She chose life.

The strong scent of Folgers coffee wafted under my nostrils. Smelled heavenly enough to get me to open my eyes. Kelsy was standing over me, passing a mug of coffee back and forth under my nose.

Sharp pain lanced up my spine when I tried to sit up, realizing that I'd fallen asleep at the working table.

"Good morning. No way your back's not hurting," Kelsy said. "Here. Drink some coffee."

I stretched like a cat before taking the mug she offered. "Thanks. You're the best. I swear, if we didn't have the same body parts, I'd marry you."

She snickered. "This looks like *a lot* of work. If only you'd let me help yo—"

"I don't have enough material for you to mess up anything here, Kels. I can't afford any wrong cuts and stitches."

"I'm not that bad," she defended, pouting.

With an arched brow, I brought the mug to my mouth and stared at her over the rim as I sipped.

Kelsy burst into a laugh. "Okay, those times you were just teaching me. I'm much better now. I like how magical it is to create stuff from just plain cloth. I've watched you do it for so many years and it's the one thing I'm actually interested in trying. Plus, I'm opening a fashion store. I need to at least have some inkling."

Kelsy was interested in nothing whatsoever except shopping and being with Tevin. It was a wonder she'd taken on this idea of opening her own store. She didn't have to work or do anything. Just be mommy and daddy's little girl. But, in truth, she'd always shown interest in what I did and kept me aware of what was in style or out. Which helped me a lot.

"Okay. I'll let you help me today. But so help me God if you spoil anything..." My words trailed off at the huge grin on her face. "I'm gonna shower."

I cricked and bent and twisted my bones and joints into activity as I headed to the guest bedroom.

Natalio still hadn't called, texted or emailed me. And I wanted to die a million deaths at the thought he might actually be over me. But I wasn't the one who caused him pain, he caused *me* pain. I had every right to be mad at him. And he *should* be sorry. Why did he come back into my life if he would just give up on me weeks later?

He was right, maybe we weren't meant to be together since we kept losing each other. Maybe we *were* fighting for something that wasn't in the stars.

Except, *he* was the only one who'd been fighting. *I* was too busy being angry, hurt and unforgiving. Maybe he was just tired of fighting. Tired of it all. I had no idea what happened that night and I'd showed no interest in wanting to know, but I *should* have.

I went into the shower 'resolved' on never calling him again, and stepped out with a fresh mind and a renewed urgency to call him. I think I was going crazy. This Natalio disconnect was driving me insane. Was this how he felt when I wouldn't talk to him?

Water dripping from my body, I went out to the main room and scooped up my cellphone from the work desk then hurried back to the bedroom, ignoring Kelsy's curious stare.

It was Sunday. There would be no assistants or whoever answering his cell on a Sunday, right? If he didn't answer, then I'd know for sure he was avoiding me.

With a steely resolve, I rang him.

He answered on the second ring. "Speak."

Suddenly my mouth was dry, unable to form a single syllable. By the time a coherent sentence came to mind, the line went dead. Jeez, he didn't even give me a chance to speak. Didn't he have my number saved in his phone or something?

When I dialed him again, the number rang out. He was ignoring the call. Rang again, straight to voicemail. He rejected the call.

Determined, I rang again and he answered with palpable irritation on the third ring. "Listen up, whoever you are, I have no time fo—"

"Natalio, it's me. Sadie." My voice sounded way too weak, so I cleared my throat.

A brief silence on the other end. "Sadie?"

"Yes," I said in a stronger voice. "Why haven't you called me back?"

"Called you back?"

"I called twice yesterday but a woman answered and said you were in a meeting. I gave her my name and told her to tell you I called."

"My assistant, Tiffany. But I didn't get a message that you called. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine. W-why would she do that?"

A careless sigh flowed down the line. "I might have an idea."

My blood heated. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't worry about it. Just email me next time. Your name is on my 'Alert Me' list. It consists of my family and relevant business partners I should immediately be alerted about when they contact me. She doesn't know you, so she probably thinks...you know. But I'll deal with her on that."

"So why should it matter to her? She gets paid to do her *job*, doesn't she?"

He ignored my question. "Are you sure you're okay, Sadie? Need help with anything? I can't say I expected to ever get a call from you."

"I promise you, I'm okay. I was just..." I couldn't say it. I couldn't say I missed and loved him and wanted him back. "...wondering if you were okay."

"I'm good," was all he said.

Of course he's okay, he's a freaking mogul. Why the hell wouldn't he be okay? Because of me? Pssh.

Silence ensued. Soft, controlled breathing responding to ragged and uncontrolled.

Courageously, I said, "I want to see you, Natalio. I want to talk about um, stuff and..."

Natalio remained silent, but his soft breathing grew heavier on the other end.

If only to see his face, if only to be near him, to be able to kiss him, to snuggle up in his arms and never leave.

"I want you," I finished. There, I said it.

A sharp intake of breath. And it took an eon before he spoke again. "Sadie, I..."

What? You love me? You want me too? You can't wait to see me? Tell me...tell me...

"I can't."

What? "Why?" My voice was barely audible.

"God dammit, Sadie! Why the hell would you do this?" he yelled, taking me by surprise. "Why would you call me now when I've finally moved on? Finally let you go? W-Why?"

"Natalio, I didn't—"

"I love you, Sadie. But I can't. I just can't."

Hot liquid sprang to my eyes. He couldn't say no. I couldn't lose him again. "No," was all I managed to say.

There was a loud clatter in the background, as if he'd knock something over or threw it, maybe. "Sadie, I've been agonizing over you for *seven* damn years! Finally I get close to you again and you don't remember me. You didn't fucking remember *me*. I realize it was an illness you suffered on my account, but still, do you have any idea how much that hurts? That you can look into my eyes and not recognize me? It *kills* me, Sadie. And when you finally did, you pushed me away. I've hung on to you for seven goddamn years, only for you to *push me away*. I know you must have been hurt, but you have no idea how hurt I was, too! You didn't give a shit to know what happened. You just pushed me out of your life and moved on happily. Now I've stepped away from all that shit, cleared my fucked-up head, finally moved on, and now you call to say you want me? It took you six weeks to know you want me? *Six weeks?*"

"I-I'm sorry," I stuttered. "But you can't say it's over. You don't want it to be over, I know. It can't be. I want you. I need you. I *love* you, Nelly."

His voice became devoid of feeling. "I find that very hard to believe."

"Why?" I sobbed. "It's true!"

"Sadie, you gave away your car. You never moved into the apartment. If you loved me so much, you would've been sticking to anything that reminded you of me." Inhale deeply, then exhale over the line, as if trying to calm himself. "You don't love me. You never did. I don't think you know what you want. And I don't care to stick around and find out anymore."

"The car and the apartment are material things, Natalio. They don't matter. Why do you feel the need to buy me anything, anyways?"

"Because it pleases me! I wanted to do those things because *I* wanted to be the one to make you happy. To give you the world. When you accept what I give, you have no idea how it makes me feel inside. Money helps me to show you my love in ways words alone can't."

"But it isn't—"

"The poor man tells his wife every morning and every night he loves her. She may be content with that, but he isn't. Every night before he closes his eyes, what he wishes for is a promotion one day, or perhaps a better job, maybe to win the lottery, just so he can buy nice things for his wife; a better house, a better car, take her on a vacation, things to *show* her he loves her. The rich man, grateful for his prosperity, does it without thought because he can afford to do so, and he's extremely satisfied he can. Men do things like that to *show* their love. There's no pity in it. It's just *love*. Whereas a woman is happy with just hearing the words, a man feels more like a *man* when he can physically show his love. Men are active. Simple words don't do shit for my ego. When you don't accept what I give, I take it as a major insult. Especially if you *claim* you love me."

"You can make me happy by not giving up. My love for you is real, Natalio. Feel it," I rasped. "I'm still in love you."

Natalio remained quiet, his exhales growing harsher by the second. But his voice was like velvet over steel when he said, "Guard your heart above all else because it will determine the course of your life."

The line went dead.

My tears ran amok until I saw nothing but blur. Everything was a blur. And everything would always be a blur because Natalio was through with me.

I'd lost him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Ninety-five thousand," countered the third bidder.

"One hundred and ten thousand," countered the fourth.

My last piece—a neon-yellow Spring shorts with bright green belt loops and green, square front buttons—had spiked up a bidding war. I gave credits to the tall, blonde model who did it more justice than it deserved. All but three of my modeled pieces had been tendered on, making me four hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars richer.

The bidding price for the Spring shorts was now at one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, and all except one bidder were stroking their chins in deep contemplation.

Being an exclusive show, there was just a small crowd of people apart from the five bidders, the eight fashion designers, including me, and the models. Nevertheless, everything was being executed like a real fashion show, with a huge white runway, blinding, flashing light and runway soundtracks.

The models, make-up artists and everything else were provided. All the designers had to do was dress the bony girls in their pieces and send them out. I'd never expected it to be this much of a fuss, but I guess the bidders needed the ambiance to get them 'in the zone'.

"That's it," said the third bidder, slamming his palm down to the table. "One hundred and fifty thousand."

The other bidders backed down in defeat, while the third smirked in triumph. He fixed his eyes on me. "Miss Francé, I'll be delighted to carry this design in my stores. The collaboration of colors and style is apropos for that touch we've been seeking for Spring. This piece will blow off the racks, I can tell you that much."

Even though I didn't feel like it, I smiled and thanked them all before shuffling off so the show could continue. Those shorts were my last piece. I'd managed only to complete a mere half of what I'd planned on. Reason? Because I'd lost a part of me. The only man I'd ever loved had moved on and no longer wanted me.

I bit my lip at the telltale burning behind my eyes and tried to focus on the models moving down the runway.

Tesko's pieces were being modeled to fast-paced electronic music. He was a beautifully muscled African-American with locks, and he'd managed to clock in close to one million dollars. His pieces were phenomenal, non-seasonal. Not that I'd wear such mundane styling, but the average consumers would, which explained why the dealers kept bidding. Virtually all his pieces were coveted.

"For someone who's half a million dollars richer, you don't look cheery at all." I swiveled around to see Geo Lee beaming down at me, dressed in a myriad of colors as usual. The front of his hair now had streaks of red along with the usual purple, and raked upwards in a wild mess.

Leaping at him, I hugged him tight—uncharacteristically so. "Thank you so much for this opportunity, Mr. Lee."

Geo Lee shook his head and sighed in frustration. "Oh, for the hatred of clits and tits and everything that shits, Francé! *Geo*. How many times do I have to tell you? 'Mr. Lee' sounds like a shriveling Chinese chef or some flat-faced Kung Fu kid, and I'm neither."

Trust Geo Lee to make me laugh. "Okay. *Geo*."

"Good. You did well. I'd buy your pieces myself. I'm aware I might be losing an exemplary assistant soon, once your name gets out there. But I'll manage." He mock pouted. "Maybe."

"I'm not going anywhere. For now."

"Oh, we'll see about that," he said with a knowing hint. "Anyway, I have to leave and make a rush pack for my Tokyo trip in three hours. I want you to—"

"I thought you weren't leaving until tomorrow?"

Geo Lee waved his hand impatiently. "Yes, yes. But that was before I had the opportunity to save myself a wad of cash and hitch a ride on your ex-vampire's jet. He's leaving in three hours and I'm not missing this free ride, sweetie. So keep up! Although I promised you and Kiwan the week off, I want you to head back to GLFH and sort out a few things for me. It's not much..."

As I got out my pad and started jotting down Geo Lee's list of demands, I tried not to think about the annoying fact that he had the opportunity to see Natalio, and I didn't...

...But I *could*, couldn't I?

I paused mid-scribbling, tilted my head and gazed up at Geo Lee under my lashes.

Geo Lee's spit-fire demands paused, too, and quirked up a brow at me. Then he sighed and theatrically brought the back of his hand to his forehead, saying, "Oh dear. You want a *favor*, don't you?"

Stifling a laugh, I bit my lip and raised my shoulders to my ears. "Pretty please?"

Two hours later, Geo Lee's driver was creeping alongside the airstrip runway towards a sexy black jet with gray tail and wings, ENEN brand in bold gold letters on the side. The jet's door was down but I didn't see Natalio.

"Okay, Francé," Geo Lee said in that voice only he owned, while flickering his lashes. "One can never tell what mood Nelson's gonna be in, he's mercurial like that, so I won't have you coming out with me. I don't care that you used to share your cookies with him. When he arrives, I'll go out first and test the waters. If his mood is in the bitters, then *you* leaving this car is a no, no. Got it?"

Can you say drama queen? "But how will I know?"

Geo Lee made a clucking sound with his tongue as he thought about it for a moment, then pulled his tie-dyed scarf from around his neck. "I'll keep this scarf in my hand. If his mood is okay, you can come out then. But if his mood is shitty, I'll wrap it around my neck and you have my driver bring you back to the office. I can't take the risk of getting on Nelson's shit list. He's that hand to pull me out of an ass when I shove my share-with-all cock too far up one and get my damned balls sucked in—there are some pretty huge butt-holes out there. Nelson, that's a man of favors, and I can't ruin that."

I nodded my head slowly and precisely to convey my understanding. "Okay, Geo, I get it."

Taking out his compact, he puckered his plump lips to smooth Chapstick over them. "You're a genius in fashion, but a complete cretin in the relationship area, if you

don't mind me saying. What sane woman lets go of a fine piece of ass like Nelson? I mean, are you on crack or something? Just look at that tall, dark, scrumptiousness of a male..."

To tune out Geo Lee's prattling, I turned my head and looked out my window that showed nothing but acres of paved land, marked and lined this way and that with white and yellow paint. The sun was getting cooler and dimmer as evening approached, the wind growing heavy. If I didn't tune out Geo Lee from time to time, he'd drive me insane talking my ears off about everything and nothing. The ride here had been brutal.

I flipped over the jewel cases in my hand, CDs I bought for Natalio. On our way to the airstrip, Geo Lee stopped at a CD store to grab a Lady Gaga album for his 'friend', and while I waited, I'd wandered around the store and stumbled upon a Buju Banton album. The sight of it immediately brought back memories of Nelly, because he was a *huge* fan of BuJu. So I purchased the album along with another that was a mixture of various reggae artistes.

As the distant yapping of Geo Lee suddenly stopped, I glanced out the front windshield and saw a white Bentley roll up next to the jet. Our car was a few feet away, leaving that perfect spot for the owner of the jet, I supposed.

"And the vampire has arrived," Geo Lee sang, packing his paraphernalia back into his duffel bag and opening his door. "Please remember: scarf off, good. Scarf on, bad." And then he was gone, wiggling his colorful ass down the pavement.

A back door of the Bentley swung open, and out stepped the dark-haired, blue-eyed, amazingly gorgeous Natalio, dressed in his customary black; close-fitting jeans and an untucked long-sleeved button down shirt. The wind made a mess of his hair that had grown a good length down his nape in loose waves since I'd last seen him.

Something about him standing between his Bentley and his jet made him look Alpha-and-Omega sexy. A sexiness that couldn't be competed with. A sexiness he *owned*.

His intimidating impeccability had me nervously smoothing my hand over my dress and raking my fingers through my hair, feeling like I was not deserving of such perfection. Before the bidding that morning, I'd made one of my rare trips to the hair salon and gotten my wild curls straightened for a first. It felt lighter and easier to manage, except for the fact it had stretched a couple more inches down the entire

length of my back, dangling right above the arch of my behind. To prevent sitting on it, I had to sweep it to one side over my shoulders.

My flirty turquoise dress might have been too short, but most of my legs were covered by a pair of black thigh-high boots. I'd had to dress the part for the bidding earlier today. If I wanted to be taken seriously as a designer, I had to look like one.

To get a better view of the events outside the car, I scooted to the middle of the seat. Geo Lee walked up to Natalio with wide arms, as a steward hurried down the steps to collect his luggage. Natalio held his hand up to halt Geo Lee's approaching embrace, his face impassive, and Geo Lee laughed, unoffended, smacking him on the arm.

Just then, a slender, tidily groomed blonde exited the jet and descended towards Natalio. Strikingly beautiful, she was dressed in a sharp, black pants suit, her glossy hair wrapped up in a neat coiffure.

When she smiled at Natalio with one of 'those' looks and ran her hand down his arm in an overly intimate manner, my heart fainted. *Who was she?*

Natalio said something to her and she frowned as she removed her hand from his arm and dropped it by her side. He said something again and her eyes widened in surprise, mouth see-sawing as if not knowing how to respond.

He addressed her again, with hand gestures this time, as if giving an order, then he redirected his attention back to Geo Lee.

Geo Lee spoke some more to Natalio with his elaborate hand and neck movements, while the woman still stood there with a blank expression.

The ever-composed Natalio slowly turned his gaze back to the woman, nailing her with a grim glare. He pointed to the jet, and then to the Bentley.

Without another blink, the woman scampered back onto the jet, and seconds later scurried off with her handbag and a steward behind her carrying a suitcase. She disappeared into the Bentley, and when the steward stuffed her suitcase in the trunk, the car immediately drove off.

That's when Geo Lee wrapped his scarf around his neck, and I slumped into the car seat, crestfallen. Blondie, whoever she was, had screwed everything, blowing my chance. I had no idea how long Natalio would be in Japan and he never answers when I call.

I had the burning urge to just hop out of the car and run to him, but Geo Lee would never forgive me if I did that.

Was it over, really? Should I just accept it?

Like the exaggerator he was, Geo Lee wrapped his scarf around his neck a second time, pulling at the ends in a way that suggested being choked to death as he started up the steps of the jet.

The poised, self-contained, confident Natalio started in his long, firm strides towards the steps also, but abruptly halted at the foot of the steps, withdrew his cell from his pocket and answered it.

Taking a step back from the steps, he listened, stuffing his free hand inside his pants pocket. His mouth moved once, then he pressed off the call and slipped his cellphone back inside his pocket.

For a while, he just stood there, staring down at the ground, the wind billowing around him. Maybe he'd gotten bad news that would cancel his trip? The bad news would still be bad news, but his trip being canceled would be good for me.

Please let it be bad news.

Suddenly, he turned in the direction of the car I was in, and my heart ricocheted in my chest. Staring straight at the car with an implacable expression, he crooked his finger in a 'come here' motion.

Shit. Did he know I was the car? Should I hide?

"Ya might wanna keep yur' head down if ya don't wanna lose yur' job, Mistress Francé," said Geo Lee's tiny, white-headed driver as he shifted the gear in Drive and cruised towards Natalio. "Just...keep low."

As the driver pulled up at Natalio's feet and began powering down his window, I tried to sink low. But Natalio walked right past the driver's door and straight to mine, wrenching it open. "Out of the car, Sadie."

The sonuvabitch was still having me followed! That's the only way he could've known I was in this car.

"You're still having me followed?" I asked, eyes wide.

"For my safety, my men follow whoever follows me. You were followed because you were following me. They're worried you might try to shoot me or strap a bomb to my jet," he said indifferently. "Now, *out* of the car."

"You would've deserved it if I did," I muttered under my breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I hurriedly replied.

As the driver silently powered back up his window, I picked up my purse from the car seat and swung my legs out of the car, tossing my hair back over my shoulders as I stood. And I could've *sworn* I heard a hitch in Natalio's breath and felt a swift sweep of his fingers through my hair as I tried to keep the flared hem of my dress from blowing up in the wind, but when I looked up at him, his face was blank and his hands were nowhere near my hair.

Guess it was just my imagination?

Taking me by the elbow, he pulled me alongside the wing of the jet so the wind wouldn't affect my dress as much. Stuffing his hands in his pockets and staring at me through hard, impassive eyes, he showed no kindness. "Why are you here, Sadie?"

"I-I wanted to see you."

"*Why?*"

Why? Because I love you, asshole! Because I want you back. Because you came into my life, brought back forgotten memories and just left me with them to suffocate myself! That's why. But I said none of that. Instead, I held out the jewel cases to him. "I picked these up for you. I remember you being a big fan of reggae and Buju. Though I can't, for the life of me, understand why. I don't understand a word that man sings."

The laugh I expected from him didn't come. He merely glanced at the cases in my hand then back at me. "Don't you think I'd already have all his songs on my iPod? Your drive here was a waste of time—if that's what you came here for. Thoughtful, but I don't need them. Have a nice day, Sadie."

Why was he being such a dick? "It's just a goddamn album, Natalio. You could show some appreciation and accept the damn thing as a memento instead of being such a dickwad."

Natalio raised his brow in that delicious way, and I had to swallow. Hard. "Just like you showed appreciation and accepted what I gave you?"

Slap to the face. Oh yeah, he was set on being Mr. Ass Supreme today.

Opening my purse, I slipped the cases inside, because I deserved that slap. How could I expect him to accept gifts from me when I wasn't accepting his?

"Look, Sadie," Natalio said, glancing at his Rolex. "It was nice seeing you, but I have to get going." He stepped around me and started for the steps, but I wasn't about to let him leave me. Not again.

In my six-inch heels, I hurried after him and grabbed the hem of his shirt.

"*What, Sadie?*" he growled, spinning to face me.

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me!” I snapped back. “You’re not getting on that plane. You’re going to stay here and tell me why the hell you left me that night!”

Natalio coolly clasped his hands behind his back and look down at me with wry amusement. Even in these heels, he still towered over me. “Am I now?”

“I deserve to know, Natalio!”

It was taking every bit of strength in me not to cry, because I’d just made the mistake of being demanding, and he might leave just to prove to me I was in no position to demand anything of him. Maybe I should’ve asked more calmly?

“You didn’t care to know before. I’m done with all that, Sadie.” He resumed his climb up the steps. “I’ve got important things to attend to.”

“What’s so important, huh?” I asked, trailing him. “Another one of those blond sluts waiting inside to suck you off? Is easy cunt so much more important than *me*? Than making up for the pain you’ve caused me, asshole?!”

Natalio stopped and slowly turned, glaring down at me. “Sadie, stop it.”

“Why? You don’t like hearing you’re an asshole? Don’t like that word?” I stepped up to him, finding the guts to meet his glower with equal intensity. “You’re an asshole, *asshole*. Ass. Hole!”

Natalio gripped my arm, keeping me steady, leaned in and hissed through clenched teeth. “I said, *stop*.”

That’s all it took to get me to shut up.

Mollified, he turned and continued up the steps, taking me with him into the sumptuous, white and mahogany-brown furnished jet. Geo Lee sat lounging in a white leather seat, munching from a large oval tray of fruits set on the table before him and yapping at the ears of the stewards and pilot who sat around, seemingly rapt in whatever tale he spun.

I couldn’t stop my eyes from sweeping around the spacious jet, searching for hints of more blondes. But there was just my boss and the staff—in sight.

Natalio didn’t go any farther than where we stood at the entrance; his overpowering presence had everyone directing their attention to him. “All yours again, Geo. Keep it clean.”

Geo Lee rolled his eyes as he popped a slice of cantaloupe in his mouth. “Oh please, Nelson. I’m not some bouncy teenager that’ll—”

“Not because I didn’t say anything to you about the orgy you engaged my staff in the last time I left you in charge, doesn’t mean I never heard about it.” Natalio said.

Geo Lee’s face flushed blood red, a bunch of grapes paused mid-air. “I-I wasn’t the one who initiated—”

“Don’t care, Geo. Just keep it clean this time.”

Natalio exchanged a look and odd hand gesture with the pilot, and the pilot nodded. Then he turned back out of the jet, tugging me down the steps with him. So he was going to stay? Wow. I needed to be demanding more often.

With me by his side, his hand holding mine in a firm grip, he got out his cellphone and ordered someone to come get him. And then a few boring business calls as we waited—to avoid speaking to me, maybe. I didn’t care, as long as he was staying.

Who would’ve thought calling him an asshole would get him to stay?

A few minutes later a pitch-black Range Rover pulled up next to us, and Natalio ushered me inside, ordering me to buckle up. After that, the ride was painfully silent, as Natalio gave me none of his attention, keeping his gaze out his window.

Just when I was about to break the deafening silence, he leaned over and snatched my purse from my lap, shuffled inside and took out the albums. When I glanced at him, eyebrows raised, he expressionlessly said, “They’re mine, aren’t they?”

Tilting my head, I could only stare at him; he was back to being Complex Natalio again. But he ignored me as he raked his eyes over the song titles on the back of the cases and leaned forward, handing the mixed reggae disc to the driver. “Number eight, Ruddy.”

Seconds later, Glen Washington’s *Kindness for Weakness* brought some life to the car, making Natalio’s reticence easier to bear. Jesus, this chasing after the man thing was exhausting, especially when the man’s as spiteful as Natalio.

The song he’d chosen gave me a modicum of hope, however. If he got overbearing again I’d just call him an asshole. Who knows, it might work in my favor again.

The sun was slinking down behind the horizon, leaving the sky in a kaleidoscope of colors by the time we got to Natalio’s penthouse. He still hadn’t said a word to me.

Not when we got out of the car, not when we were sealed in the elevator, not when we were spat out into his penthouse. It was getting overwhelming.

“I did well today at the bidding war,” I said, breaking the silence.

He was really overdoing the silent treatment thing.

Natalio strode over to the kitchen, emptying his pockets on the island. “What bidding?” His tone was apathetic, but at least he was talking.

A thin orange glow from the effect of the retiring sun swathed the penthouse through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

I plopped down on a huge, black leather sofa in the living area and turned to look at him over the edge—well, technically I was looking at his back. “I was given an opportunity by the kindhearted Geo Lee to model some of my designs in a bidding show. All but three of my pieces were coveted and bid on, making me five hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars richer.”

“That’s nice,” was all he mumbled.

He walked over to his wine rack adjacent to the fridge and selected a bottle of wine, grabbed a wineglass and went to sit at the dinner table. Concentrating hard on opening the bottle, he didn’t even cast a glance in my direction.

What was his problem? Why did he bring me here if he was going to be all weird?

After opening and pouring the wine, without even offering me a glass, he took a sip and stared down at the wine in his glass. “Are you hungry? Would you like me to order something in?”

And then it hit me, his quietness was actually nervousness. About telling me what happened. Maybe he really didn’t want to talk about it. Maybe something tragic had happened, making him reluctant to tread down memory lane.

At least he could easily access his memories, mine had to be triggered.

I got up and glided over to the kitchen, got myself a wineglass, then went to sit across from him at the table. “No,” I whispered, dragging the wine bottle across the table to fill my glass. “Not hungry.”

I might never even have an appetite again until I was guaranteed all was well between us. I just wished there was a fast forward button I could press, where we butcher this heavy ass elephant in the room and move on to the more interesting parts. The parts where he tells me he loves me and can't live without me and I do the same and then we get naked and... “Are you nervous?”

Natalio peered at me through his long, dark lashes, his blue eyes solemn. “I don’t do nervous, Sadie.” He was meant to sound cocky, but I saw right through him. He *was* nervous. “Where do you want me to start?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

"A-After...After I fell asleep," I muttered.

Intense sapphire eyes pierced me and my lips parted as I struggled to breath. It felt like he was asphyxiating me with his eyes.

When I shifted uncomfortably, he broke his gaze, took a long sip of his wine, then let out a long breath.

"Watching you sleep was one of my most peaceful, relaxing preoccupations. I was obsessed with it...And that night, after we made love, that's what I was doing when my phone rang." He dropped his gaze to his wineglass. "It was Darren."

Hmm, Darren, the right-hand man.

"I walked out into the living room to talk to him so I wouldn't wake you. He told me he just got this unbelievable deal on some ammo, but he was unsure about the link and why it was so cheap. Said he'd feel a lot better if I was there. He wanted me to go with him.

"I told him I couldn't because I was with you. He badgered and pressed me, saying the location wasn't far so we wouldn't be long. Less than fifteen minutes to exchange payments for goods and head back. I told him off and hung up, then went back to bed with you. Few minutes later, Darren was banging on my front door. Pissed the fuck off, I went outside to punch him in the face, but he kept begging, telling me it wouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. Eventually, I said okay." Natalio glanced up at me with a please-understand expression. "You know Darren was my boy."

I remained silent and expressionless, because frankly, I didn't *want* to understand why he would choose to accompany Darren on an ammunition deal and leave *me* in bed on what was supposed to be my special night.

"I thought leaving you for fifteen minutes wouldn't hurt. Darren wouldn't relent. So I went back into the room and got dressed. You were still asleep. I kissed you, and I left. I...I just didn't know that would be the last time I'd see you. That I'd never get to see your eighteenth birthday. That I'd never get to marry you. That I would lose you, your heart, and your memories of me."

He raked a hand back through his hair, pushed back his chair, stood up, paced around for a bit, then sat back down. "I told Darren to drive. Larry was in front with Darren and...and Otis was in the back with me. He was only fifteen." He swallowed hard, then took a long sip of his wine.

A vague memory of Otis came to me. Otis was Darren's younger brother, tall and gangly with an ever-present smile.

"Otis always tried to be a part of Nine Lives. But I told him he was too young and he should focus on school. That night I got angry seeing him there and tossed him out of the car. But Darren insisted he come along." Natalio shook his head in remorse.

What the hell happened?

His voice grew harsh. "Beyond irritated, I allowed it, because my mind was on getting it all over with so I could get back to you. All the lingering and arguing was eating time and I just wanted to get to my fucking girl. Wanted to get back before you woke up." Natalio bit his lip, exhaled noisily. "But ten minutes later we were still driving to wherever this godforsaken place was, and I was getting more and more pissed with each minute. Darren kept assuring me it was just around the corner, a corner that took another ten minutes to get to.

"We finally pulled onto this open land with lines of trailers. Darren, Larry and I got out and I told Otis to remain in the car. Halfway to the trailer, I figured you'd probably be awake by now, so I figured I should just send you a message to let you know I'd be back soon. I told Darren and Larry to go ahead and start the transaction that I'd be there in a minute. Jogged back to the car for my cellphone and saw your text. As soon as I began typing a reply, the first round of shots rang out.

When I looked up, Larry and Darren were hot-footing it back toward the car; Darren a bit more awkwardly...because he'd been shot in the stomach. Ducking from getting hit, we rushed back into the car and got the hell outta there.

"For one, I didn't even have a weapon because I was in a hurry when I left my place. And two, I wouldn't have guessed a simple ammo purchase could go so awry." He sighed. "The men didn't pursue us further once we got onto the main, so we thought

we were safe. Not even close. Because the next thing I knew, police lights were flashing behind us. Darren panicked and gassed up. I began yelling at him, asking him what the hell he was doing. The fucking car was mine and if the police should trace the license plate they'd trace *me*." He pointed at his chest. "Not Nelly, but me, *Natalio Nelson*."

And that wouldn't be pretty, would it? I wrestled down the urge to roll my eyes.

"It would've been a simple task for me to bribe the cops if he'd just pulled over and played nice. But the idiot kept driving. And before I knew it, two police cars were chasing us. Otis was sitting next to me, shocked, frightened, and I was so pissed this young kid who should've been at home with his nose in his books was out with us assholes in a car chase."

Natalio pushed back from the table with a loud screech. "Then dumbass Larry panicked, pulled his gun and began firing at the cops. What kind of idiot does that?" He ran both hands through his hair. "Unable to process all that was happening, I started shouting, cursing, slapping the nitwit telling him to quit it. Then to my surprise, Darren said 'Fuck it! There's no getting outta this'. And he, too, pulled his gun and began firing." He shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it. "Fucking idiot."

"The cops always win in shoot outs," I said. It was all I could manage, because honestly, I was shocked. Not in a million years had I imagined this was his fate on the night I got jilted. At least, I *thought* I'd got jilted.

Natalio didn't look at me, he just continued. "Eventually, the cops began reciprocating. And everything was happening so fast it was all just a blur. Bullets shattered the windshields, grazing us by the inch. Darren swerved around a corner and...and..."

He trailed off and crouched down with his fingers laced on the nape of his neck, eyes glued to the floor. My heart stopped beating. What happened?

"That's when Otis slumped onto my lap. A bullet hole in the side of his head. Mouth hung open, eyes vacant. He was...dead. He was only fifteen. *Fifteen*."

A loud gasp escaped me, my hand flying to my mouth. *Holy shit*. So that's how Darren's brother died and not from some illness? Why would his family lie about his death? Shame? Wow. There's so much I was oblivious to.

Natalio's voice broke through my thoughts as he continued. "Everything was so surreal, I kept thinking at some point I would wake up and it would all be a dream. Darren kept driving, trying to get away but the police cars only multiplied and I thought to myself, '*This is it. We're finished*'. When I attempted to shift Otis's body so I could crouch lower, a sharp pain slammed through my shoulder. That's when I realized I'd been shot."

I'd been right. The mark on his shoulder *was* a gunshot wound. My Natalio had been shot. While I was bawling my eyes out, thinking he'd left me because he didn't want me, all this was happening?

Natalio kept going as if he was unable to stop talking, his blue eyes void as he relived that night. "Knowing if the shooting continued I'd end up like Otis, I shouted at Darren and told him to give it up or we'd all be dead; because he was already shot in the stomach and bleeding to death. That's when he glanced around and saw his brother slumped lifeless, and I was hit. He swore and made a loud cry, prompting Larry to look around, too. Blood was everywhere. The short distraction sent us crashing straight into a drugstore. I don't know what happened, but all I remember was my whole body being flung from the back seat and toward the shattered windshield in one swift move. I remember not being able to move at all. And my last thought was about you...If I'd ever live to see you again. Then there was shouting, gas, smoke and fire. Then there was darkness."

I sat numbed and speechless. Shocked to the core.

Natalio unfolded from his crouch, stood up and paced the length of the room, scrubbing his hands down his face. "I woke up in the hospital. Seven days later. I was comatose for *seven* days, Sadie." His tone held incredulity that such unfortunate circumstances could happen to someone like him. "Two of my father's security stood guard in my hospital room. And I knew I was in deep shit. They'd trimmed my hair. Trimmed. My. Hair." He laughed without humor, bitter, unbelieving.

"They kept me hospitalized for another three days while I worried shitless about being sent off to jail. But I should've known that being my father's son, there's no way on earth that would happen." More humorless chuckling. "Next time I woke up, I was on my father's jet. Being shipped off to Japan. He *drugged* me." Natalio kicked at a bar stool and sent it tumbling noisily to the ground. "My domineering tyrant of a father

sent me away because he thought it was for the best. That 'I was getting out of control'.

"And when I asked what happened to Darren and Larry and how I got off the hook, I was told my father's lawyer, somehow, got the boys to say they'd kidnapped me and intended to ask for a ransom." He glanced at me, a disgusted curve to his lips. "Ludicrous, isn't it? But it was easily bought, because no one would ever believe Marcello Nelson's son, Natalio Nelson, CEO of a new multi-million dollar company on the rise, would be hanging out in a clique and shooting at the police."

A large lump in my throat hindered my breathing. *Marcello Nelson* was his father? That snob, I *did* know. The man was obscenely wealthy—if 'wealthy' was a justifiable word—and involved in virtually everything from theology to politics. Damn right no one would believe that story. The man was untouchable from any angle.

"I was forced to step away from my business for two years—well, not really. My uncle, Orthello Nelson, is the owner of NIFTZ in Japan. You know those smart cars?"

I nodded. How could anyone not know them? They were made in such bright colors that, from a satellite's point of view, they probably looked like gum balls scattered on the earth. But consumers flocked to them anyways because of their swift and affordable convenience.

"Well, he also owns an electronics company similar to mine. So for the years I was forced to stay there, I gained more knowledge in that industry. Apprenticed as you would say. Learned a lot from the smart and creative Japanese. By the time I was back in San Fran, I was filled with ideas and a new direction for my company. I was able to turn my millions to billions in very little time. So in some ways it helped me. I grew in knowledge, wisdom and understanding. Exactly what my father wanted to see."

He stared at me seriously now. "You have to understand, Sadie, there was nothing I could do. My brothers and I, our lives don't belong to us, but to him, Marcello. Whatever he says, goes. We were raised with gentility and decorum. Home-schooled. And as soon as we hit eighteen, millions got shoved into our hands to start our own businesses. And it better damn well be sensible and successful, too. Father was right there looking over our shoulders making sure we turned those millions into billions. Honestly, he's the only man on this earth I fear. He's a domineering, high-handed, insensitive megalomaniac."

Natalio began pacing the room again. "After those two years of living in Japan, he allowed me to come home. And while I worked my ass off to right my company and regain my father's respect—because I'd messed up big time—I tried to get through to you and learned you'd moved because your house had been burnt to the ground. So I zealously searched for you."

My heart leaped. *He searched for me.*

"It took me a few weeks to find out about your father's suicide and your mother's attempt at the same. Of what had happened to you and that you were...you were with...Cali D," his voice broke as he said this. "You'd moved on. What could I do? Especially if you didn't remember me? I sent warnings to him, to let him know if anything should happen to you, anything at all, I'd pull his intestines through his mouth." He ran both hands through his hair. "I couldn't fathom how everything could go so wrong so quickly."

This was too much. So overwhelming. Hell, this man had suffered more than I did. Suddenly I felt sickened. And everything I'd eaten that day threatened to exit orally.

But Natalio rambled on. "I never left you, Sadie. I assigned men to keep watch on you during the years you were with him. And whenever he messed up and you left, I'd be sure his ass got kicked. But then days later you'd go back to him. Before I could make a move from wherever I was in the world to get to you, you were back with that scum. And I had to watch that shit for years." His stare was suddenly sulfurous as he asked, "Did you love him?"

Caught off-guard by his question, I stuttered, "N-No. I-I didn't."

"Then why the hell did you keep—" he stopped short, turned and grabbed the vase of white roses from the table and hurled it at a wall, making me jump. "I slept with girl after girl, night after night. Trying to find *you* in one of them. A semblance of you. Something. Anything. Anything at all that would remind me of you. But I never did. You're one of a kind, Sadie. The love I had for you just wouldn't go. Wouldn't fade. Wouldn't allow me to be happy with anyone else. And that's why I couldn't move on. So I waited and waited and waited."

"Did y-you...you...?" I couldn't say it.

"You truly don't know me at all. I just told you how I was raised as a child. I'm not a murderer, Sadie. I can't give life, so who am I to take someone's life? A lovesick puppy? Yes. A stalker? Yes. But a murderer? No. And even if I was a murderer, do you think I

would've waited all those years to switch the Italian asshole's lights off. You really think I'd do something like that?"

"No," I replied truthfully.

"Then why the fuck would you ask me that?"

I don't know. Maybe because you'd threatened to do so? Beat him up when I left? Excuse my unprovoked curiosity, Mister.

"I was more of a safety net for Cali D. Whenever he got himself in a shithole, I'd be the one to bail his ass out. For *your* sake. He thought you were a family member of mine, so he made use of his advantages."

Striding over to the kitchen, he grabbed a bottled water from the fridge and downed it. "Cali D messed up big time with some Cubans. And Cubans don't give a shit about anything. I made myself unavailable to him because I was tired of bailing him. I just requested assurance of your safety. But somehow you'd come to your senses and left him. For good. Or so it seemed. It was the longest you'd stayed away. The Cubans assured me they wouldn't hurt you, but then those guys couldn't be trusted."

Natalio righted the barstool he'd previously kicked over and sat down. "I'd run into you deliberately on many occasions. Even spoke to you. But you were unresponsive. You just didn't remember me." He turned and lanced me with cold, disapproving eyes. "I was in Chicago when I heard you'd lost your job at the Bistro and started pole dancing at 'Secre X'. What in God's name were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking," I said evenly, "I was surviving."

Natalio shook his head, choosing not to contest me on the matter. "I decided I couldn't stay away any longer and allow you to destroy yourself. You are so smart and talented..." He sighed again. "I told Tico to keep an eye on you and restrict you from stripping or dancing with anyone. I was desperate to get you out of that club."

What the hell? So people just do what he tells them to? It was like I was oblivion personified while everything and everyone played around me. To this man's command. He seemed disgusted by his father's domineering, high-handed ways, but how could he fail to see he was just the same? Did he think I belonged to him so completely that he was justified in his actions? Watching my every move for years and telling everyone around me what or what not to do?

Mind overloaded, I could only stare at him because there was so much information to process, I didn't know what to talk about first. Or how I was supposed to feel.

I sought fortification in a long gulp of wine, got up from around the table and sidled over to the breakfast bar to sit next to him. I randomly picked one of the many questions as they floated around in my head. "If you were brought up in such a righteous, sophisticated family, how did you end up on the wrong side of town? With the wrong crowd, the wrong friends, the wrong...girl?"

Through impassive eyes, he studied me for a moment, and I waited to hear him say I was never the wrong girl. But he didn't. "My brother, Trevillo, had just expanded to constructing tower lofts. This building here was his first. I was interested and somehow convinced him to let me invest. Trevillo doesn't do partnerships, but I'm very good at persuading people to do what I want. So I used to fly in on the weekends, increasing my knowledge of the real estate business.

"One day there was a commotion on site. I rushed out to see Trevillo pummeling some dude's face. When I inquired he said this guy kept coming on his jobsite introducing marijuana to his workers or some shit like that. Long story short, the dude was Darren. And he was the cousin of one of the construction workers. After pulling my murderous brother away from him and seeing his battered condition, I offered to drop him home. And somehow Darren and I kicked it off. He was real cool. So whenever I was here on the weekends I would hang out in his neighborhood. I liked it there. It was different. Lively. Something new I'd never known. Plus I got a thrill at living dangerously, life on the edge." He paused to study me some more. "Most of all, there was this girl; she had me hooked by the gills. Saw her walking home from school one Friday evening. Her expression was sullen, but still she glowed. Her hair an abundance of long, untamed curls, flowing down the length of her back. Slim waist, wide hips, long legs, clean skin. Reeled me in like a fish on bait. And I just stood there, captured, watching her until she disappeared into her house. Since then, I couldn't stop thinking about her. She took over every crease of my mind, every bit of my heart. I dreamed of her. Of only her. And decided I had to have her. Whatever it took, anything, I *had* to have her."

As my eyes watered, he tore his gaze away and cleared his throat. "Anyway, that's how I got tangled in all that bullshit."

I blinked rapidly, trying to rid the tears. "So do you have any info on Darren and Larry?"

Natalio chuckled. "Oh, they're good. Really good. Though, Larry lost a leg in the car crash that night. Their false testimonies of kidnapping me didn't come cheap. My father had made a deal to set them up with a descent compensation when they got out. They both got ten years but did less than half of that."

"You still talk to them?"

"Why wouldn't I? The guys bit the bullet for me."

"So you're still caught up in that life?" I wanted to tell him about what happened at Tevin's place but chose not to bring that up right now. There had been so much shit rolled out tonight, I didn't think my brain could take anymore.

"Can a man scoop a flame into his lap and not have his clothes catch on fire? Can he walk on hot coals and not blister his feet?"

What was it with him and bible verses?

"No," he said in answer to my question. "But I'm not tamed. Nelly is still Nelly."

Another question: "That night, when I went looking for you, the guys said some really awful stuff. Especially Travis. Said you and Tanya were hooking up. And when I came out of the hospital, there were a lot of rumors about you knocking up Tanya and two other girls. Any of that true?"

Natalio laughed and shook his head. "I never slept with Tanya, Sadie. *Ever*. Want me to tell you a secret?"

I nodded.

"It's Darren who was hooking up with her, even though she was secretly trying to get with me. *He* knocked her up and they're married now. Happily. The rooftop restaurant I took you to after your interview, it's theirs."

What? This is news.

"And as for Travis..." His jaw ticked. "Travis never hated you. He was in love with you. All this was uncovered after the shitstorm and everything else that happened that night. The boys came forward and informed me it was Travis who'd set us up that night."

Travis was in love with *me*? I found that very, very hard to believe. It's almost laughable.

"Apparently, he'd always liked you but was too much of a punk to make a move. Then I came along and that ticked him off. The boys said he'd planned for the men to cripple Darren and me so he could take leadership of Nine Lives, and then he'd get to have you."

Natalio nodded at my ghastly expression, assuring me it was so. He reached out a hand, brushed his knuckles along my cheek, and ran his thumb across my lower lip. My body responded instantly, a throbbing ache between my thighs. "So to put it simply, Sadie, *you're* the cause of all that happened."

My breathing hastened, lips quivering as he leaned into me. I closed my eyes, waiting for his lips to touch mine. Breath hot against my lips, he whispered, "So maybe you're right. Maybe you were the wrong girl."

And with that, he got up and walked away from me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Natalio walked back over to the table and cleared the wine glasses. "It's late, Sadie. You said you wanted to know what happened, now you do. Moore will take you home."

He unnecessarily busied himself, emptying the glasses and putting them in the dishwasher, while I just sat there like a spare part.

Why's he being so mean?

He still loved me; it was evident in his eyes. So why was he purposely trying to hurt me? Did he want me to beg him to stay with me?

One side of me was ready and willing to do so, but pride won over. I loved him with all my heart, but I wouldn't beg him anymore. Who the hell did he think he was? We *both* got hurt that night. Him in more ways than me, I agree. Now that I knew truth, I finally understood and could move on from it.

But on a sad note, it seemed we'd be moving on separately, because he had given up when I was ready to try.

Holding on to my dignity, I got up from the barstool, made a beeline for the elevator and pressed the call button. Fighting to keep my tears in, I looked upwards, blinking rapidly, but the elevator wasn't responding quickly enough, and my tears threatened to burst through at any minute.

Before I knew what was happening, strong hands gripped me by the shoulders, flipped me around, and pushed me up against the wall. Natalio pinned me from shoulder to thigh with the length of his body, eyes glazed, breathing harsh.

My heart floundered, both scared and aroused.

"Did you *ever* love me?"

Nonplussed, I stared at him. He must be the most complex man on the planet.

"Answer me, dammit!" he barked.

"Yes," I whispered. "I love you. Always have and always will."

"Yet you don't think I'm worth fighting for?"

"I-I—" Oh god, what was I trying to say? It's true, I gave up too easily, but that's because I don't handle rejection well. Now he was making me feel horrible.

There was a way to play this game, however. To take the guilt off me. Because I didn't do too well with guilt either. So I asked a question I already knew the answer to... "Did you sleep with her?"

Natalio stilled. "Her, who?"

"Your assistant, Tiffany."

He let go of me. "Why would you ask me that?"

"Because I want to know."

A rake of a hand through his hair. "Why?"

Seems to be working... "Because I want to know!"

He watched me, worried his lip, then turned and strode off.

I followed him. "So you did, then?"

Natalio unbuttoned his shirt, shrugged out of it, and tossed it on the sofa. That momentarily sidetracked me. "What did you expect me to do? Sit around moping? Hoping that one day you'd wake up and realize you want me? You *left* me, Sadie. I honored your wishes by staying away from you and I moved on—well, I *tried* to."

"Didn't take you long," I said in a mild tone. Too mild. I was supposed to be pretending I was jealous-girlfriend angry, but I just couldn't pull my eyes away from his bare chest. Did he remove his shirt intentionally, knowing it would distract me?

"Oh, it took me seven years."

"You didn't—"

"I'm a man, Sadie. That's what men do when they're heart-broken. They seek solace in booze and faceless orgasms."

"Well, don't let me stop you then," I said. "Carry on!"

Putting on my 'angry' mask, I flounced off towards the elevator. In a millisecond, Natalio's hands were around my waist. Just the reaction I was hoping for.

I love it when he chases me. It makes me so...hot.

"Sadie, stop." He kissed my hair. "It was nothing serious. The blonde you were ranting about today, that's Tiffany. I fired her."

"Why?"

"Because she didn't deliver your messages," he said simply. "Can't you see how brainsick, unhinged and fucking crazy you make me? I'm one big ball of fury and frustration without you. Nothing makes sense." He spun me around in his arms to face him, eyes searching my face. "I love you so much it hurts, Sadie. Don't leave again. Please. Let's just start over."

Of course, yes...

Bringing my hands up to lock around his neck, I pulled his lips down to mine. My tongue like an enthusiast as it plunged into his warm mouth. I've missed this. Missed him, his kiss, his touch...everything.

He pressed me into him, merging my desires with his. I cared about nothing else, could think about nothing else at the moment but him, his tongue sliding along mine. Desire sprinted through my veins and suddenly I felt possessed. I wanted him, all of him.

This second.

My kisses grew feverish. Greedy, voracious, I went up on my tippy toes. "I want you. Now. Please."

With a deep groan, he grasped my thighs, lifting me, and I reflexively wrapped my legs around his waist. Tongues knotted, passions flared, fire flamed between us as he walked into the living area with my body wrapped around his body like a Python sucking the air out of his lungs.

He braced me against the floor-to-ceiling glass window that overlooked the city. Glitzy L.A lights twinkled below.

We parted, gasping, refilling our lungs with air.

"I wanted you the second I saw you today," he raggedly confessed. "Your hair, you've never done it like this before it. You are, hands down, the most beautiful woman I've ever known, Sadie." He gave me a swift kiss. "I love you." Another swift kiss, pulling away before I could reciprocate. "You are *everything*."

And then he kissed me for real, sweeping me up into a vortex of lust. We both pawed and growled like two starving animals. My fingers lacing through his hair as he feasted on my heated, squirming body. Devouring my ears, my nose, my lips, my neck.

Using his hips to keep me steady against the glass, he grasped the hem of my dress and pulled it over my head. One hand unhooked my bra, revealing my perked and aching breasts, while the other ran leisurely up my thigh.

His warm tongue touched my nipple, evoking a soft moan from me. The rigidity of his erection pressed against my sex, and orgasm threatened.

"No," I whimpered. Inside me. I wanted him inside me. Wanted to orgasm while he pumped rigorously into me.

His hips flexed in a circular motion, pushing me closer to the edge, as he whispered, "Yes." Hands cupped my breasts, kneading, squeezing, while he continued grinding against me, pushing me up and onward. "So damn perfect..."

I curled my toes in my shoes, willing myself not to climax at his torturous assault. "Please. I want...I..." I could hardly think clear anymore.

"What, Sadie?" he silkily asked. "What do you want?"

"I want y-you. Inside me. P-P-Please."

As he flexed back a bit, I exhaled, grateful for the brief respite. Stealing a condom from his back pocket, he passed it to me then pressed his hands flat on the glass at either side of my head. "Help yourself."

Trembling and burning with need, I fumbled with his belt buckle, his jeans button, unzipped and freed him, licking my lips at the sight of his rock-hard, blood-filled, venous erection.

That would feel so good in my mouth, hitting the back of my throat.

With impatient fingers, I tore open the condom and covered him, all done under his intense, lust-filled gaze.

I arched into him, letting him know I was ready.

He dug his fingers into the thin, lacy material of my panties and ripped it to shreds, leaving me bare and throbbing. He moved his dick to and fro against slick heat, causing me to mewl and claw at his chest. To and fro, to and fro he glided

"Natalio! Please!"

But he ignored my pleas and continued his torture. And just when I was about to fall over the edge, he stopped.

Oh Christ! This man...

Clamping his mouth down on mine, he kissed me, thrusting his tongue in and out. I was taken by surprise when he slammed into me, and I bit his lip and gripped his biceps, clenching at the sudden intrusion. He filled me to the brim and didn't move... And then he did. In slow, leisured strokes at first, which incremented to long, hard

strokes hitting all the way home. I squeezed my muscles around him which elicited a winding groan from him. "Fuck, Sadie. So sweet..."

As I felt my orgasm rocking on, I squeezed my muscles again. And again.

"So cruel," he growled and picked up momentum, slamming into me. Over and over. Taking me there. My eyes pinched closed, and I could no longer focus on anything but the sensation roiling where we were joined together, Natalio's slick, heated body against mine, the mixture of ragged sounds, harsh groans and soft mewls as we breathed each other's air.

Soon, I was there at the peak, and I spread my arms and let myself fall off the edge of nothingness. Body vibrating, muscles contracting, tonsils shaking at the loud screams that rushed past them.

A pearl of sweat dripped off Natalio's nose and fell onto mine as he slammed violently into me with a garbled version of my name, and stilled. His shaft pulsating inside me, draining him.

He sagged against me and we slid down the glass with a squeak, down onto the floor.

Done in.

There's only darkness and the almost imperceptible humming of the air conditioner. I opened my eyes, stretched; a smile creeping across my face when I realized I was in Natalio's bed.

Natalio wasn't there, though.

Glancing over at the bedside clock I saw it was long after midnight. My smile melted as my heart pounded loud in my ears. Déjà vu attacked me.

Scrambling out of bed, I yanked off the sheet and draped it around me then rushed into the bathroom. He wasn't there.

I darted out onto the balcony. Not there.

Trying not to trip over the bunched-up sheet, I sprinted downstairs.

My heart sagged in relief.

Natalio in the living area, humming to the sound of Morgan Heritage's *She's Still Loving Me* playing softly over the integrated speakers, while cleaning up shards of the vase he'd broken earlier.

As if sensing me, he abruptly glanced up and smiled. But that smile quickly morphed into a frown. "Sadie, what's wrong?" he asked, concern in his voice. "Shit, you don't want to leave, do you? Stay. Please."

Biting down hard on my bottom lip, I shook my head, willing myself not to cry from the heart-faltering panic I'd felt a minute ago. He hadn't left me again. He was here. "No. I just thought...I thought..." Words failed me as a single tear escaped and trickled down my face.

The dust pan clattered to the floor as Natalio immediately dropped it and rushed over to me, encapsulating me in his arms. "You thought I left you again?"

An involuntary dry heave lifted my chest, and I hiccupped as I nodded.

"No, Sadie. No. Never. I'll never leave you again," he soothed. "I'm sorry. I was stupid back then. I should've never left you, not even for a second. And I've learned my lesson the hard way. Never, baby. *Never*. I love you. I'll never leave you. Trust me."

I tightened my arms around him. Relieved he was still here.

Cradling me in his arms, he carried me over to the breakfast bar, seating me on the counter. "There might still be splinters on the ground. Don't want you to hurt yourself." He tucked a lock of hair behind my ears. "My cleaner will sort that out tomorrow."

"Is your cleaner young and attractive?"

Natalio gave me a look. "Stop."

Rounding the kitchen counter, he washed his hands at the sink before pouring me a cold glass of water. "Here. Drink."

I gulped it down, quenching a thirst I wasn't aware I had. How did *he* know?

Back in front of me, he drew up a barstool, settling himself between my thighs while nibbling on almonds from a small container. "I want you to accompany me to our monthly family dinner on Sunday."

"San Fran?"

"Yep. I came up with an excuse for my absence last month and I would've had an excuse for this one if you hadn't stopped my trip to Tokyo. So now I have no choice

but to attend this dreadful family dinner. And for your punishment, I'm taking you with me."

I frowned. "How is having dinner with your family a punishment?"

"You'll know when you meet my father," he deadpanned.

"So do—"

"I'll call my cousin, Lori, over tomorrow—she's a stylist—so you can pick a gown. And other stuff. I want you to stay here. I don't want you to leave." Tossing his head back, he threw up an almond and caught his with his mouth. *What a grown ass kid.*

"I can make my ow—"

"Okay, if Lori has nothing you like—which is highly unlikely—then you can call Kelsy over and you two can go shopping. No sewing for you this weekend."

Is he going to give me a chance to speak? He was asking me but at the same time, it's like he was telling me.

"And I *love* your hair like this," he commented, gently slipping his fingers through the lengthy strands. "It's so...long and soft. Keep it that way for the dinner. You're *my* Aphrodite."

Lifting an eyebrow at him, I silently asked if I could speak now and he grinned at me. Something he rarely did.

He looked contended, at peace.

"If it's just a family dinner, why do I need a gown? Can't I just wear a normal spring dress or something?"

"No. My father's *very* archaic." He grimaced. "We, the men, have to wear bow ties and tuxes. You'll see."

Folding my lips, I tried to stifle a laugh and failed, and Natalio chuckled, tossed another almond in the air to catch in his mouth.

"Do you know proper table manners? Like distinguishing a salad fork from a dinner fork and all that shit?"

My eyes went to the heavens. "I can identify a fork from a spoon and a knife from a toothpick. I know not to burp or talk with food in my mouth at the table. That's as far as my table manners go."

Natalio laughed at me as he peeled away the sheet from my body, kissing my inner thighs. Heat pooled at once. "I'll arrange a lesson for you on Saturday morning. We'll leave for SF that evening."

"Why do I need to do all that?" I whispered, trying to focus on breathing.

Hot kisses dripped up along my inner thighs. "To please a man who *survives* off being pleased," he said between kisses.

"What if I don—"

"Trust me, Sadie. It'll make everyone's life a whole lot easier. The man's a pain in the ass."

"Just like you..." All sense of thought got lost when his warm tongue brushed my folds. I threw my head back and arched into his mouth. His tongue swirled around my bud, around and around, over, up, down and across, transforming me into a slithering snake. He slid a finger inside me, and then another, thrusting slowly in and out.

"Ah...god...Na..."

"You'll come..." Natalio whispered. "...to the dinner. And you'll come...now."

Thrusting his fingers hard inside me, he pressed his thumb down on my bud. There I was on his kitchen counter with my legs eagled, Natalio between them, working me into a frenzy. My nirvana.

"Hey," he said, forcing me to open my eyes, panting as if I'd just run a marathon. "Watch. Watch me as I send you off."

With his eyes never leaving mine, he flicked my bud with his tongue. Once, twice, three times. And then he covered it with his mouth and sucked me. Instantly, I spiraled off with a squall. Stiffening and bucking in his mouth as I quivered with my orgasm.

He kept his mouth on me until I settled limply back on planet Earth.

Smothering blue eyes peeked up at me through long, dark lashes. "Have anything you wanna say now, Sadie? Anything to object to? I'm all ears."

I shook my head, because I'd kind of forgotten what our conversation was about.

Revealing a smug grin, he whispered, "I thought so," before cradling me in his arms again. "Come, let's go to bed."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Natalio was watching me sleep.

I was in limbo between sleep and wake, but I still could *feel* his eyes on me. And I was right. When I chose to be awake instead of asleep, there those blue eyes were, fixed on me.

On his side. Hands tucked under his cheek. Unkempt hair, stubble shadowing his squared jaw, and still he looked as glorious as ever. A ray of sun sneaking through the blinds laced across his features. No one should be allowed to look this damn good in the morning.

His lips curved up. "Hi."

Turning on my side, I mirrored his actions—though I was pretty sure I didn't look half as good as he did at the moment. "You're giving me the Edward, watching me sleep."

"Think I'm creepy?"

"Nope. I think it's sexy."

He made a face. "Okay, that just...doesn't...sound right."

A giggle escaped as I stretched. "Whatever. You're sexy. Deal with it."

He edged closer to me but didn't touch me. Just the heat of our bodies mingled. "You have any idea how happy I am right now? To have you back in my life. You know how long and hard I've waited for this?"

"I think I have an inkling," I said, grinning so damn wide. "Because I feel the same way."

"When?"

I frowned. "When?"

"Yes. When?" He edged closer, but still didn't touch me. "I want to be sure we don't lose each other again. I'm ready. I've been ready since I met you."

My heart rocket launched. So fast? "I don't think we are."

His smile slipped. "Why not?"

"We just got back together. There are a lot of things we still need to work out. I knew Nelly back then. Now, you're *Natalio Nelson*—some top shot billionaire."

"I'm the same person, Sadie. I've never been anyone different with you. You hold the key to *me*. I'm yours."

Hold firm, Sadie, hold firm. "You are like two people in one and I need to get used to you, Natalio. You need to know what I will and will not tolerate. As I need to know about you. It's been *seven* years."

"Like what?" Before I could speak, he beat me to it, saying, "Whatever you're worried about we can always work on that after. It *has* to be worked out. Because there'll be no more separation."

"You're an overbearing ass who never lets me speak!"

Natalio reached his hand under the duvet and smoothed his hand across my pelvis. "Too early for arguments, Sadie." He leaned in and planted a chaste kiss on my lips.

My head bopped back on the pillow in exasperation. "Can't you see you're just like your father? If you're disgusted with him, then you should be disgusted with yourself, too, because that's who you are."

He placed his forefinger against my lips. "Shh."

Arrgggh! The man was beyond frustrating.

Natalio laughed when I huffed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "It's far too early to be mad at me, Sadie. Can't you at least wait until noon?" His fingers whispered along my hip bone. "Or...not at all?"

"I'm not mad...now that you're touching me," I rasped.

His lids lowered. "How about I lick that yes out of you?"

My thighs squeezed together involuntarily.

"You promised me, Sadie." He frowned. "What did you do with the ring?"

My lids fluttered down as he ran his hand up my side and palmed my breast, brushing his thumb over my nipple. "I have no idea. My father probably took it..."

He shifted closer to me so his body brushed against mine. "Wouldn't put it past him. It was worth over two hundred thou, which back then was a lot of money."

What the hell? That's still a lot of money. "I'm sorry."

He came over me and licked between my breasts, instantly rousing me. I was helpless whenever he touched me.

Tearing away the duvet, he peppered my body with hot kisses, edging down. I was so hot, I just might've burned a hole in the mattress.

Pushing my legs up and apart, he licked, nipped and kissed my inner thighs, while I bucked my hips upward, imploring him to taste me—all done to no avail. He kissed around my folds, kissed my lips, my mound, kissed everywhere except where I desired him the most.

"*Please...*" I begged.

"Love it when you beg." He resumed the torture, never conceding. "You know what I want, Sadie. And I know what you want. So let's barter."

My hips bucked up again, coming in contact with nothing. I wanted to scream from frustration. My hands reached for his head but he grabbed them and pinned them to my sides.

Just once, he kissed my folds, and I sighed in gratification at the much-anticipated gesture. "Will." *Kiss.* "You." *Kiss.* "Marry." *Kiss.* "Me?"

Oh sweet lord... "You're not playing fair."

"I hate rules. So I break them...like dry twigs on a forest bed."

"Natalio, please..."

"Will." *Kiss.* "You." *Kiss.* "Be." *Kiss.* "My." *Long swipe.* "Wife?"

Hell, I couldn't bear it any longer. "Yes. Yes. Yes!!!! Anything! Now suck me you freakin' demon!"

"With pleasure."

And the moment his mouth covered my folds, the fireworks blasted and I detonated.

"Will you be at the family dinner, too?"

My question was directed to the svelte, brown-eyed Lori who was trying to stuff me into a lime-green gown as we made a mess of Natalio's apartment. I liked her, because

she wasn't uppity. Neither did she bombard me with questions or try to pry into her cousin's privacy.

Kelsy, who popped in an hour ago with the intention of us going shopping, believing Lori wouldn't have anything I'd like, was rummaging sparkly-eyed through Lori's racks. She had no upcoming functions that required formal wear, yet she'd set aside four gowns she decided she *had* to have. I, on the other hand, had yet to find a gown I liked.

"God, no!" Lori shrieked, a horrified expression on her face. "I can't stand Uncle Nelson."

"Is he that bad?"

"Yes." She added a slow nod to emphasize. "But it's not just him. It's the whole setting and requirements for the dinner. I mean, the whole purpose is to have dinner and catch up with family. I don't see why all the formality is needed, gowns and tuxes and all that nonsense."

"I wondered the same thing," Kelsy jumped in, her voice muffled by the racks of clothes her head was stuck between.

Lori scoffed. "No one likes to go. We'll skip from time to time, drafting the lamest excuses. But three consecutive months of absences and Uncle Nelson will be on your doorstep with a tirade about how ungrateful you are."

We snickered.

I glanced down at the gown. "Don't like it. Let me try that blue one with the studs."

Offering no protest, she lurched for the blue dress while I shuffled out of the suffocating lime gown. I wondered if she was terrified of Natalio, too. He could be so intimidating sometimes.

He'd hurried out a few hours ago after receiving some "urgent" news.

After I shimmied into the other gown, I turned to the mirror and was overly pleased. "*This* is it."

A flowing, strapless, cleavage-dipped, navy blue gown. Diamond studs launched from my left hip and crept upwards to rim the deep sweetheart neckline. The slinky material clung to my skin, accentuating my small waist and ample hips. It was perfect.

"Yes!" Lori beamed at me. "This dress is a killer! You're going to *blow* cousin's mind."

Kelsy popped her head from where she was rummaging through the racks. “Uh-huh.” She gave me a thumbs up. “Blow. His. Mind.”

After loading me with more clothes and cosmetics at Natalio's request, Lori wished me a good day and—accompanied by a commiserative expression—good luck at the dinner, and left.

Kelsy flopped back on the sofa, surrounded by the mess of unnecessary stuff she snatched from Lori. “Holy shit, you’re with *Natalio Nelson*, bitch!”

Folding the scads of clothes into neat piles, I rolled my eyes. “He’s just a normal guy I fell in love with when I was seventeen.”

“Normal, you say?” Kelsy said, blowing a large bubble of her chewing gum then popping it. “There’s nothing normal about that blue-eyed sex-go—”

The shrill of my cellphone cut her off, and I scooped it off the coffee table and answered, “Hi.”

Natalio’s voice came over the line in a tone that was levels less spirited than it had been before he’d left a few hours ago. “Hey, babe. How are you doing? Found a dress yet?”

“After trying over a dozen, yep, found one.”

“kay. That’s good...” The agitation in voice was palpable, sending me into panic mode.

“Everything alright, Natalio?”

“Uh, not really. I’ve got some bad news... Hang on, baby.” I could hear him yelling at someone in the background, threatening to cut their lying tongue out or something of that sort. “Yeah, Sadie? Maybe I should just wait until I get home later. Is Kelsy still there?”

“Yeah. Yeah, she’s still here,” I replied. “But please, tell me what you have to tell me now. I’ll only worry and think the worst if you don’t. What’s going on?”

Natalio sighed. “It’s Tevin. Something’s happened.”

An unusual feeling jolted in my chest, and I sprung to my feet. The piles of clothes that sat on my lap tumbled to the floor as I began pacing the room. Kelsy perked up, watching me closely. But I tried my damndest to avoid her eyes. “What-What do you mean ‘something’s happened’?”

“Well—just a sec.” And again I was on hold. There was rustling in the background as Natalio gave some sort of order to someone, then it sounded like a man was howling

in pain. I couldn't hear what was being said, and I just wish he'd hurry and tell me what the hell happened to my best friend. "Sadie?"

"Yeah, I'm still here, Natalio. Just tell me already!" Every vein of patience had left me.

And just like that, he dropped the words that pushed me into a numbing abyss. "Tevin's dead, Sadie."

Tears sprang to my eyes so fast, it was as if I'd been punched in the nose. My heart felt extremely heavy in my chest, beating so hard I could feel it in my ears. My knees wobbled, threatening to take me down. Kelsy stood up from the sofa, imploring me to look at her. But each time she came near, I turned my back to her, hiding. She suspected the news I was receiving was terrible, but she couldn't imagine just *how* terrible. There was no way to prepare her for this.

"Sadie? You still there?"

"Y-yes," I croaked, pain and lament clogged my throat. "How did it happen? Who did it? *Who* took my best friend's life?!"

A long, winding wail pierced through my ears as Kelsy tore her eyes wide, her hands fisted in her own hair. Now she knew just how terrible the news was. I never meant to say it aloud like that, but the pain was so unbearable it incited anger.

I averted my eyes from the horrific sight of her. It was more than I could handle.

Natalio breathed heavily down the receiver. "He'd...been apart of something. And they solicited payback for it. He was found stabbed to death in his cell this morning."

A noise that sounded too horrible to be my own voice left me, and I doubled over, a heaviness pulling at my stomach. "W-w-what did he do?"

"That doesn't matter, Sadie. He's gone and there's no way to bring him back. I really wish I was there with you right now, but I'm a bit tied up and—" A gunshot rang out in the background, cutting him off. "Ruddy, what the *fuck*?"

I could hear Ruddy's familiar voice rumbling apologetically, but Natalio swore at him again and came back on the line. "Sadie, I gotta go. I'll be there as soon as I can, okay?"

"You!!" I yelled at him. "You could've saved him! You could've stopped this! You... you sonuvabitch!"

Natalio sounded shocked at my outburst. "What?"

“You got me out of there. You could’ve gotten him out, too! But you left him; you left him in there to die! I hate you! *You* let him die.” Finding it impossible to speak another word, the rest of my blame backed up my throat.

Kelsy’s caterwauling grew louder. Deafening. And I felt like stripping myself bare and running butt naked to a place farther away than Africa. Away to a place where bad things never happened. What’s the route to Utopia? Was I to just close my eyes and imagine myself there? For once, couldn’t the fucking place just be *real*!?

“Sadie, the only way Tevin could’ve lived to see another month is if a helicopter had landed on the prison grounds and got him out of the state—the *country*. Tevin was a dead man walking in or out of jail. Even if I’d gotten him out, he’d still be dead by now. Too many people were after him. There’s nothing I could—”

“Screw you, *Nelly*! You could’ve saved him! You know as I know you could’ve prevented this.” Before he could reply, I hurled the phone across the room and smashed it into pieces against the wall. It felt as though I had an anchor tied to my ankles, dragging me down to the bottom of a sea of salty tears. Drowning me in grief.

When I finally had the courage to face Kelsy, her eyes were red and swollen, her face drenched in tears. It was hard to see. But I looked at her anyway, as she looked back at me. And all we could do at a moment’s beat was launch into each other’s arms, both of us seeking solace from the other. But all I withdrew from her was bereavement, as she withdrew the same from me. Because this was all we had, this was all we could give. And so we sank to the floor in our embrace, our tears mixing, our wails competing.

We cried ourselves into a tangled heap, curled up on Natalio’s huge, dark rug like a twin fetus.

Tevin was dead.

We cried ourselves to sleep.

When I next allowed myself to open my eyes, night had fallen, and strong arms were around me.

They weren’t Kelsy’s. They were arms I didn’t want to embrace me, to give me solace from a grief said arms could’ve prevented.

Kelsy was nowhere in sight.

Launching up in a sitting position, I called out for her. She needed me like I needed her. I couldn't allow her to mourn alone. She had no idea what grief could do to her. She wouldn't know how to deal with it.

"Kelsy!" I called out again, but my voice was so hoarse I could hardly hear myself.

Natalio's hard frame was right there behind me, his big, masculine arms trying to ease me back down to the carpet. "Sadie, calm down. Kelsy left."

Anger surged through me as I twisted around to glare at him. He was shirtless and look a tad weary. I tried not to let his nakedness distract me. "How could you let her leave? Are you that goddamn insensitive?"

Though I wanted it to sound like a shout, I failed, because I almost had no voice, my throat was so sore from crying.

Natalio ran a hand down his face, then braced up on his elbows, eyes filled with sympathy and remorse. "I tried to get her to stay but she insisted on leaving. She was worried...about *you*."

"About me? I know what grief feels like. I know how to get over this. She doesn't. I have to be there for her, Natalio. I'm sorry, but I can't go to your family dinner with you. I have to stay here with her."

"That's exactly what she said you'd do," he said through an exhausted sigh. "I came in and found her sitting on the couch. Just staring at you while you slept."

"Her boyfriend just *died!*"

Natalio shook his head, trying to be patient with me, seemingly understanding my rage and allowing me to be angry. He stuck his hand in the side crease of the couch and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "She left this for you."

Giving him a glare, sending the message I hated him—only temporarily—I snatched the paper from his hand and unfolded it.

Sister,

We've both just lost someone dear to us. Someone who was a part of us. Your brother, and my lover.

We have lost him. He's gone forever. And all the tears in the world won't ever bring him back.

Please note the plural pronoun: WE.

It's not just me feeling this pain. You are, too.

As you well know, I've never, ever felt pain like this before. I've only ever known joys, and happiness and sunshine. Contentment, love in abundance and peace. My life has always been exceptional.

Your life, on the other hand, has been anything but. You've been grieving since that midwife slapped you on your bare bum the day you were born. Unlike me, most of your life has been filled with sadness, sorrows, and darkness. Unhappiness, tough love and heartaches.

People like me who have existed only in a sheltered cocoon need doses of grief from time to time to even things out. To open our blinded eyes to the abrasiveness of life.

But people like you don't need just a 'dose' of happiness, but an outpouring, a torrential flood of bliss, love and contentment foraying into your life. Because life has not been lived until we know what happiness feels like. Neither has life been lived until we know, too, what grief feels like. And there can be no way to distinguish the two until we've felt both.

Which means neither of us have ever lived...until now.

It's your time to be happy with the man who loves you enough to wait seven damn years for you.

That, girl, is LOVE.

Don't worry about me, Sadie. I have enough happy bones inside me to fight off my first circumstance of grief.

Stay with Natalio and let him love your pain away. Go to the dinner, meet his family, and, although I know it will be hard right now, have fun. I'll see you when you get back. And if you decide to move there, you know damn well I'll be moving there, too.

But please, let me grieve on my own. Focus on your own happiness. For once.

I love you, with all my heart.

Kelsy.

Twin tears rolled down my face as I folded the letter as small as it could be folded and tucked it in my shorts pocket. In a time when I thought Kelsy would've withered to the ground, she'd found so much more strength than I ever could. She wanted to grieve *alone*. Handling this so much better than I was. And in her sorrow, was thinking about *my* happiness. That fact evoked rivulets of tears.

I turned to Natalio who was watching me, pained, as if wishing he could swipe away my misery. "I don't believe her, Natalio. What if she's just trying to keep me away so she could go hurl herself off a bridge? I don't want her to grieve alone. It's not healthy."

Reaching out, he thumbed my tears away. "You only see one's true strength in their time of sorrow. Some people may seem weak on the outside, but really, they're so much stronger than you could ever imagine. Everyone has their own way of handling grief. You've never seen Kelsy grieve before, so maybe this is her way of dealing with her distress. I sure as hell know I hate having people around when I'm going through

my shit. While there are some people who'd rather be surrounded with friends and loved ones. Just...respect what she asks, Sadie."

"But I've always thought she was so fragile. It's just..." I sighed and crawled up to his chest, curling myself in his arms.

"You ever think maybe she was expecting it? I've seen her, and I've seen you. You're taking it so much worse than her, Sadie. And I think that's why she's worried about you. It's almost like she was expecting it and you weren't, that made the news hit you harder."

Natalio might have correctly assessed the situation. In fact, Kelsy had been vacillating between whether she should break up with Tevin or not, ever since that horrible night at Tevin's house. Added to that the nights she used to sit up and worry about Tevin on the streets. So in some light, she probably *was* expecting the unexpected.

Of course I knew Tevin was a son of the streets, but I honestly was not expecting his death. At least, not yet.

Tevin was bad, yes, a menace to society. But I was hoping he would've been like one of *those* bad guys who tiptoed around God's wrath and escaped a short life.

Pressing my lips against my fortress, Natalio's chest, I whispered, "Love my pain away. All of it. Everything that has ever made me cry, love it away, Natalio. Be my light at the end of the tunnel. Be my eternity."

My lover sighed and kissed my forehead. "All that and more, Francé. All that and more."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

We arrive in San Francisco late Saturday evening.

Huge was too small of a word to describe Natalio's all-glass home. Aesthetically decorated with white furniture and elaborate pieces of art, I didn't know where to look first.

From any room, kitchen, living room, bathroom, bedroom, I could see the city lights twinkling all around because the pad was all-glass.

I'd grumbled a bit about privacy, but when I stepped outside the long-lipped wraparound balcony, I realized the glass was one-way. Nothing could be seen from the outside looking in. Strewn about were white leather lounge chairs and tall decorative plants.

"You like?"

I spun around and found Natalio at the sliding glass doors which led out to the balcony. Shirt, shoes and socks all gone. Top button his jeans undone, flashing me a peek at his gray boxers.

"Y-yes," I rasped, totally, completely affected by the delicious sight of him. "It's...huge."

"Good. Because I had it redecorated, hoping you'd like it."

A stumpy, bald guy dressed in a dark suit appeared at the sliding doors. "Sir, all the items are in. Should I send up Carline?"

"No. I'll be down with Miss Francé in a minute to get her acquainted with the staff. Shut down. We won't be leaving for the night."

The man nodded and jotted off.

I lifted a brow at him. "Don't tell me you live with a host of people who cater only to *one* man."

"No, I don't. They have their own floor below," he deadpanned.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and turn to look over the balcony. He came up behind me, circling his arms around my waist and resting his chin on my shoulder. And we stood like that for a few silent minutes, taking in the astounding view.

Should I be anxious about meeting his aristocratic family? Maybe I should. But I wasn't. Because it didn't matter to me if his family liked me or not. As long as Natalio wanted me, loved me, I was good. As his arms flexed tighter around me, I wished he'd never have to let go.

"You okay?" he asked, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

I thought about it.

Was I okay? A few days ago I wasn't. A few weeks ago I wasn't. Heck, a couple of years ago I wasn't. I'd never thought in a million years I would've recovered my memories, let alone see Natalio again. And when I did, pride caused me to push him away. Now he was here. And he wanted to marry me, with the same eagerness he had seven years ago. Wanted to make me his forever. Wanted to fulfill the promises I was once led to believe were empty. I believed in love again, because of the same man who'd introduced me to love. Made me feel love, receive love and give love. I *believed* in love.

"Yeah," I replied in utter contentment. "I am."

Natalio flipped us so his back was against the rail and I was facing him, pressed into him. The cool night air ruffled his hair as he said, "I love you, Sadie. The feeling is frightening. I have you, but it's like I don't have you enough. So I hug you, but when I do, it's like you're not close enough. So I kiss you, and still I can't get enough. So I make love to you. And yet, and still I feel like I'll wake up and won't be sure.

"And I worry. I worry that I'll lose you again. That's one of the reasons I watch you sleep. Because I'm afraid if I close my eyes, when I open them again, you'll be gone. This is why I want to marry you, Sadie. You understand?"

A lone tear fell from my lashes. "I'll never leave you again, Natalio. You're my lifeline."

He placed his finger under my chin, tilting it upward to kiss me. A soft, caressing kiss that bled into a hard tongue thrust and possessive fever.

I smoothed my palms over his taut pecks, shivering at the heat seeping through my pores. I tried to part but he glued me to the kiss, not wanting to let go. So I bit his tongue and he groaned into my mouth and capitulated.

"Little devil," he raggedly whispered.

As I kissed along his neck, he tilted his head back, exposing his throat, and I sucked at his flesh long and hard enough to mark him. Then I traveled down his firm sternum, swirled my tongue around his nipple, and he flexed his well-built chest.

Cocky ass.

"No need to show off, bad boy," I said, then bit his nipple. The subsequent jump of his chest was not deliberate this time, much to my satisfaction. *Take that.*

My kisses meandered down his body until I was soon on my knees, my fingers twirling in his silky trail while I one-handedly unzipped his jeans and freed his rock-hard, veined erection. It was hot, red with blood and felt impressively sturdy in my hands.

I peered up at him through my lashes while he leered down at me with hooded blue eyes. Then he flashed a lopsided grin and twitched his dick in my hand. Again. And again. *Cocky, cocky ass.*

Okay, Mr. Showoff, let's see how long you can keep your eyes open.

Eyes glued to his, I took his crest in my mouth. His lips parted, and he tried to make his ensuing sighs imperceptible. He knew I was challenging him and I knew he'd put up a fight.

Licking around his blood-filled crest, I slid my tongue through the split that sprouted pre-cum. He emitted a shuddering sigh this time, but still kept his gaze transfixed on mine. I took him in, inch by inch, going lower and lower until I felt him touch my tonsils, my lips wrapped tightly around his base.

Natalio slammed his eyes shut and his head fell backwards. "Shhhhhhhiiiiit."

Oh yes, Nelly. I can take it all. I'm a badass.

Then I began to move, pleasuring him with my mouth, sheathing my teeth and sucking him hard. Occasionally releasing him with a 'pop'. Whenever he tried to flex his hips, I'd tighten my fingers around the base of his shaft, blocking his orgasm. *I was in control.*

"Fuck, Sadie...please..."

Because he was famous for being merciless in bed, I tormented him a minute longer, reveling in his garbling and the way his body shivered as his hands helplessly gripped the railings.

Ending the torture, I uncurled my fingers from the base of his shaft, grasped him with both hands and pumped while I sucked. My hands and mouth moved in synergy.

He swelled and grew harder, his hands now fisted in my hair. "Shit...about to...hot...damn...no...shit..."

Knowing he was about to climax, I took him all the way in, shoving his swollen steel-hard dick to the back of my throat, as far as I could go without choking.

"Ah Chrissssssssttt!" he growled as he reached his peak and sent his fluids squirting down my throat, pulsing effusively.

Expended, he slumped back against the railing, simultaneously lifting me to my feet. His lips came down to mine, kissing me hard.

"How did you—" he started to ask when he pulled away, but curtailed and shook his head. "Don't you ever goddamn leave me. You understand?"

I nodded.

"Promise me."

On my tippy toes, I smacked him a kiss. "I promise. I'll never leave you, Natalio. I love you too much."

He slammed his lips on mine again and sucked all the air from my lungs.

The ride to the Nelson estate was long, but the green scenery made up for it. I hadn't realize I'd been slouching with my face glued out the window until Natalio pulled up outside a stately, wrought-iron gate and numbered the security monitor on a red-bricked column.

We drove through the gates and down a narrow road, passing tall, flourishing trees. Between the intermittent spacing of the trees, I could see acres of verdant land rolling on and on.

Two minutes of driving and the house was still out of view. One more minute of driving and we were outside another baronial gate. Again he numbered the security monitor and drove us through.

"All that land behind us belongs to your father?"

"Yep."

"Are we gonna get to the house anytime this year?"

He chuckled. "We're here."

We drove along a sinuous path lined with towering palm trees until the palatial house came into view. An imposing, three story, white mansion with immense carved columns, French windows and doors. Put simply, the place was impressive with its Old World charm.

Natalio pulled up next to a gushing man-made waterfall with chunks of Tonalite rocks surrounded by colorful, blooming plants. The residence was peaceful. Beautiful. Eye-popping. So many things called for the eyes' attention.

Switching off the engine, he took a deep readying breath and turned to me. "Ready to meet the Nelsons?"

"I dunno. Am I?"

He took my hand and kissed my knuckles. "Just...don't be too sensitive."

Could his family really be that bad?

We climbed out of his vehicular monstrosity, and he hauled me into his arms, hugging me tight. "You're so damn beautiful."

"You're not so hideous yourself, bad boy."

As we started toward the white palace, I heard a distant whistle. Natalio swiveled around and a boyish grin brightened his face. Curious, I turned to where his attention was directed and saw two men at a far distance standing in a rectangular, white gazebo, gesturing for us to come over.

"My brothers," he said. "Bet they're boozing it up to get through the dinner of pain." He tugged on my arm as he shifted in their direction. "Come on."

Looking at the distance from where we stood to the gazebo, I sighed but followed anyway. It was a never-ending blanket of greenery with sprawling trees, manicured shrubs, and carpeted grass that wasn't so pleasant for my heels.

As we neared his brothers, Natalio's adolescent grin widened. Obviously happy to see them. No underlying emotion; his love for them and the frisson of excitement at the sight of his brothers was palpable.

We entered the gazebo and the trio instantly joined in a series of hugs, and back slaps and animated greetings as if they hadn't seen each other in years.

"Liquid courage?" Natalio asked, absently lacing his fingers through mine.

"Yep. Numbing our veins before stepping into that hell-hole," one brother replied. Then he winked at me. "Who's this brown-eyed babe?"

"None of that bullshit, Love," Natalio warned.

Even as they talked, my gaze was riveted on the brother who winked at me. His beauty was...unbelievable.

Unlacing our fingers, Natalio wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me protectively close to him. "This 'brown-eyed, babe' is my soon to be wife, Sadie." His eyes narrowed at his brother. "Sadie, these are my two halves, Lovello and Trevillo Nelson."

Lovello was the one who had me transfixed.

Both brothers shared a quick glance and then their eyebrows shot up as they said in unison, "*Sadie?*"

"I know what you're thinking," Natalio said, sending his eyes heavenward. "Yes. This *is* Sadie."

"Holy. Hell!" Trevillo exclaimed. Trevillo was the same height as Natalio, with neatly groomed dark hair, high jaws, a cute upturned nose and pale blue eyes. They were not as bright a blue as Natalio's, but there was a glint of something mischievous in them. Something wicked. Yes, he was wickedly handsome. "Where's your halo?"

I frowned, confused.

Lovello butted in. "We've been hearing about you since the days of Noah. Finally. You're actually *real* and not a figment of his imagination."

Lovello was beyond, and I mean *beyond* handsome. He was, hands down, the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. He was as beautiful as a man could get without being mistaken for a woman. I cocked my head to one side to take in his glorious face. He had inky, messy hair, slate-gray eyes with hints of blue, a straight nose, angled jaw, sculptured peach-colored lips and...and everything impeccable. No man should *ever* be that good-looking. It wasn't normal.

"Are you legal?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Natalio's hand tightened around my waist. These brothers could easily pass for triplets, with Lovello being more handsome than Natalio, and Natalio being more handsome than Trevillo.

"Dammit, Sadie. I was hoping you'd be immune to this asshole's looks," Natalio said indifferently, his tight grip on my waist belying his calm demeanor.

"Oh my god. I'm so sorry. It's just..." I stopped before I made it worse and reached out my hand. "Nice to meet you."

After shaking both brothers' hands, I turned into Natalio's arms and offered, tipped up and gave him and assuring kiss. So he'd know I was wholly his.

"Okay. Okay, we get it. You two are in love," said Lovello, holding up his hands.

Trevillo chuckled in good humor, watching us with shrewd eyes. "Sure you don't need a swig, brother?"

Natalio shook his head.

"God knows I need it," Lovello said as he knocked back a cube of amber liquid. "I lost 2.6mil in an overly optimistic investment. I won't even consider the possibility that Father doesn't know. My ass will probably be the main course this evening."

The brothers chuckled.

"And you?" Natalio asked Trevillo.

Trevillo shrugged. "Mrs. Lonnes got out."

"Mrs. Lonnes? How did I not know of that hookup?" Natalio said through a hearty laugh. "You ever gonna try sleeping with anyone your own age...and single?"

"Young chicks just don't do it for me, man. Always going on about love and marriage and happily ever after. I'm not for all that bullshit. The mature ones who're already married or divorced know the deal. They've been there, done that, and know marriage is not all it's cracked up to be. So they're in for what I'm in for: fun." His gaze slid to me. "No offense, Sadie."

"None taken," Natalio and I replied in unison.

Lovello clasped his hands over his heart and said in a mock girl voice, "Awe, you guys are so cute."

Natalio made a swift swing at him but Lovello ducked and shifted to the side laughing like a little boy. The brothers were a lively, sophomoric trio.

"We can see your ass is going to be dessert," Trevillo said to Natalio.

Natalio sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

"Don't sweat it. He just might surprise us and not be a total douche today," Lovello consoled, patting him on the back.

As I turned to Natalio to ask what he would be chewed up for, I saw the lightheartedness instantly vanish, and they all snapped their mouths shut, looking outside the gazebo where a lissome, dark-haired girl, wearing a gorgeous purple gown, strode lithely and purposefully toward us.

She stopped at the steps of the gazebo. "Father wants you in now, brothers."

None of them acknowledged her.

She directed her gaze to me. "Hi, you must be Sadie." She mounted the steps and offered her hand. "I'm Princessa Nelson."

Taking her hand, I shook it and smiled. "Sadie Francé. Delighted to meet you."

Princessa pursed her lips and scanned me from head to toe, doing a terrible job hiding her sneer. "Hmm," was all she said, then turned stiffly and graced away.

"Ignore her," Trevillo whispered. "She's my sister but that won't stop me from saying she's a witch. Switch that 'w' to a 'b' and you'll get my drift." He looked at his brothers. "Time to enter the lion's den, boys."

As we headed toward the house, I asked Natalio, "You guys don't get along with your sister?"

"We use to trust her. But it took us a while to discover she was a spy for Father. She'd listen in on everything we'd say and report back what we were up to. So we cut her off. Of course we love her, but she can't be trusted." He bent his head to whisper in my ear. "I must warn you, this family is not, um...normal. Once we enter that house, we're completely different; how we speak, walk and conduct ourselves. This is how we were raised. You'll see. But don't make fun of it, it'll piss Father off."

We were soon at the entry way of the grand house. Lovello and Trevillo were a few feet in front of us, clad in sharp tuxedos, crisp white shirts and bow ties just like Natalio. Rigidly postured, shoulders squared with one hand behind the back, they walked in single file toward the huge double doors where a pair of stiff menservants stood on either side. Natalio stopped and tilted my chin up, kissed my lips, then grasped my shoulders and pushed them backward.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I knocked his hands away and hissed, "*Stop.*"

He bit his lip, closed his eyes and gave a short shake of his head. "Sorry."

Hooking my arm through the crook of his, he placed his other hand behind his back, and he literally went wooden next to me. *What the hell?* Was all this really necessary?

Not wanting to laugh, I folded my lips and allowed him to lead me through the doors where the menservants nodded courtly with a "Pleasant good evening, Mr. Nelson. Ma'am."

I was tempted to roll my eyes but stifled the urge. This has got to be a joke.

We entered a spacious foyer, where the ceiling was as high as that of a Catholic church. Two long, winding staircases with twisted golden banisters commanded attention. The floors were white marble, and an imposing chandelier shimmered from above.

We continued towards another set of double doors where a towering, hard-faced, silver-haired man stood domineeringly upright, with an arm behind his back, not a trace of emotion on his face. Despite his tough demeanor, he was really handsome. There was no question where his sons' handsomeness came from, because he was merely an older version.

Princessa, who was at the front of the queue, stepped up to him and curtsied. "Father." Next was Lovello, Trevillo, then Natalio and I stepped up. "Father," Natalio nodded. "I'd like you to me—"

"Sadie Francé," his father said in a chilling tone. I was close enough to see that his eyes were an intense steel-gray. Cold and impassive. His eyes bored into mine without blinking. Neither did mine, because what he didn't know was that I found him uniquely fascinating, not at all intimidating.

He shifted his gaze to Natalio and nodded. Natalio strode off with me, propelling us into a grand room sumptuously and ornately decorated in white and gold. Everything was, true to his word, ostentatious and over the top.

A purple, velvet, antique sofa with gold trimmings dominated the room, and on it perched a gorgeous middle-aged woman, resplendent in a flowing white and gold gown.

One by one the brothers went over and stiffly gave her a kiss on both cheeks, accompanied by a "Mother."

Beaming at me, she waved for me to sit next to her once Natalio introduced me.

"Sons," the father's voice resounded. "Study."

With a reassuring squeeze of my hand, Natalio left the room with his brothers. Didn't they call each other by their names in this house? It was Mother, Father, Brother, Sons...Jeez.

"Melinda Nelson," the mother said in a sweet, soft voice. Her eyes were the exact bright blue as Natalio's. Her coal-black hair almost as long as mine.

"Very nice to meet you, Mrs. Nelson."

She leaned forward and refilled her wineglass, asked if I wanted any and frowned when I declined. Her smile was residual, but the faint crooked line between her brows that told me she frowned and worried a lot.

"You are very beautiful," she said.

"Not nearly as much as you."

She frowned again, condensing the line between her brows. The beam in her eyes just seconds ago slipped, revealing the poignancy deep within.

Bingo. This woman was anything but happy. She didn't even believe she was beautiful. What kind of husband doesn't let his wife know she's beautiful?

"It's nice you two have found each other again," she said in that soft voice. "My son used to go on and on about you when you two dated a few years back. He really loves you, you know."

Hmm...she knew about our turbulent relationship?

"As I do him," I replied in my seldom used polite tone.

Melinda stared down at the wine in her glass, twirling it around unconsciously. "It's a precious thing when two people love each other equally. Nothing but love holding the two together. No worldly thing. No mercenary intentions."

Could her unhappiness be any more intense? Did she marry a man she didn't love because of money and now regretted it? Let me not judge. I just needed to get through this dinner.

Taking me by surprise, Melinda leaned over and clasped my hand. "Do you really love him? Men change, you know. They can change so suddenly that—"

"Of course she doesn't," said a voice behind me, which I now recognized as Princessa's. "She has a gold eye, and Brother's a fool for thinking she actually loves *him*."

"Princessa," Melinda warned with an irritated wave. "Ignore her," she whispered conspiratorially. "Nothing annoys her more."

I plastered a smile on my face. "It's okay. I'm used to antagonism. Where's your powder room?"

"Left." She gave me an apologetic smile. "At the very end of the hall."

Grateful to get away, I thanked her and took off.

There were paintings of each family member along the hall walls. How much more archaic could this family get?

As I sidled down the dragging hall, I heard harsh yelling coming from behind one of the doors on the right, which was left ajar, and I edged closer to eavesdrop.

"...and my last words to you Lovello: 'punishment is made for mockers and the backs of *fools* are made to be beaten!'" All three brothers joined in midway through the verse.

Well, that explained Natalio's constant repetitions of bible verses.

"Do you boys think this is funny?" the father shouted.

"No, Father," they all replied.

"Now you, Natalio, have you made up your mind about NIFTZ yet?"

"No. I'm still thinking—"

His father cut him off. "What the hell are you still thinking about? Who *thinks* about money? Fretting will kill your uncle much sooner than the cancer. Just accept the goddamn company and put the man out of his misery. He chose you over your brothers because of your strong work ethic, and you're goal-oriented. You've never stopped your involvement with his business, and you know more about it than any of us. He feels the best chance for the company's ongoing success lies with you. There's nothing to *think* about."

"I know bu—"

"It's a multi-billion dollar company, son. You *will* accept it." The man's tone brooked no argument. "Now, what of this girl your mother tells me you plan to marry?"

My heart rate sped up.

"She's—"

"Sadie Francé. Twenty-four years of age. Has lived with drug dealers. Been in jail. Worked in a strip club. Dated your associate, Devon, and now she's got her claws in you. Have you lost your mind? What can you be thinking? Or are you even thinking? Answer me!"

"None of that matters," Natalio responded. "Sadie's who I love. We've known each other since—"

"Ah, this is the same girl you ran around with when you nearly lost your life in ELA? I see."

"Yes. And if I'd stayed with her that night I wouldn't hav—"

"She's not acceptable," the father clipped. Finalized. Decision made.

An involuntary breath of air whooshed through me, and I inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying to calm my pounding heart. You never really know how important the acceptance of your lover's family is to you until you have been rejected by them.

Natalio's voice was calm and respectful. "I didn't ask for your approval, Father."

"Excuse me?" His father's voice was heavy with surprise. "No. You did not. But *I* am telling you anyway. She can't be a Nelson. She's nothing and no one, and would bring nothing but disgrace to our name."

"You can't stop me." Natalio's was determined.

"Shut. Up. *Boy!* You know damn well I can. And I will."

All regard was removed from Natalio's voice when he spoke again. "And I say you fucking won't!"

His brothers quietly entreated Natalio to rein it in, but he continued, "I *will* marry her and *you* won't be able to do a thing about it. Wash your hands of me, dammit! Even if she only wants me for what I have, I don't give a shit! I'll give her anything she wants because *she* makes me happy. I. Love. Her. I lost her once because of you. You will not take her away from me again. You understand me?" Natalio's breathing was so loud and harsh it made me shiver. When he spoke again, his voice was more controlled. "My life has always been yours, Father. I do everything you tell me to—"

"But never without my mandate, you stubborn mule," Father Nelson spat.

Natalio continued as if his father never spoke, "I've lived my life to please you. To gain your respect and honor. I never made a life decision without taking your opinion into consideration. But not this time. Disown me. Do what you have to. But your approval for my marriage to Miss Francé is *not* required."

Marcello scoffed. "Oh yes it—"

"I will not take relationship advice from a man who doesn't know the first thing about fidelity!"

"Whoa, Natalio, don't go there," one brother pleaded.

"No, I'm going there," Natalio said. "You didn't think we knew, Father? Well, think again."

Mr. Marcello Nelson was, for once, quiet.

That's why their mother seemed so unhappy. The jerk slept around on her. And how do you even try to divorce a man like him? I was overwhelmed just by

eavesdropping. Why did Natalio and his brothers even put up with his shit? They were grown ass men, for crying out loud.

As if not wanting his next comments to be overheard, Natalio dropped his voice calm and low, "Maybe if you'd married someone you actually loved instead of concerning yourself with what Mother brought to the marriage, then you wouldn't have to..."

The sounds of approaching footsteps jerked me away from the door. I turned to see two maidservants striding down the hall; one carried an arm full of folded white towels and the other held a tea tray.

I quickly scrambled off to the bathroom, hoping I succeeded at looking casual and not suspicious.

After being sedated by the exchange of text messages with Kelsy, updating her about the formality and antiquity of the Nelsons, my abrasive welcome, and their unconcealed disdain for me, I took a deep breath and exited the powder room, bracing for the storm's eye.

The study door flew open and out strode a livid Natalio, followed by his brothers. Though I tried to hurry, I didn't catch up with him because the hall was so damn long. He must have reached where he left me, because I heard him call out my name from a distance.

As soon as I entered the great room—now crowded with what I assumed were the rest of the Nelsons: aunts, uncles, cousins, whoever—Natalio grabbed my wrist and tugged me towards the double doors we came through. "We're leaving."

I didn't protest, because to say I was ecstatic to flee the medieval family was an understatement. But as we reached the double doors to leave, Trevillo, the eldest brother, caught hold of Natalio's arm.

"Christ, Natalio, will you please calm down?" he said. "You know this is what Father wants. He'll think he's won. You'll go home and be eaten up with guilt because of your disrespect and give in to whatever he wants you to do just to regain his favor. You know that's how it always plays out. Stay. He'll see you're serious about this." Trevillo glanced at me and gave a faint smile, not knowing I'd eavesdropped—um, overheard and knew what they were talking about.

Me.

Natalio, still breathing heavily, looked down at me, his eyes flaming with rage. In hopes of subduing him, I reached up to cup his face and gave him a soft kiss. He

pressed his forehead to mine and closed his eyes, breathing evening out. "Okay," he said. "We'll stay."

"Good," his brother replied with a pat on the back. He leaned in and lowered his voice, "You really went there with him about his messing around, brother. Now that he knows we know, he'll—"

"Stop playing Mr. Self-Righteous?"

Trevillo sighed and folded his lips. "Let's just have dinner and get this dreadful evening over with, shall we?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The great room was packed with Nelsons, as we all waited an annoyingly long time for the dinner to start. Like we were at the White House waiting for the President's arrival or something.

Centuries later, a wiry middle-aged butler emerged through a set of double doors on the right. Holding a wand that seemed much too heavy for his proportion, he lifted it high before slicing it through the air and hitting it against a huge gold gong I hadn't noticed was there. The blow elicited a loud, grating bang, ceasing all chattering and yanking everyone's attention.

"Good evening, everyone," he said resoundingly. "Dinner is served." He stepped aside and gestured to double doors that were immediately pulled open by another pair of butlers. All the Nelsons formed a single file line and walked through the doors.

I folded my lips and followed, trying with tenuous control to not collapse into a fit of laughter at this family's over-the-top absurdities. A small giggle managed to escape and Natalio glanced down at me in warning.

The dinner room was white and archaically decorated with antique pieces and paintings. Silver draperies curved away from gold-framed windows. Elaborate high-back, red velvet chairs surrounded the longest dining table I'd ever seen. Above was an exquisite glistening chandelier that lit up the room. But what really made me refrain from taking these people seriously was the pig on a spit turning over an open fire next to the fireplace. It was as if I'd stepped into a scene out of a Jane Austen novel. These people couldn't possibly be serious.

I was seated between Natalio and a plump, chattering aunt. Across from us sat Trevillo and Lovello. Their father sat at the head of the table, with Melinda on one side

and Princessa on the other. The table was laden with fruits and delicacies, crystal glasses—no less, and the finest silverware.

Waiters came around filling our glasses with water and wine while the heavy commanding voice of Marcello Nelson welcomed and wished all the enjoyment of their monthly family dinner...

"The family that prays and eats together, stays together. We must never be too busy, too wealthy, or too proud for family. Because after everyone else has failed us, we can always count on *family*." He took a sip of his water and continued, "And to my children, you all know I love you dearly and I want only the *best* for you. The following verse I shall continue to preach to you at every Third Sunday Dinner until I breathe no more: 'My children, *listen* when your father corrects you. Pay attention and learn good judgment, for I am giving you good guidance. Don't turn away from my instructions. For I, too, was once my father's son. My father taught me, "*Take my words to heart. Follow my commands, and you will live. Get wisdom; develop good judgment. Don't forget my words or turn your back on them. Don't turn your back on wisdom, for she will protect you. Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do.*" My child, listen to me and do as I say, and you will have a long, good life. When you walk, you won't be held back. When you run, you won't stumble. Take hold of my instructions, don't let them go. Guard them, for they are the key to life. My sons, guard your heart above all else, for it will determine the course of your life."

The last sentence made me wince, as those were the same words Natalio had said to me when I'd begged him to take me back. *Was I not best for him?*

So far no one seemed to approve of me, apart from Natalio's brothers and his mother—maybe. Who said I could see their hearts? All other family members either gave tight smiles or downright sneers. I felt like Anne Boleyn seated at a table with the Tudors.

"Stop," Natalio whispered against my ear. "He repeats this at every damn dinner. Stop reading anything into it. You *are* what's best for me."

How did he know what I was mulling over?

The wiry butler entered the room and banged a smaller gong this time. When all the chattering ceased, he said, "We will now serve you the first course of the evening." As he said this, maids marched in with trays. "Chilled broccoli soup with seared scallops, salt cod mousse and broccoli sprouts."

Leaning into Natalio, I whispered, "Seriously, is all this *really* necessary?"

Biting his lip to suppress a smile, he brought his index finger to his lips in a 'shh' gesture.

I picked up my spoon to try the green soup, but before I could even get a taste of it, the frosty voice of Marcello Nelson sounded. "Miss Francé."

Inwardly preparing myself for whatever was to come, I set down my spoon and looked to him.

"My son has informed me you two are to be wed."

My lips curved in an insincere smile. "Yes, Mr—"

"Tell me about yourself," he demanded. As if he didn't already know everything about me. If he thought I was going to put up with his bullshit, he had another thing coming.

Natalio's hand found mine and squeezed, but I barely felt it as I prepared for battle with the oh-so-feared Marcello Nelson.

"Sadie Elizabene Francé. Twenty-four years of age—Oh, what the heck. I'm wasting my time, aren't I? Pretty sure you've already conducted a background check on me, Mr. Nelson. No need to verify my honesty."

Marcello sucked in a breath at my audacity and his eyes grew colder, his face harder, and his frame visibly stiffened in his high-back chair.

Natalio squeezed my hand in warning, while everyone else at the table stared at me like I was an asylum escapee.

"Indeed, Miss Francé," Marcello said, "you are correct. I *have* executed a background check. Your father is deceased. What of your mother?"

"My mother, at the moment, is battling with her own mortality," I replied, composed. "You see, Mr. Nelson, HIV was the reward my mother received for being the wife an abusive, dominant husband of untold infidelities."

Disruptive clatter followed a cough as Melinda's soup spoon '*accidentally*' fell, her face flushed a bright shade of crimson.

I watched as Marcello's hand subtly disappeared under the table, and a second later Melinda's eyes flew to his face with a gasp. He was no doubt sinking his fingernails into her thigh as a warning for her to contain herself. It was a famous move of my father's. But Marcello didn't even look at Melinda, he was looking at me. Whatever pain he was inflicting on her beneath the table was enough to restore her composure. Melinda's hand shook slightly as she recovered her spoon and resumed eating.

Abuser.

With his eyes never leaving mine, he said, "I have come to the conclusion you are not worthy of my son, Miss Francé."

I pulled my hand away from Natalio's grasp that'd grown tighter with every word I spoke. No way in hell was I going to leave this house with downcast eyes. If I was dismissed, then I'd leave with a bang. All my life I'd been antagonized. And at this point, I think I was immune to it. His harsh tone or his cold stare didn't scare me. My father acted just the same, so I've had enough practice to stand up to this double-ass.

With mock disappointment, I slumped my shoulders and peered up at Natalio who was glaring at me. "Dang it. So you mean to tell me I've gone through all this trouble of reeling your hot billionaire ass in for nothing? We're not getting married without a pre-nup so I can divorce you twelve months later, take a chunk of all you own and run off with your best friend? Man, that's a bummer." I sighed dramatically. "Oh well. Know any other rich and single sucker you could hook me up with?"

Natalio's eyes threatened to roll from their sockets, while everyone else gaped at me. I swung my eyes back to Marcello whose demeanor hadn't changed a bit. He was indeed a hard nugget to crack.

Marcello leaned forward, bracing an arm on the table; his steely gray eyes pinioned mine. "Miss Francé, a prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences."

So now he was threatening me through bible verses? *How low!* Game on Marcello Nelson, because I've read the bible, too.

I held my composure. "Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an *undeserved* curse will not land on its intended victim."

Almost imperceptibly, his head jerked back as if he couldn't believe I could quote the bible also.

And at that instant, Natalio pushed back his chair with a loud screech and grabbed my hand, pulling me from my chair. "Enough, Sadie. We're leaving."

"No," ringed Marcello's voice. "Dinner has already begun. You shall stay." He leaned back in his chair, tracing his index finger across his lower lip as his gaze remained locked with mine. "You've got a pair of balls on you, Miss Francé."

"*Heavy* balls. And at the moment, they're itching."

A stifled laugh came from across the table, and I didn't need to look to know it was Lovello.

Marcello's eyes narrowed. "Are you deliberately trying to aggravate me, Miss Francé?"

"I wouldn't *dare*, your grace," I said, adding a reverential nod for emphasis.

The corners of his lips seemed to twitch, but it was hard to tell. He failed at another utterance, just staring piercingly at me.

He didn't scare me one bit and so I stared right back.

He blinked first, losing the battle, and transferred his attention to his eldest son. "Trevillo, tell me about this new project of yours."

For a moment, the entire room was quiet, as if no one believed what they'd just witnessed. Then, as if responding to the snap of a hypnotist's fingers, everyone started talking at once.

A lone grape rolled across the table towards me, prompting me to look up, and I caught Lovello's eyes. He grinned at me and mouthed, "I love you. Marry *me*."

Natalio tugged my fingers and hissed, "Eat," all the while glowering at Lovello who didn't seem the least bit affected by his brother's anger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We drove home from the dinner in painful silence.

Natalio hadn't said a word to me since my tiff with his father. Was I in trouble for this bullshit? Would he leave me because I showed no respect to his father—his idol?

The day was starting to wear on me.

Easing into his garage, he parked, pulled up the handbrake, and turned to look at me. Expression was unrevealing.

I braced myself for the imminent explosion. Strange that hours ago I'd stared down the one man he, Natalio, was afraid of, yet I was intimidated by *the son*.

Saying nothing, he just watched me, inexpressive.

My eyes dropped to my fingers restlessly fiddling with the edges of my purse.

"Look at me, Sadie," he said. "You just stared down one of the most domineering men I've ever known. A man who has intimidated some of the world's most powerful businessmen to capitulate to his demands. And you can't look at *me*?"

I didn't look up at him when I quietly asked, "Are you mad at me?"

Silence.

When I risked a peek up at him, the apathy remained in the depth of his blues. But even then, he was still irresistible.

My tongue flicked out and wet my lips, libido awakened by the sensuality he oozed.

Hot. All of a sudden I was inexplicably hot. Because of the confinement of the vehicle, maybe—even though the air conditioner was on full blast?

Natalio's lids lowered, eyes darkening, emotion dancing in his optics now. *That* emotion called lust.

We stared at each other, and I could see in his tempestuous eyes if he took me at this very minute, it would be fast and hard and...fucking *hot*.

Taking pre-emptive action, I unlocked my seat belt and leaped across the console at him, wrapping my arms around his neck while his hands clasped my hips and pulled me onto his lap.

His tongue dipped into my mouth, exploring, as we ravaged each other hard, hungrily, thrust for thrust.

Lips bitten, tongues tangled, moans absorbed.

Yanking up my dress, he freed my legs so I could straddle him, our lips never parting. Hands squeezing my ass, he flexed his hips forward, allowing me to feel his hard erection.

Oh god, I wanted him so, so bad.

His thoughts must have mirrored mine, because he spared no time in freeing himself from the constraints of his pants and made quick work of shifting my panties and entering me.

"Ah," I moaned at the brief pain from his size, closing my eyes and tipping my head back.

He attacked my neck, sucking and nipping as he thrust up into my strides. "Harder," he breathed. "Faster."

Digging my fingers into his shoulders, I did as he commanded, reveling in the feel of him swelling inside me. No latex between, just us, hard against soft.

The feeling was exquisite, and I felt the wave building at my impending orgasm.

Natalio's breathing grew harsher, more ragged as I rode him, taking all of him, our juices mixing. My legs trembled and my strides accelerated, harder, faster, possessed. This wave was going to be a big one. Vibrations rocked me as the wave rose up in the sea. I surfed on the edge before the wave swallowed me whole and crashed me onto the shore. I shattered around my lover, contracting at my release.

Air hissing through his teeth, Natalio gripped my waist and slammed me down onto him, punctuating his last hard thrust with a feral "Damn you, Sadieeee!"

He pulsed inside me, flooding me with latent Nelsons as he buried his face into my cleavage, his arms wrapped tightly around me.

Then we sagged, spent, and stayed that way for... who knows how long.

"You surprised me," he told my cleavage. "I was so confused because I wasn't sure if I should be angry with you or kiss you senseless. So turned on I couldn't even see straight. But that was my *father*. So for the whole time I was unsure how I should deal

with you on the matter." He raised his head and kissed me. "This was a really nice way of dealing with the matter."

Another kiss.

"As for my father, I can't say. He either loves you or hates you for it. We'll know within a month or so. If he likes you, he'll furtively inquire about your well-being. Financial-wise, health-wise and every other wise." More kiss. "But the possibility he hates you is highly unlikely, because he wouldn't have allowed you to stay at the dinner table after your shameless display."

"I've been on my own for basically all my life, Natalio. I'm like an adjustable wrench. I can adjust myself to whatever situation I'm thrown into. That's how I survive. You don't know any of this because you've skipped seven years of my life. This is the reason I suggested we wait before getting married." I tightened my arms around his neck. "You're everything, and I love you. I'll never leave. Have faith in me."

"I do," he replied. "But no, marriage *can't* wait. I just...need you." He frowned then. "What's your take on children? We just had unprotected sex."

"No worries. I'm on the Pill."

"I'd rather you be *off* them."

Whoa. Slow down! "No, not yet, Mr. Let's-get-married-and-have-kids-in-one-breath. Maybe in the next twenty-four months."

"How about the next twelve months?"

"Sixteen," I countered.

"Eleven."

"Nine." *What?* Oh dang. "Shit, I meant ninetee—"

"Nine months. Deal," he said with a wide grin.

I huffed and thumped him. "You...you...cheat."

"I've been called worse." He tugged my chin and brought my lips to his. "Now, Miss Francé, I'd like to take you inside and make love to you in every position anatomically possible."

This man...

"Will you tell me where the hell you're taking me?"

It was the following weekend. Saturday. And I was once again seething.

Only minutes ago we'd managed to untangle ourselves from a high-pitched, unsavory argument that erupted after he'd blindfolded me and led me into a two-story building—intent on surprising me—he bought for me to open my own fashion house.

The man didn't even ask me if San Francisco was where I'd prefer to have a fashion house. And I was pissed, which resulted in a crestfallen Natalio and a shouting Sadie.

Of course, our angry, vein-bulging quarrel later transformed into white-hot sex against a wall in the empty building, echoes of moans and groans bouncing off the walls.

Natalio had calmed, I was still mad.

Though I didn't show my appreciation, the building was amazing and I was already planning in my head how I'd design it and what I'd name it. I knew Natalio wanted to give me everything, but I just wished he would've asked me first.

"Nope." He glance over at me, smiled blindingly bright. "You're so cute when you're angry. You should know by now that your anger's a major turn on for me."

Resigned, I sighed. The man was incorrigible. And I was going to have to live with it.

The sun was on its descent when Natalio steered onto open, verdant land in Napa Valley. A group of men were setting up a hot air balloon, cluing me in on how our evening would be spent.

Oh dear.

"Not afraid of heights, are you?" he asked, knowing damn well I was.

"I'm not afraid of anything," I retorted. "Just you," I added in a lower inflection.

Was this his way of trying to help me get over my fear of heights? Or was it a punishment for some unknown peccadillo I'd committed?

He leaned over and gave me a loud smack on the cheek. "Good. Put on your jacket."

Hot air balloon. I've never been on one before and I was—despite my irritable fear of heights—excited. Because I've always wondered what it felt to ride one.

Shrugging on my denim jacket, I narrowed my eyes in the distance and watched as the massive yellow balloon slowly inflated, tilting to the side as the group of men struggled to keep it grounded.

"We better hurry," Natalio said. "Come." He took my hand, and for a moment I couldn't keep my eyes off him. Natalio was glowing in white sneakers, white jeans and a white V-neck sweater. The cherry-red hickey I'd given him during a round of mind-numbing sex last night stood prominently on his neck. He looked so happy, young and

carefree. Every bit the easygoing, good-natured guy I'd fallen in love with seven years ago.

I love this man...

By the time we waded through the winds and got to the balloon, it was fully inflated and righted, fighting against the strains of the men.

"Ready and all yours, Nelson," shouted one of the men.

Natalio climbed into the huge woven basket then turned and lifted me over as the pilot pulled on the gas lever. It was so loud I could hardly hear his warnings for me to be careful.

Once we were on and steady, the men released their hold and the balloon drifted up. There was no fear, surprisingly. And I couldn't help the silly grin plastered on my face.

"Is this a better surprise?" he asked.

I was grinning like a kid. "I frickin' love you!"

We were soon high in ascent, and the sun's slow descent produced a peaceful tangerine sky. My heart wasn't even beating as hard as it normally does whenever I'm up high. Maybe because my lover's arms were wrapped tight around me?

I could feel his eyes hot on my face while I oohed and ahed over the picturesque view of Napa Valley below. Apparently he enjoyed watching *me* enjoy myself.

His hands drifted up to my shoulders and turned me to face him, eyes intense and brimming with love. Taking my left hand, he raised it to his lips, kissed my knuckles, and then suddenly dropped to one knee, the untamed wind tossing his hair about his face.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. What was he doing? I already said yes.

"Sadie," he began. "From the moment I first saw you I knew you were mine. I was bewitched, and the spell hasn't reversed since then. And I don't want it to. I know you've already said yes, but I wanted to give you the fairy tale every girl desires. I want to be your Prince Charming. Your Knight in Shining Armor. Your Romeo. I want to be your Everything. Anything you desire, as long as it is in my power, it's yours. We're adrift in the sky, closer to God's angels, and you are *my* angel. I want you to be mine eternally. Please, be my wife, my spice, my life. Share my laughs with me, my wealth, my body, my soul and my heart. Marry me."

Midway through his proposal my face was soaked with tears, and my facial muscles hurt from my persistent grin. "Like you didn't already know the answer," I sobbed. "Of course, yes."

A monstrosity of a ring winked up at me. Platinum, with a rectangular cut diamond surrounded by emerald green studs. *I'll be damned...*

Natalio removed the ring from the slit in the black velvet case and slid it onto my finger. "Don't you ever take this off," he warned. "I want you to wear my love. Embrace my love. Boast my love. I want you to *love* my love." He rose to his feet and crushed me in his arms. "I love you. So hard."

My tears ran amok, and the elation, joy and contentment I felt at that moment were incapable of a perfect description. I would forever remember this day. Forever.

Like a life-saver, I clung to him. "I love you too, Natalio. I'm yours. Only yours. Always."

The loud gas of the air balloon, the pilot who stood a ways off, the unfriendly wind and its biting chill faded into stillness as Natalio and I locked ourselves into an undying embrace and allowed God's gentle breathing to float us away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Ann Cole is a passionate writer and reader, and a lover of anything that distracts her from the real world. Reader first and second a writer, S. Ann Cole is an exaggerator, a laughier, sometimes overly chatty, sometimes overly shy. She's afraid of cats, dogs, snakes—heck, she's only tolerable to gold fishes in a tank. Because if they do jump out and try to attack her, the suckers will die...

She hates chocolate, schmaltz and arrogance.

She loves carbs, Chris Brown and humility.

She lives nowhere and everywhere.

Jokey people are her favorite people, as laughter is the way to her heart.

When Ann's not abusing her computer keyboard, you can find her nosing a novel, watching anything on television that makes her laugh until she breaks into hiccups, studying the Bible, or guzzling booze.

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Last but not least, to all the people who have taken the time to read my novel. I hope it was an enjoyable read for you. Look out for Lovello's story *Love Has A Name!!*

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