

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE



# RUTHLESS

*Vengeance*

INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR  
HOPE STONE

# RUTHLESS VENGEANCE

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MAFIA ROMANCE

VENGEANCE & VOWS

BOOK 1

# HOPE STONE

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The thing that no one ever talked about when it came to running a crime organization was the amount of paperwork involved. Owen had been born into this life. His old man had run the Irish mafia in Misso City for decades.

Yet, when he took on the role of head of the organization upon his father's death, he'd been shocked to learn just how much time he was forced to spend on the books. Both the illegal and legitimate sides of the business required meticulous tracking to make sure everything was in order.

He hated dealing with it.

Sitting back in his chair, Owen rubbed his eyes. Give him guns and fighting. Give him shady dealings all day long. He'd take it. But crunching numbers was never going to be his thing.

The door of his office opened, and his brother walked inside. Declan was his right-hand man in the organization and the only person allowed to just waltz into this room without an invitation.

Gathering the paperwork he'd been dealing with for the past hour, Owen tucked it away into a drawer of his desk. If Declan was here, the others would arrive soon. That meant that now was a good time to take a break from it.

Accepting one of the two glasses of amber liquid in Declan's hands, Owen sipped the scotch, enjoying the way it burned all the way down.

“How are things downstairs?” he asked as Declan took a seat on the black leather couch against the wall.

He shrugged. “There are people eating dinner, just like any other restaurant in the city.”

Owen rolled his eyes. Something that Declan and many other members of the organization didn’t understand was that it was just as important to make sure they ran their legitimate businesses successfully as it was to have a successful hold on the criminal side of things.

If they didn’t have restaurants, bars, and a large waste management company, there would be no way to clean their money. History showed that getting sloppy with money could bring down a criminal empire faster than anything. The last thing Owen wanted was to end up behind bars for something as stupid as tax fraud.

So, he set up his office on the upper floor of the most successful restaurant that he owned. It also happened to be the only business that carried his family name: Walsh’s Irish Eatery. Doing his business from this location just made sense, and the stairs leading up here were right by the back entrance, so his associates could come and go without bothering the restaurant employees or patrons.

But he knew that Declan went into the restaurant to grab some drinks at the bar.

“How about the delivery?” Owen asked after taking another sip of his scotch. Declan had just finished distributing their product to the dealers in their territory. “Any trouble there?”

Declan shook his head, his expression grave. “No, but I’m not happy about the missing product.”

“That’s why we’re having a meeting.”

There was a knock on the door, and Declan got up to pull it open, letting two of Owen’s lieutenants into the room.

When Owen took charge of the mafia three years ago, the first thing he did was clean house and put men he trusted into the higher ranking positions



within the organization. He knew he could never trust the men that had been the most loyal to his father. A ruthless asshole like him didn't keep good company.

The men that joined them today were Brogan and Connor. Connor was Owen's cousin from his mom's side. That meant that he didn't have a blood connection to his father, not that it would have necessarily mattered. Owen and Declan were his sons, and they couldn't stand the abusive bastard.

Connor was only a year younger than Owen, and they had been close while growing up together. Connor was on a short list of people that Owen would trust with his own life.

Brogan had earned Owen's respect in other ways. As an enforcer for the mafia under Owen's father, he'd seen and done some ugly shit, but Owen was one of the few people that knew the man had lines he didn't cross, even for the mafia. He didn't hurt women, children, or animals. *Ever.*

Owen's father would have put a bullet between Brogan's eyes if he had any idea how many times the man had gone against orders, helping to hide family members of people that angered the former head of the organization. But Owen admired the fact that he took the risk because he wouldn't live with a guilty conscience.

Owen was of the same mind, and that made Brogan a man that he wanted at his side. Some people wouldn't understand that, but he was connected to Brogan because he had drawn the same line in the sand for himself when he took over this job.

Owen knew that he was a criminal. He did bad things. There was literal blood on his hands.

But he wasn't the type of man to hurt the innocent. The wives and children of his enemies never had to fear that he'd put them in the ground to send a message. It was the kind of thing his father would do, but Owen wasn't like him.

He'd hurt or kill a man if he had to, but never at random. Betrayal and deception were a part of this life, and sometimes that required reacting with

violence. The unsavory part of this whole thing came down to keeping people in line.

There were a couple of chairs in front of Owen's desk, and Connor took a seat in one while Brogan propped himself up against the wall opposite the entrance to the room. Owen was used to that. Brogan always positioned himself in a way that allowed for the best defense. The man's back never faced the door, and he was *always* armed.

"So, last night was a real shit show," Connor said, brushing his dark hair back off his forehead.

Declan nodded grimly. "Our shipment was stolen *again*."

"I thought we put extra men at the docks to prevent that," Brogan said, his voice little more than a rough growl.

"We did," Owen confirmed, a throbbing headache forming at his temples. "There was a fight, and we lost two men."

"Fuck," Brogan spat, shaking his head. "We get any of them?"

Owen shook his head. "No, but we know who's responsible for this."

"The Italians," Connor said through gritted teeth. "No one else would have the balls to move against us."

"Mancini's an arrogant bastard, but does he really think that we'll let him get away with this?"

Owen scoffed. "We all know he's wanted more control of the city for a long time."

"Yeah, we outnumber them. How does he think he'll get away with this?"

No one spoke for a moment, but Owen could practically see the wheels turning in Brogan's mind. He narrowed his eyes on the man.

"Tell me where your mind is," he demanded.

"Rocco Mancini has been hungry for more power in this city the entire time he's been Don of the Italian mafia," Brogan said. "But he never dared to move against your father."

Owen understood what Brogan *wasn't* saying.

He wasn't his father. The man was violent, known to be ruthless in a way that Owen was not. The organization was thriving under his leadership bringing in more money than ever before and people respected him without necessarily fearing for their lives every single day. They were happier and loyal to Owen.

But some people thought of him as weak.

"You think Mancini is getting bolder because he doesn't think I'll stop him?"

"I think he underestimates you," Brogan said.

Yes, they understood each other very well. Brogan knew that he would do what was necessary to keep the Irish in control of the city. No matter what.

"There's another shipment of product coming in next week," Owen told them. "This time, I'll be there personally. If I have to deal with the issue myself, that's what I'm going to do."

The meeting broke up soon after that, and Owen left the rest of the paperwork in his desk to be dealt with tomorrow. Declan, Connor, and Brogan left out the back, but Owen strolled through the dining area, his sharp eyes taking in all the activity in the restaurant. The place was more than half full, not bad for late in the evening mid-week. As Owen approached the bar, intending to have another drink before leaving, he couldn't help noticing the bartender shoving some cash into his pocket.

That wasn't unusual if it was a tip, but Owen had a feeling that the guy was up to no good. He didn't approach the bar, wanting to observe the bartender without being noticed. Most people here had a pretty good idea of who he was and what he did. Even without his father's particularly violent tendencies, he was a feared man. If the bartender was skimming off the top, like Owen suspected, there was no way he'd do it if he realized Owen was watching.

The restaurant was busy enough that the bartender didn't notice him as he took a seat at a table nearby, giving him just the right vantage point to watch what was happening behind the bar. It didn't take long for him to see

the bartender pocketing more cash. This time, Owen saw the man crumple up a ticket and toss it in the trash instead of entering the drinks into the POS system.

The son of a bitch was stealing from the restaurant.

Owen was tempted to tear him a new asshole right there, but he didn't want any of the customers to see him threaten the guy. It wouldn't be good for business. But the employees seeing it wasn't a bad idea at all.

Looking around, he spotted Stevie, the general manager. Stevie ran this place and her wife ran a club that Owen owned on the south side. They kept two of his most successful legit operations in good standing, and he trusted them both even though they weren't directly involved in the organization.

A simple jerk of his head brought Stevie to him, and he quickly explained the situation. Anger flashed in her brown eyes.

"Damn it," she hissed, her eyes darting to the bartender. "That's Gene, and I've had a bad feeling about him for a while, but I haven't been able to catch him doing anything wrong."

"Have him come to the kitchen," Owen said, standing and walking in that direction.

The kitchen was a hub of activity. With a team of cooks working to knock out food orders and servers going in and out. The kitchen manager looked at Owen curiously as he stood in the Alley - the narrow space in front of the heat lamps where waitresses picked up their food - but he didn't say anything.

When Stevie led the bartender into the kitchen, he had a calm, unconcerned smirk on his face. It wasn't until he stopped Owen glowering at him that a glimmer of fear flashed in his eyes. His steps faltered, but the Alley wasn't a big space. Owen was able to close the distance between them in three long strides. At over six feet tall, he towered over the bartender. Owen didn't go out of his way to get to know most of the employees at his legitimate businesses, but they all knew him.

His role as head of the mafia was the worst kept secret around here. No one dared to talk about it in front of him, but everyone at least suspected that he

was deeply involved in the criminal organization.

They knew to fear him.

“Empty your pockets,” he commended, anger lacing every word.

“W-what?” Gene looked at the others in the kitchen before his eyes settled on Stevie. “What’s going on?”

Owen answered the question before Stevie could. “I’ll tell you what’s going on, you have thirty seconds to empty your pockets of the money you’ve stolen from me tonight before I take it by force.”

Everyone in the kitchen froze, staring at the two of them. Tension was thick in the air. Gene’s shifty eyes still didn’t meet Owen’s, and his cheeks turned red. Owen waited a moment to see if he was going to deny it.

He didn’t.

Sighing, the man pulled the cash out of his pocket. Stevie took it from him while Owen continued to glare. He took a step toward Gene, watching as the blood drained from the young bartender’s face.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Owen asked, the threat clear in his voice. “Don’t you know who you’ve been stealing from? I’ve broken kneecaps for less.”

It was true. Killing was something he tried not to do unless it was necessary, but a little violence got his point across nicely. It also made intimidating piss-ants like this guy easy.

“I...I didn’t...”

Owen scoffed. The man looked like he was going to piss himself.

“Get the hell out of here,” he said. “Don’t ever come back or it’ll be the last thing you do.”

For just a moment, it looked like Gene might argue, but it turned out that he wasn’t that stupid. Turning away, he stormed out of the kitchen, shoving past the curious servers that had gathered there to watch and turning toward the back exit.

Stevie tucked the cash away with a chuckle as everyone in the kitchen and the servers went back to work. “There can’t be more than a hundred bucks here.”

“I wouldn’t care if it was ten dollars. I won’t be disrespected,” Owen said. He headed out of the kitchen, and she fell into step at his side.

“Well, after a scene like that, I’m sure that no one else will even think of pulling that kind of thing themselves.”

“Good.” They reached the back door, and he paused. “Just make sure that we’re back to being fully staffed by the weekend. I don’t need to worry about the restaurant on top of everything else.”

Stevie nodded. “Consider it done.”

Owen left after that, glad to know that there was at least one thing he could depend on.

There was a nervous flutter in Ruby's stomach as she walked into the restaurant. She'd been looking for a job for two weeks, ever since she arrived in the city, and Walsh's Irish Eatery was the most recent place she'd come across advertising a position for a waitress. They wanted someone that could also fill in as a bartender when needed, so she hoped that her past experience doing both of those jobs would land her the job.

Her savings account was dwindling way too fast for her liking, and she was eager to have some money coming in before she was completely broke. The ad actually listed decent pay for a waitress, not just the minimum amount that so many other places gave their employees that earned tips.

That meant that she could make some serious money if she worked at this restaurant, maybe even enough to get her own place soon. She'd been mooching off her best friend for the past two weeks, staying in her guest room until she was able to find a job.

Maybe moving to a new city without a job or a plan was a reckless move, but she was desperate to get out of her hometown. A fresh start was worth a little risk, right?

She hoped so.

It was morning, so the restaurant wasn't open for lunch yet, and the place was nearly empty. The dining room was big and split into two main sections with a rounded bar in the center, convenient for waitresses and guests to

come up for drinks. There was another smaller dining area near the back of the room that was elevated two steps up and surrounded by a half wall that made it an obviously separate space, maybe for private parties or special guests.

There were tall windows on every exterior wall with dark green curtains that were tied back, allowing sunlight to shine into the restaurant, and Ruby could tell that the place was kept clean. There was no dust that she could see, the tables and the walls were free of any food residue, and the vinyl plank flooring had obviously been swept and mopped recently.

The only person in sight was a woman seated at a table alone with a small stack of resumes in front of her. She was looking down at her phone as Ruby approached, as if she hadn't heard her enter.

Not wanting to sneak up on her, Ruby cleared her throat, and the woman's head snapped up.

"Are you here for an interview?" she asked. Ruby nodded.

"Yes. I'm Ruby Cross."

The woman shuffled through the resumes in front of her until she found Ruby's with a yellow post-it note attached with the time written down.

"Looks like you're a little early, that's good. My name is Stevie, and I'm the GM here. Please, take a seat."

Ruby did as she asked, wiping her sweaty palms on her black pants as she sat in the chair across from Stevie. She was always nervous during interviews, but she was a great worker, and she tried to hold onto that knowledge as Stevie started the interview with a basic rundown of the job's responsibilities.

"Now that you know exactly what's expected of you here, does this still seem like a job that you're interested in?" Stevie asked.

Stevie's hair was chestnut brown and shaved on one side. Combined with the stud in her nose, it made her seem less imposing than the other managers that Ruby had interviewed with over the last couple of weeks. She found herself relaxing a bit and smiled.



“Absolutely. I’ve always worked in restaurants, so you’d probably be hard pressed to find something here that I *haven’t* already done.”

“I like the sound of that.”

She scanned Ruby’s resume. “It looks like your last job was at the same restaurant for the past eight years. That’s impressive. But honestly, I’m a little surprised.”

Ruby tilted her head to the side and scrunched her brow together. “Why?”

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m surprised you haven’t worked your way up into management. Why are you still waitressing?”

“It might sound crazy, but I like it. I like working directly with customers and hustling around the restaurant. Management has always seemed a little stressful to me.”

Stevie chuckled. “You have a point there. I see that your past jobs have been in Toka Hills. That’s a small town about an hour away, isn’t it?”

“Are you familiar with it?”

“I’ve heard of it. So, what brings you to Misso City?”

She probably should have anticipated that question, but she didn’t and there was no way she was going to tell Stevie that messy truth. It was too personal.

When Stevie called Toka Hills a small town, she was completely right. The population was less than five thousand, and they didn’t even have a Starbucks. In a place like that, gossip ran rampant and being at the center of it could be torture. Ruby found herself in that position pretty consistently over the past year.

It all started with her fiancé, Derek. They’d been together for three years when he proposed, claiming that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. She loved the guy, so it was a no-brainer. They moved in together and started planning a wedding.

So, it was a crushing blow when she learned that Derek was cheating on her with a married woman. It wasn’t just any married woman, either. She was

the wife of the mayor. When news broke, it was the scandal of the decade in their small town. Ruby's engagement was called off and the mayor's marriage ended.

Ruby had to move back in with her parents at thirty years old, and everywhere she went in town, people whispered to each other and flashed her looks of pity. It was a nightmare, especially at work, draining her enjoyment of waitressing.

Still, she hoped it would all blow over eventually.

Then, Derek and his mistress eloped before the ink was dry on her divorce papers. That brought the whole mess back into the spotlight and everyone was so sure that Ruby must have been upset about the marriage, even though she'd long moved past her heartbreak over her ex. It was suffocating to have the whole town feeling sorry for her. Then, last month, the couple announced their pregnancy.

Ruby couldn't stay in Toka Hills after that. She felt like a pathetic loser every time someone asked her if she was okay in that tone of voice that suggested they thought she might just fall to pieces right in front of them. She couldn't keep living like that.

"My best friend lives in the city," Ruby said. "I've always wanted to live somewhere a little more interesting, and it was an easy choice knowing that I already had a friend here."

It was kind of true.

Stevie accepted that answer and moved on to other questions about Ruby's experience and whether or not she had a liquor license. Finally, Stevie sat back in her chair and grinned.

"I think you'd make a great addition to the team. I'm not going to lie, I'm looking for someone that can step in and start doing the job without needing a lot of training. The boss likes to have things running as smoothly as possible on the weekend. Would you be willing to start tonight so that you can get familiar with our processes before our big Friday night?"

Ruby's eyes widened. "Are you serious? I have the job?"

“Yeah, if you want it.”

It took effort not to do a little happy dance in her chair. Ruby knew that wouldn't be very professional, but she couldn't deny that she was thrilled with the way that this went. Money was getting so tight that she was starting to panic. Even though Michelle wasn't planning to charge her rent, Ruby didn't want to stay with her friend without chipping in something for bills. By earning tips, she could have something to give to Michelle by the end of the week.

“I'll take it,” she said.

“Good. I have a good feeling about you. I hope I'm right this time.”

“Bad track record with new hires?”

Stevie shrugged, but it didn't seem as nonchalant as she probably intended. “Just the last one. You're replacing him because he was caught stealing last night.”

“You don't have to worry about that from me.”

“Good. The boss wouldn't like that.”

Was Ruby imagining the ominous tone in Stevie's voice?

She couldn't be sure, but she figured it was just because of how serious stealing from your work was. What boss would be happy about that?

She was given a nametag and details about what to wear that night. There was a spring in her step as she walked out of the restaurant. Getting into her little Volkswagen Beetle, she drove back to Michelle's apartment and practically burst through the door, eager to share the good news.

Michelle worked from home as a website designer, and she was sitting at her desk in the corner of the living room. Ruby suspected that her friend used to use the guest bedroom as an office but moved her desk out of there so that Ruby could have her own space. It was all the more reason to save up quickly that get her own place.

Michelle jumped in surprise at Ruby's sudden entrance, her chair rolling backward across the hardwood floor as she turned toward the door with

wild eyes.

“Guess what?” Ruby said as she came into the apartment.

“You got the job?”

“I got the job!”

Michelle was out of her seat in seconds, hugging Ruby with a huge smile on her face. “I told you things would work out if you just stayed positive.”

“I start tonight.”

“Tonight? Already?”

“They want me up to speed as soon as possible. I guess they had to unexpectedly fire someone for stealing.”

Michelle wrinkled her nose in distaste. “That’s pretty shitty of him, but I guess it worked out for you. Let’s have a drink.”

Ruby laughed as Michelle scurried into the kitchen, following close behind her. “It’s eleven in the morning.”

“Then, I’ll make mimosas. You deserve to celebrate, especially if you start tonight.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that. But let’s make it brunch. I’ll whip up some pancakes while you make the drinks.”

Ruby was still determined to leave Michelle’s small apartment as soon as she could, to stand on her own two feet, but for now, she was going to enjoy a small celebration with her friend, look forward to this fresh start that she so desperately needed.

Anger made him grind his teeth together as he turned down a street in a bad neighborhood. The houses here were run down and practically falling apart. The city neglected this area, so the road had potholes he had to dodge and the sidewalks were in terrible condition. There was litter on the ground, not that anyone cared about that kind of thing here.

“Which house is it?” he asked Declan, who was just as pissed off and sitting in the passenger seat.

“Last one this block, on the right.”

Owen’s eyes narrowed on the house that Declan indicated. It was technically white, even though the siding was so grimy that it looked gray. There were ruts in the grass, as if someone regularly parked on the lawn, and the roof was sloping on one side. Half of the windows were boarded up.

The thing probably should have been condemned. Instead, they had intel that the place was a crack house.

The problem was that the product they were dealing here was from the Italians, and this was Irish territory. The man running this house was encroaching on their territory. It was ballsy, and Owen was going to make them pay for it.

Parking in front of the house, he got out and marched up the rickety wooden steps with Declan right behind him. His brother had pulled a gun, but Owen

kept his tucked into the waistband at his back. He'd pull it if he needed it, but his rage was fueling his urge to get his hands a little dirty today.

Not bothering with a subtle approach, he stomped across the porch, lifted his foot, and kicked the door in. The thunderous crash seemed to echo within the house as the door slammed into the wall. Sunlight streamed into the dark house illuminating a living room crowded with trash and broken furniture. There were four men there, and they scattered with exclamations of surprise.

The bunch of cowards probably recognized him and were trying to flee his wrath, but he wasn't worried about most of them. His intel was good, and he knew that only one man here was dealing for the Ialtians. He'd seen the pictures taken by the men he'd ordered to stake the place out and memorized that man's face.

Moving further in the house, he saw his target emerge from a room down the hall. There was panic in the man's eyes as Owen's long strides closed the distance between them. He looked shocked, which was probably why he didn't try to run away. Shock could make a man react strangely to threats.

When Owen reached the asshole, he grabbed him by the throat and shoved him against the wall. His eyes bugged out as he tried to struggle against Owen's hold uselessly.

Declan was nearby, watching Owens' back as he leaned in close and growled, "You think you can invade my territory and get away with it?"

The man gasped for air, unable to speak as Owen's hand tightened on his throat.

"You know what?" Owen said, a wicked smile twisting his features. "I have a couple of messages for you."

He released the man, who gasped for air, his knees nearly buckling. "W-what are the messages?"

At least he wasn't pretending not to know who Owen was or what this was about.

“The first one is for Mancini. You go running back to him with your tail between your legs and you tell him that moving into Irish territory in any way will not be tolerated. If it happens again, it’ll be war.”

Terror flashed through the man’s eyes, but Owen didn’t care. If Mancini was going to be pissed enough to take it out on the messenger, that wasn’t his problem. This man was a high ranking member of the Italian mafia, he knew what he was getting into when he came here.

“A-and the other message?” the man asked.

“That one is for everybody else.”

Without a second of hesitation, he pulled out a switchblade and buried it into the man’s side. The blade was short, and he made sure to avoid any vital organs, but he was still sure that it hurt like hell.

The man cried out in pain, trying to swing out at Owen as he pulled out the knife and took a step back. He missed, and Owen couldn’t help letting out an amused chuckle at the man’s futile effort.

“Make sure the house is empty,” he told Declan as he fisted the man’s shirt at the back of his neck. He yanked the man toward the door.

“Hey! What the fuck are you doing?” he shouted.

“I told you, I’m sending a message,” he replied as he shoved the guy down the porch steps. “I want everyone to see what happens when you cross us.”

“House is clear,” Declan said from behind him. “Looks like everyone ran out the back door.”

The lack of a fight was rather pathetic, but Owen didn’t comment on it.

“Burn the place,” he ordered his brother while the injured man struggled to his feet on the lawn. He was clutching his side, which was bleeding, but he could walk. Owen jerked his head toward the street. “Get the hell out of here. Deliver my message.”

Declan pulled a can of gas from the trunk and went back inside while Owen leaned against the hood and waited. It was only a matter of minutes before

Declan came back out of the house with black smoke billowing out of the doorway behind him.

They didn't speak as they drove away from the house. There was no need. The dirty work had been done, and Owen was confident that the man he stabbed would go straight to the Don.

*I show him who's weak.*

Dropping off Declan at his place, Owen headed home. He lived in a home on the east side, where there were a lot of new developments popping up over the past decade. It was a residential area for people that were wealthy enough to buy a large plot and build their own homes.

Owen had his house designed to his specifications. Large, modern, secure. He'd also purchased three plots of land so that he didn't have to deal with any close neighbors. He preferred not to bring his work home, but if it was necessary, he liked knowing that there was no one close enough to see or hear anything they shouldn't.

Parking his black sedan in the garage, he headed into the house and straight up the stairs to the master suite. He'd gotten blood on his black suit. It wasn't the first time, so he knew his dry cleaner could get it out. Stripping out of it, he got in the shower.

Standing under the spray of hot water, he let it work out the tension in his muscles. He was worried, even though he'd never admit to anyone. The Italians were getting bolder, and he'd already lost men. How far would it go?

His organization was larger, and he had better resources. If it came to a war, he was sure that he'd crush them, but he'd lose more men in the process. It was something that his dad never gave a damn about, but Owen did. He couldn't help feeling guilty about the men he'd already lost.

Owen sighed as he shut off the water, a stress headache forming at the back of his head. They were becoming more frequent, and he knew it wasn't just the job. He needed to learn how to relax. It had always been a problem for him, and he couldn't even remember a time that he was able to just feel happy.



Shaking his head at his own thoughts, he got dressed in another black suit and left the house again. For a place that he had built just for him, he didn't spend much time there. There was always too much to do.

*And* the place was too quiet. Living there alone bothered him in a way that he never expected when it was constructed. It was big and modern, like he wanted. But it also felt cold in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature.

He was lonely, but he didn't like to think about it. It was easier to head the restaurant and deal with things in his office that needed his attention, such as the paperwork that he still needed to attend to.

There was a paved area at the back of the building where the staff parked, and Owen pulled into his usual spot. His mind was on the incident at the drug house as he made his way across the parking lot. He wondered if Mancini would bide his time or if there would be a retaliation immediately. He wasn't foolish enough to believe that injuring a man and burning down an empty building were going to be enough to convince the Don to back off.

Things were probably going to get worse before they got better.

At that thought, his stress headache seemed to get worse, a tightness creeping down his neck that was going to bother him for the rest of the evening.

He was frowning as he came in through the back door of the restaurant. The entrance opened at the end of a short hallway. There were two doors on each side leading to storage areas, Stevie's office, the kitchen, and an employee bathroom. At the other end of the hallway was the dining room and just before that, the staircase on the right led to the second floor, where there was more storage and his office.

Owen headed in that direction, only making it about halfway down the hallway when Stevie stepped out of her office in front of him with a stranger right behind her.

"Owen, this is our new hire," Stevie said, gesturing to the woman.

His eyes locked onto the woman, and he felt a jolt of unexpected desire. She was beautiful with delicate features and silky blonde hair that was braided down her back. Her gray eyes captivated him, especially when they lit with her smile.

“I’m Ruby,” she said, holding out her hand.

There was something so open and friendly about her expression, and he found his frown melting away to be replaced by a smile of his own. He took her hand and shook it, his body coming alive from the simple touch. Her palm was warm and soft, and he had the crazy idea that it would be heaven to feel her fingers run over his body.

His thoughts startled him, making him drop her hand as Stevie explained to Ruby that he was the owner of the restaurant.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said.

She sounded like she meant that, and when was the last time a person had been happy to meet his grumpy ass?

“Welcome to the team,” he said, immediately regretting the lame sentiment.

“Well, let’s head to the front,” Stevie said. “I’ll introduce you to your trainer.”

Ruby’s eyes lingered on him for just a second longer, and he was tempted to step closer to her, so that she’d have to tilt her head back to look up at him through those long eyelashes. He could pull her body into his so easily.

The strength of his attraction to this woman shocked him. He’d never felt such an immediate desire for a woman. There was just something about her.

As she walked down the hallway with Stevie, Owen allowed his eyes to run over her body. The white button-up shirt didn’t show off much of her body, but her black pants clung to her like a second skin. His gaze lingered at the curve of her ass until she reached the end of the hallway and stepped out of his view.

*Don’t even think about it.*

It was a bad idea, even if the desire roaring in his blood told him differently. That brief interaction with Ruby told him that she was a ray of sunshine with her bright smile and genial nature. And him? He was a walking storm cloud. The two of them just didn't mix.

With that in mind, he headed upstairs, determined to focus on what he needed to get done.

Ruby slept in the next day. Her first night working at Walsh's Irish Eatery was hectic, but she made it through and could tell that her new manager was impressed. She'd only worked with her trainer for a couple of hours before she was taking tables on her own.

It had been a late night for her since the bar stayed open for a couple of hours after the restaurant stopped serving food and Stevie had her serving drinks until one in the morning.

She woke up to the sound of her cell phone ringing. Turning over with a groan, she fumbled around for it without even opening her eyes, knocking the alarm clock to the floor before she grasped the phone and brought it to her face. Blinking the sleep out of her eyes, she saw that her mom was calling.

"Hello?" she answered, her voice a harsh croak. She cleared her throat and tried again, "Hello? Mom?"

"Are you asleep?"

She bent over to pick up the alarm clock, seeing that it was ten in the morning. "Yeah, I was working late."

"Work? You found a job?"

"Yeah," Ruby replied, rolling onto her back and yawning. "I'm waitressing at a restaurant that serves Irish food."

“Waitressing? Again?”

Ruby groaned as she heard the disapproval in her mom’s voice. “Yes, Mom. You know that I enjoy it.”

Her mom clucked her tongue in a way that Ruby was familiar with. She could picture the woman clearly in her mind. Her eyebrows were probably pulled tight over her eyes and she likely had a hand on her hip. She would be pacing in the kitchen or living room as they spoke.

Ruby had seen her mom like that way too many times. It was her go-to when she was unhappy, and nothing made her mom unhappy quite like Ruby’s decision to stay in lower-paying food service jobs instead of going to college and pursuing a career that she had no interest in.

“I know you like it,” her mom said, her voice right on the edge of being patronizing. “But I thought that you’d explore your options a little more in the city, maybe find something worthwhile. Something that pays better.”

“Like what?”

“Anything you want. Your brother has had so much success as an accountant.”

Ruby groaned. How many times did she have to suffer through being compared to her perfect older brother?

“Doing math all day long sounds like a literal nightmare.”

Her mom laughed at that and some of the tension bled out of the conversation. Ruby knew that her mom was just concerned about her, but she wished that the woman would try to understand that happiness in a job wasn’t necessarily about how much money was made. If that was all that mattered to Ruby, she could have gotten a job in one of the factories operating in and around her hometown. The work was hard and the hours long, but the pay was great at those places.

But Ruby got satisfaction from waitressing. She always had. There was something thrilling about rushing around a busy dining room that made her feel like the job *was* worthwhile, even if her mom didn’t think so.

“So, tell me about home,” she said, changing the subject. “Anything new going on?”

“Probably nothing you want to hear about.”

Ruby knew what that meant. There was news about her ex.

“Something else going on with Derek?” Why couldn’t that guy stay out of the spotlight?

“Nothing big, but I heard from the manager at the grocery store that Derek and his wife were seen arguing in public. I guess it was a big blow up at the store near the checkout line. It got so bad that she left him there and he had to get a ride home from a friend.”

“What was the fight about?” Ruby asked, even as she tried to tell herself that it was none of her business.

“I’m not sure. A few people caught snippets of the argument, but no one really paid attention at the beginning. All I know is that the whole town’s talking about them and wondering if there’s trouble in paradise.”

Ruby didn’t really care if their relationship was strong or not. A year ago, when she was still hurt and upset about the whole thing, she would have wanted to know every detail of what was going on between them, but that was behind her now.

She talked to her mom for a couple more minutes before ending the call. She laid in bed for a moment longer, staring at her ceiling and thinking about how much her life had changed in the past year. She thought she’d be married to Derek now, happy and maybe trying to have their kids, but she was glad that she discovered his affair before the wedding. It saved her a lot of pain.

Besides, her new life already had so much potential.

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It was Friday night and the restaurant was just as busy as she expected it would be. She’d been working at Walsh’s Irish Eatery for three days now,

and she was pretty sure that she had the job mastered, but it was still a little daunting to walk into the restaurant and see every table full.

She'd barely clocked in when Stevie came to find her, assigning tables for her to cover and rattling off the Friday night specials. Then, she was gone and Ruby was on her own.

The first hour of her shift passed in a blur as she worked, serving food and chatting with her customers just enough to leave a good impression. She pocketed her tips and ducked in the back a couple of times to chat with the cooks that she was still getting to know.

She'd just returned to the dining room to make sure no one needed a refill on their drinks when she saw the owner of the restaurant out of the corner of her eye. He must have been upstairs, where she'd heard he had an office, because he walked out of the back hallway.

Ruby stayed in place at the server's station, where she could get sodas and coffee, watching as Owen strode across the dining room. She couldn't seem to pull her eyes away from him. She'd caught a few glimpses of Owen since they met on her first night, but she didn't have a chance to speak to him again.

She hoped that he didn't notice her staring, but she would have been surprised if he did. It was obvious that a man like him had more important things to worry about, not that she knew anything about the guy. There was just something about the way he carried himself that made him seem like an important man, an air he exuded that made him seem like a powerful, confident man..

Maybe it was because he owned a nice restaurant like this. That had to give a guy a certain amount of swagger, didn't it?

What she didn't understand was the danger that she sensed in him. When she looked into his eyes in that hallway, she was somehow entirely sure that he was a person that wasn't to be messed with. He was someone that it would be wise to fear.

Yet, she felt something entirely different. The deep-seated lust that burrowed into her was the last thing she expected. She'd never been drawn

to a bad boy before, so she couldn't understand the reaction.

But she wasn't just staring tonight because she found his aura mesmerizing. The man was hot. His tailored black suit couldn't hide how well-built he was, and she'd liked that he was tall and broad. He had a strong jawline that was dusted with stubble the day they first met, but he was clean-shaven today. It suited him better.

His black hair was short, adding to the whole tall, dark, and handsome thing he had going for him, and his brown eyes roamed the room in an assessing way. That made her remember that she had work to do.

Ripping her eyes away from Owen, she filled two glasses of diet Coke and headed to a couple of women that were about halfway through eating their dinner. They were all smiles and compliments about their food, and when she stepped away from the table and looked around, she saw that Owen was seated in the VIP section. That was what she learned the separate area in the dining room was for. Special and important customers were seated there.

Owen was by himself at first, but as Ruby finished up a few tables and glanced over again - fully aware that she was acting like a swooning teenager over a guy that she barely knew - she saw that a group of people had joined him.

Stevie approached her at that moment.

"Can I get you to help in the VIP area?"

"Really?" Ruby asked, surprised. "You usually let the new girls serve the important customers?"

Stevie grinned. "Only if they're as good as you are. I'll have Sarah cover your tables and split the tips, but don't worry, you'll make plenty of money taking care of Owen's table with Claire."

Ruby nodded as she headed toward the VIP section. Claire had trained her on that first night, so she was comfortable working with her. She was already at Owen's table taking drink orders, but he wasn't giving her any of his attention. His eyes were trained on Ruby as she approached.



She went straight to him, pulling out her notepad. “Good evening, Mr. Walsh.”

“Owen,” he corrected her. “Call me Owen.”

His voice was deep, and it made a shiver run down her spine. She bit her bottom lip before realizing how sexual that probably looked. Plastering a grin on her face, she brought a pen to her notepad.

“Okay, Owen. What can I get you to drink?”

“Macallan, neat.”

She wrote down the scotch order on her notepad before turning to the man beside Owen. As she met his eyes, she was startled to realize that he was the DA. She’d just seen him in a news report yesterday talking about a case he was prosecuting. He smirked as he saw the recognition in her eyes and ordered a whiskey. As she made her way around the table on the opposite side of Claire, it seemed that all the men were ordering hard liquor.

She didn’t recognize anyone else at the table, but they were all men in suits. A few of them even gave off the same intimidating vibes as Owen, but she wasn’t drawn to it from any of the others. That reaction seemed to be reserved for him.

They were the only table in the VIP section, so Ruby and Claire spent the next hour serving them exclusively. It wasn’t too difficult since they were working together, even though the group ran up quite the bar bill over the course of the meal.

As she worked, she kept stealing glances at Owen, and he seemed chummy with the men at the table. She didn’t linger too much, so she only caught snippets of conversation and didn’t learn much about what this gathering was about, but she couldn’t help feeling curious about it.

“Bring me the check for the whole table,” Owen said as everyone finished their meals.

Ruby nodded and reached out to grab his empty plate. As she did, her hip brushed against his arm. It was a small point of contact through clothing, but it sent a tingle over her skin. Owen was in the middle of talking to

someone, but his eyes flickered over to meet hers briefly. She could have sworn that there was heat in his gaze for a moment, but he looked away so quickly that she couldn't be sure.

Stepping back, she walked away from the table with her heart racing. That had to be her imagination, right? Why in the world would a powerful man like that look at her with desire burning in his eyes?

Ruby went back to clearing the table while Claire prepared the check, making sure to keep her distance from him this time. By the time the dirty dishes were all in the dish room, Owen had paid, adding a huge tip to the receipt for the waitresses to split. Ruby was shocked as she stared at the amount. Even splitting it, this was more money than she'd expected to make all night.

When she looked toward the table again, Owen was gone. Trying not to let that bother her too much, she returned to her usual tables with a spring in her step. Taking this job was the best idea she'd had in a *long* time.

The weekend flew by, and Owen was busy nearly every minute of it. He had another shipment coming up soon, and he needed to be ready. That meant making more plans on top of his normal responsibilities. The organization was big, with a lot of business dealings - both legal and illegal - and he oversaw it all.

It could get a bit overwhelming at times, but there was nothing he could do about it other than focus his attention where it was needed.

Sitting in his office, he stared at a paper of numbers that Declan had dropped off earlier in the evening. It was a rundown of the profits from the gambling ring. He liked to keep a close eye on the money there because it was easy for people to get greedy and try to skim a little off the top. Wasn't that exactly what he'd caught the bartender doing just last week?

But everything looked good on the report from Declan. The gambling ring was one of the organization's most consistent money-makers. It was all because Connor had a brilliant idea two years ago to start a high-stakes poker game with a half a million as the buy-in. Owen had been reluctant, but it turned out that rich assholes liked to feel like they were being risky with their money. It gave them a rush or something, and it lined his pockets.

Glancing at the time on his phone, Owen put the report away and stood up. It was just after ten at night, and he had developed a new habit of going downstairs around this time every night. At least, he'd done for for three nights in a row now.

Stepping into the dining room, he saw that there were still four tables occupied by diners, even though the restaurant stopped serving food at ten on weeknights. The rest of the patrons were sitting at the bar, but it wasn't too busy yet.

Owen's eyes landed on Ruby as he approached the bar and took a seat on a bar stool at the end, nowhere near where anyone else was sitting. She looked great tonight, with her shoulder length blonde hair down in waves and red lipstick that he'd never seen her wear before.

*Not that I'm obsessed enough to notice the woman's makeup every day.*

But then she saw him and flashed her bright smile his way, and he knew that he was lying to himself. This woman had gotten right under his skin, and he couldn't help noticing just about everything about her.

Reaching behind her, she grabbed his favorite scotch and poured him a measure into a glass before coming over.

"Hey, Owen," she said, and he thought back to when she'd called him Mr. Walsh. That had been almost cute, but he preferred this. He liked that she was comfortable with him. "How are you tonight?"

She asked him the same thing every night. He knew it was nothing more than an innocently friendly question, but he wished he could answer it honestly.

*My day was stressful because I'm planning the best way to ensure the fucking Italians don't get their hands on my drug shipment in a couple of days.*

"I'm good," he said, accepting the glass from her. Their fingertips brushed, and he felt like a sap for the thrilling excitement he felt at the contact. He took a sip of the alcohol before speaking again. "What about you?"

"I'm really good. I found a birthday present for my friend at the place you recommended I check out."

"I told you Joe would hook you up."

Ruby had told him yesterday that she was trying to track down the first edition of a book for her friend's upcoming birthday. He got an unprecedented burst of pleasure from knowing that he'd helped her, even if he'd just done something as simple as giving her the name of a man that ran an independent bookstore that might have what she needed.

This was the reason that he'd developed the habit of coming down here in the evenings. He liked to sit here at the bar for a half an hour or so, have a couple of drinks, and talk to Ruby. He still thought of her as a ray of sunshine, and he liked to bask in it. She was always chatty, but he still didn't know much about her.

He knew he shouldn't care about that. It was one thing to be attracted to her, but this interest he had in her as a person was something he'd never experienced before. Usually, when he wanted a woman, he took her to bed a couple of times and moved on. It didn't mean anything. It was just a way to satisfy his needs.

Ruby was different. He was drawn to her in a way that he couldn't understand but was helpless to deny. It was a bad idea to get too close. Not only was he her boss, but they came from different worlds. She'd never accept him if she found out who he really was.

So, he could get to know her, but he couldn't let this go beyond that, no matter how much he wanted to strip her out of that uniform and lavish every inch of her body with his tongue. Just the thought of it made his cock grow heavy in his pants. He wanted to hear her cry out his name in ecstasy.

Owen took a long pull from the glass of scotch and tried to push those thoughts out of his mind. He already knew that sex with Ruby wouldn't be like his casual flings in the past. He was pretty damn sure that once he got a taste, he'd never let her go.

She had moved down the bar to help someone else, but she came back to him a minute later.

"You want another?" she asked when she saw that he'd nearly drained his glass. He drank it too fast to distract himself from wanting her so badly, and he could already feel it going to his head, but he nodded anyway.

“Where did you work before this?” he asked as she opened the bottle of scotch again.

He already knew the answer, of course. His curiosity about her had him seeking her employee file on her second day of work. He’d seen her resume and the forms she filled out when she started. But that was all facts and information she chose to share professionally. He wanted to know more.

“In a little cafe in Toka Hills. Have you heard of it?”

The town name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t place it in his mind. He shook head as he accepted his glass back from her.

“It’s about an hour west of here, but it’s like a completely different world,” she said wistfully. “I was born and raised there, and let me tell you, small town life is way different.”

“How so?”

“For one thing, there’s nowhere to go after nine p.m. I swear the entire town shuts down except one gas station just off the highway and the two small bars in town. So, unless you want to get drunk every night, there’s nothing to do. No movie theater. No mall. There are barely any franchised restaurants. It’s a tiny community compared to the population of this city.”

“I’ve heard that a small community can be a good thing. People look out for each other, right?”

She chuckled, the light and airy sound seeming to settle in the center of his chest. “Sure they do, but you’ve got to watch out for that sometimes.”

“It sounds like there’s a story there,” he said, eager for any glimpse at her past.

Picking up a glass, Ruby started to wipe it with a clean white rag, removing any fingerprints. He had a feeling that she was just keeping her hands busy while they talked.

“It’s not exactly a feel-good tale. Let’s just say that I found myself in the center of a controversy and needed to get out of there. So, I fled to the city. But I swear, I’m not a coward, even if I am running from something.”

“Maybe you’re not,” he said. “Maybe you’re here because you’re running *toward* something.”

“Like a fresh start?”

“Exactly.”

Her smile was brilliant, and he kept asking her questions about her life in her hometown and what she wanted from the future. He ended up lingering longer than usual, and the more they talked, the more conflicted his emotions became.

They were such different people. Ruby liked people and always looked for fun in life. There was an optimistic part of her that he could never relate to.

On the other hand, he was just a grumpy bastard.

Finishing off his drink, Owen paid and left his stool. He had work to do. He couldn’t keep hanging around down here, wasting his time down here lusting after a woman he was never planning to make a move on.

Her first week working at the restaurant had flown by. She had yesterday off, and it happened to be Michelle's birthday, so the two of them spent the day together. Now that Ruby was making decent money - due in large part to the amazing tips that Owen left every night he came to the bar - she was able to afford not only a gift for her friend but to treat them to manicures.

She was back at work tonight, and her eyes kept darting toward the hallway that led to the back of the restaurant. That's where Owen would emerge from when he came downstairs. She found herself looking forward to seeing him every night. Sometimes he was tense and quiet, but most of the time, he talked to her. He asked her questions about herself and seemed to really care about the answers.

It was probably silly, but his appearance had become her favorite part of the evening.

It was nearly ten-thirty when he finally showed up, and she had a glass of his expensive scotch poured before he even took his seat. She could tell right away that he wasn't in a good mood tonight. His shoulders seemed bunched up, like he was carrying the weight of the world on them, and there was a hard set to his jaw.

"Hey Owen," she said, greeting him as she normally did when she sat the drink in front of him. "How you doing?"



“Not my best day,” he murmured, lifting the drink to his lips and downing half of it in one go. She didn’t know how he could drink that stuff. It was so strong that the smell of it made her eyes water. Not that she was ever going to order it in a bar herself. The stuff cost way more than she could afford.

He didn’t elaborate about what was bothering him, and she wasn’t going to ask. She might not know him well yet, but she understood that he was a private man. If he didn’t volunteer the information, she didn’t think it would do any good to ask.

So, she busied herself with making sure the others in the bar were well taken care of and keeping track of Owen’s drink out of the corner of her eye.

Even though he wasn’t chatty tonight, his presence still somehow dominated her attention. She could have sworn that she felt his smoldering stare on her as he sat at the end of the bar. Indeed, when she finally got up the courage to look in his direction, he was watching her over the rim of his glass with an intensity that made every inch of her skin tingle with awareness. Then, he put the glass down and licked moisture off his full bottom lip.

She nearly moaned. At least twenty feet of space separated them, and there were about a dozen other people sitting along the bar, but for just a moment, it felt like they were the only two people present, mesmerized by one another. Wetness pooled between her legs, and she had the absolutely insane urge to come around the bar and sit in his lap.

Maybe that scotch wouldn’t taste so bad if she was licking off his lip herself...

“Can I get a vodka and cranberry juice?”

The grating voice of a woman at the bar in front of her drew Ruby’s gaze away from Owen. She plastered her friendliest smile on her face and made the drink. Once it was handed over, she looked back toward Owen’s seat, but he was gone, leaving a couple of bills at his seat that came out to nearly double the cost of his single drink.

It was disappointing that they didn’t talk much tonight, but she didn’t hold it against him. When he was surly like this, it just made her more curious

about him. What was going on with him that made him seem so stressed? Was it just running a restaurant?

She didn't think so. That could definitely be a tough gig, but her instincts told her there was more to it than that. There was some kind of mystery to Owen that she couldn't quite put her finger on, but it just made him more intriguing to her.

She wanted him. It was the first time she'd really wanted a man since Derek broke her heart, but she knew that it was probably never going to happen. He was her boss, so that made him strictly off-limits.

Clearing away his drink and pocketing her tip, she headed down to the other end of the bar where there was a group of three rowdy guys that were having a good time and getting drunk. She was a pretty good judge of when to cut people off, but these guys weren't quite there yet. She'd just have to keep an eye on them.

"Another round, boys?" she asked.

They were all in their early thirties, so about her age, and she'd noticed a few appreciative glances thrown her way since they arrived, but it was nothing too concerning. But now that they'd each had a few beers, she couldn't help but notice that one of the men was eyeing her like he was a starving man and she was a juicy piece of steak.

"Yeah," he said, "And I'll take your phone number as well."

Ruby grabbed three new glasses and started to fill them from the tap. "Sorry, I'm only offering drinks tonight."

The man looked angry for a split second before he smirked. She suspected that he was trying to look charming. It didn't matter. The only man she was attracted to was a big broody guy that was currently sitting in an office right above their heads.

"Come on, baby, don't be like that." He reached out to grab a hold of her arm, but Ruby shoved his drink into his hand.

"It's not happening," she said firmly. "Enjoy your drink."

She was handing his buddies their beers when the man took a step back from the bar with the full beer in his hand.

“Oops,” he said, and she turned her full attention back to him just in time to see him purposefully drop the whole thing.

*What an asshole.*

Ruby struggled to keep her professionalism as she came out from behind the bar to clean up the mess. As much as she usually liked to interact with customers, there were always jerks out there that had to be dealt with.

She grabbed a mop bucket from the back while Stevie had everyone clear the area so that no one slipped and fell.

“I got this,” she told her manager as she approached. “Can you man the bar while I take care of the mess?”

“As long as I don’t have to do it,” Stevie grinned.

Ruby moved her mop bucket to the side and bent to carefully pick up the glass shards and throw them into the trash. She’d just picked up the biggest shard when she felt a hand grab her ass, giving her a rough pinch.

It was so sudden and unexpected that she yelped and reflexively tightened her hand around the piece of glass. There was a sharp pain in her palm as the glass cut into it, and she straightened with a gasp, dropping it.

Whirling around, she glared at the man that grabbed her, the same one that asked for her number and dropped the beer. There was amusement in his eyes, which just made her angrier.

“Don’t touch me,” she shouted loud enough to get Stevie’s attention. It only took seconds for her manager to put the pieces together and she looked positively violent when she saw blood dripping from the edge of Ruby’s closed fist.

“Get him out of here,” she told the bouncer.

He was a huge man that was always polite to Ruby and drank sprite every night while sitting at a table in the dining area, watching over everything.

He'd already seen Ruby being grabbed and was nearby, waiting to be told what to do.

The handsy jerk was removed from the bar in seconds. He didn't go easily, cursing and trying to yank his arm out of the bouncer's grip the whole time, but it didn't do any good. His friends followed him out, looking embarrassed.

"I've got a first aid kit in my office," Stevie said. "I'll cover things out here. Go get that cut taken care of."

Ruby did as she was told, heading to Stevie's office. She grabbed a clean rag along the way and wrapped it around her hand, which was still closed into a tight fist. It hurt, and she was still angry that it happened. *What kind of a man just grabs a woman like that?*

In the office, she tried to remember where the first aid kit was located. Stevie had told her on her first day, but she didn't anticipate needing it, so she hadn't paid much attention. The room was small and there were two sets of cabinets behind the desk.

Ruby had just opened one when she sensed a presence behind her. Turning, she saw that Owen was standing there, his body filling up the door frame.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. She noticed that he had some kind of paperwork in his hands.

She held up her fist wrapped in the white rag with a little blood starting to seep through. "I cut my hand. I was just looking for a first aid kit."

Owen strode forward, tossing the papers onto the desk carelessly as he came around to her. "What? How did you cut yourself?"

She relayed the incident as he yanked open a drawer in the cabinet, grabbing the first aid kit. By the time she was finished with the brief story, he was grinding his teeth together and shaking his head.

"Someone should have told me," he said, radiating anger.

Ruby probably should have felt intimidated by that, but she was confused. "It just happened. Besides, why would you want to be involved in that? The

bouncer took care of things.”

“He should’ve broken the guy’s hand for touching you.”

Ruby’s eyebrows popped up in surprise. “You can’t mean that.”

Owen didn’t confirm or deny that. He just took her wrist gently and tugged her out of the room with the first aid kit in his other hand.

“Come on, I’m going to take care of you.”

Seeing Ruby hurt enraged him more than he'd ever felt before. It was hard to wrap his mind around his own shocking emotional reaction, but he simultaneously wanted to take care of her and use the security cameras to figure out who the guy was and track him down to avenge her. He'd do the first thing now.

The second one would come later. This man touched Owen's woman, and that couldn't go unpunished.

*No, she's not mine.*

But that didn't change the possessiveness gripping him. Opening the door to his office, he gestured to the couch against the wall. "Take a seat."

He shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it onto the back of a chair. Rolling up his sleeves, he sat beside her and opened up the first aid kit. They didn't talk as he took her hand in his, being as gentle as possible as he unwrapped the bar rag and tossed it aside.

"Open your hand," he said.

Ruby winced as she did it, revealing a shallow slice along her palm. The bleeding had slowed down, and he carefully cleaned the blood away. His entire focus was on the wound, but he could feel her staring at his face while he worked.

It was strange that he felt so upset at seeing such a small cut. He'd dealt with much worse injuries, both his own and those of his men. But seeing Ruby hurt was so different. He never wanted that.

They were quiet while he worked, applying antibiotic ointment and wrapping a bandage around her hand. Once he was finished, he finally looked up, meeting her eyes. They were so close, and he immediately got lost in the depths of her gray orbs.

Sparks seemed to fly between them, and his mind went blank. He suddenly couldn't remember why he was resisting this, how he'd talked himself out of claiming her as his. Right now, all he knew was that he was being pulled toward her, as if there was something in the center of his chest tugging at him. He couldn't resist.

Slipping his hands to her hips and pulling her toward him, he leaned in and pressed a kiss to her lips. Fire raced through his veins and his erection pulsed with need. Ruby melted into him, parting her lips to allow his tongue to slip inside.

She was perfect. Sweet and responsive. Hot desire blasted through him, and he wanted more. He wanted to pull her into his lap and run his hand over every inch of her that he could reach.

But she broke the kiss before any of that could happen, pulling away with wide eyes.

They were both breathing hard, and his hands were still on her hips, his thumbs caressing her sides through her thin shirt. Seeming to realize this, Ruby stood, making his hands fall away.

"I-I better go," she said, not looking directly at him. "Thanks for...um, thanks for bandaging me up."

She scurried out of the room before he could respond, and he sat there, watching her go. The taste of her seemed to linger on his lips, and he knew he was in trouble now. Because he was right. One kiss was never going to be enough with this woman. He needed more.

---

It took Owen months of consideration before he finally pulled the trigger and put his mother in a retirement home. It was really an assisted living facility, with nurses and aids that could help her with anything she needed and made sure that she got her medications every day.

It was definitely a step up from a nursing home, with all residents having their own apartments and all the amenities that money could buy. As Owen opened up the door to her apartment, he stepped into a little kitchenette where his mother had a table. It was lunchtime, but his mom wasn't sitting there.

Instead, he could see her through the glass doors in the small living room that led out to the concrete patio. There was a table out there and his mom liked to sit there in the afternoons, enjoying nice weather and breathing in the scent of flowers in the garden lining the patio.

She looked back at him with a smile as he slid the glass door open and stepped outside. Every apartment had a patio, and he could see that several of the other residents were sitting out here.

"Owen, I didn't know you were coming today," his mom said. She started to stand, but he crossed to her quickly, pulling her into a hug and easing her frail body back down into the chair. There was a tray of food in front of her, and he noticed that she'd barely eaten any of it.

"It's Tuesday," he reminded her. "I always come by on Tuesdays."

"Oh right."

His smile felt stiff as he took his seat across from her. He'd put her in here six months ago because of her health problems, but that didn't include dementia at the time. He was starting to worry that her memory was slipping.

"How's the food?" he asked.

"I hate this low-salt diet the doctor put me on," she grumbled as she poked at the chicken breast on her plate. "Nothing tastes as good as it used to."

"Your heart appreciates your taste buds' sacrifice." His mom laughed, and he relaxed back in his chair. "Go on, try to eat."



She rolled her eyes but picked up her fork and stabbed at her green beans.

“Tell me how you’re doing. And Declan.”

Owen filled her in on what was going on with them without mentioning their business much. His mother knew all about it, of course. She was married to his father while he was running the organization with an iron fist, so it would have been impossible for her not to know. Still, Owen liked to keep the ugly side of it from his mom. She didn’t need to know the details of what was going on. Somehow, his mom was a gentle soul, despite the man she was married to for nearly forty years.

“That’s all great,” she said after Owen filled her in on his life. “But haven’t you met a nice girl yet?”

Owen shook his head. “No, Ma. No girl.”

Despite his words, Ruby’s face popped up in his mind and he had to wonder if he was lying. After their kiss last night, he certainly felt like she was his.

She kissed her boss.

Ruby couldn't stop thinking about it, wondering if it was a mistake. Would she get fired for that?

But he kissed her back. Maybe he even initiated it. She wasn't entirely sure. She wanted it to happen so much that the way his lips ended up molded to hers was a blur in her mind. It was still wrong. *Right?*

She'd never been in a situation like this before. All she knew for sure was that she wanted the man. Their chemistry was off the charts, and it didn't seem to matter how different they were from each other.

She was torn about how to handle the situation. Walking into the restaurant for her shift, she was just as nervous as she was when she showed up for her interview. Making her way down the hallway, she peeked into each room she passed, but she didn't spot Owen. Clocking in, she headed to the dining room. He wasn't there either.

"Are you looking for someone?" Stevie asked as she spotted her.

"Oh, no. Not really." She held up her bandaged hand. "It's just that Owen helped me with my hand last night, and I wanted to thank him."

"Oh, he's not here. Not even up in his office."

Stevie walked away, and Ruby tied a little black apron around her waist, trying not to let herself be bothered by Owen's absence. It probably had

nothing to do with her and their hot kiss. It would be crazy to think so.

The night seemed to drag on without Owen around. He usually showed up at some point during the dinner rush, walking around the dining room and checking out how things were going. It seemed that he always knew at least a couple of people that were dining and would stop to talk to them. But not tonight.

As customers started to clear out, she found herself at the drink station with Claire. They were both rolling silverware.

Owen was still on her mind, and she decided there wasn't any harm in mentioning him to her coworker. "So...it's kind of weird that Owen wasn't in the dining room tonight."

Claire blinked at her, looking confused. "Owen?"

"Hey, you know. The boss."

"Oh, Mr. Walsh. No, it's not weird. Showing up during the dinner service and lingering in the dining room isn't something that he usually does. It's a recent thing for him. Just in the last couple of weeks."

*Since I started?*

No, that had to be a coincidence. Why would her presence influence his behavior in any way?

"I guess he wants to make sure things are going smoothly," Ruby said.

Claire shrugged. "I don't know why he's been around more. The restaurant is just a front, anyway."

"What? What does that mean?"

"Just that men like Mr. Walsh and his associates have better ways than this of making big money. They just don't need anyone asking questions about it."

Ruby's brow furrowed. "You're saying that he's a criminal?"

"I'm saying don't ask questions."

Claire had to go check on a table, so she left after that, leaving Ruby staring after her in shock.

---

The next night, there was a black BMW parked in the lot behind the restaurant when she arrived. There was really no reason for her to think it belonged to Owen, but her heart fluttered anyway, making her feel silly.

Was she really that smitten with the man after just one kiss?

Apparently, the answer was yes, because she could feel her mood shifting to something brighter as she walked inside, hoping to see him tonight. She headed for the timeclock, but as soon as she grabbed her timecard, Stevie approached, looking apologetic.

“Don’t clock in.”

“Why?” Ruby asked.

“I scheduled too many people tonight. I hate to do this, but since you’re the newest employee-”

“I’m getting cut.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got a prime rib special this weekend. We’ll be slammed, and I’m sure you’ll get enough tips to more than make up for missing tonight.”

“It’s fine. I’ll head home and get caught up on my reality TV binge watching.”

“Really?”

Ruby chuckled. “It’s my guilty pleasure, and I won’t be shamed for it.”

Stevie raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. “No shame here. But can you do me a favor before you go? Owen wanted a plate of food delivered to his office. Could you drop it off?”

“Sure.”

Heading into the kitchen, she grabbed a plate with Irish stew and soda bread. She felt strange going up those stairs again, her entire body was a live wire, thrumming with desire as she recalled the feeling of his mouth on hers and his hands gripping her hips.

She wanted so much more that night, but she made herself pull away. She was freaking out about what would happen if she gave in to what she wanted. But ever since, she'd regretted it. Did she miss the possibility of something great by ending their kiss too soon?

She shook her head at herself as she reached the closed door at the top of the stairs.

*He's still your boss. It's a bad idea.*

She knocked on the door, and Owen called out for her to enter. He was sitting behind his desk and didn't look up right away. His eyes were focused on a paper in front of him. Ruby noticed that he pursed his lips slightly as he concentrated and something about that made a warm feeling form in the center of her chest.

She reached his desk and sat the plate down. Owen's gaze flickered up to her, and she saw surprise in his eyes.

"Ruby?"

She chuckled nervously. "That's me."

Pushing his chair back, he stood and came around the desk. She noticed that he'd removed his suit jacket, just like the night he treated her hand. The top two buttons of the black shirt he wore were open, revealing smooth olive skin. His sleeves were rolled up again, revealing a tattoo of some kind of celtic symbol in black ink.

God, he was sexy.

"How's your hand?" he asked, taking a hold of it.

She'd changed out the wrap he put on for a large band-aid that covered most of her palm. "It's okay. It wasn't deep."

His big hands enveloped her, and she looked up at him through her eyelashes. That connection they shared was stronger than ever now, and she couldn't stop her eyes from going to his lips.

"You're playing with fire, sweetheart," he said, his eyes seeming to grow darker.

She wet her lips, and he stepped closer, so that their chests were pressed together.

"What if I like that?" she asked, an ache forming deep inside of her. She'd never been so turned on in her life. "What if I want to be burned?"

Owen groaned, his arms coming around her. She was pulled flush against his body, all those hard muscles pressed against her. Her hands came around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Owen took control almost immediately, his tongue slipping inside to tangle with her own as his hands ran down her back to grope her ass.

Ruby moaned into his mouth, a haze of lust settling over her brain and chasing away her concerns about the fact that Owen was her boss. She could feel his erection pressing into her lower stomach, and her core pulsed with the need to feel him sink inside.

She was lifted into Owen's arms, her legs going around his waist. The bulge in his pants hit her in just the right place, and she couldn't help moving against him, seeking friction. It was good, but not enough.

Then, they were moving. Owen brought them around the desk, brushing the papers off and shifting his plate of food to the bookshelf behind him as he laid her out on the surface. He pulled back from the kiss and ripped her shirt open, sending buttons flying everywhere.

"Hey!" she gasped, but he just chuckled.

"I'll replace it," he said, his eyes on her white lacy bra. "You're so damn beautiful."

His hands ran up her sides, tracing the curve of her hip before he cupped her breasts, his thumbs running over her beaded nipples through her bra. She arched her back, pressing her breasts further into his touch.

Her breathing turned into sharp, desperate gasps, as he ground his erection into her. His fingers found the front clasp of her bra, releasing it and exposing her to the cool air in the room. He lowered himself over her, his mouth latching onto one nipple while he used his hand to pinch and tease the other. The onslaught of sensation made her moan and close her eyes as she tilted her head back.

She was so wet that she was sure that her panties would be soaked. It was a good thing she wasn't going back downstairs to work after this.

His mouth moved to the other side, his tongue flicking back and forth, and she started to squirm. She needed this to move along. He was lavishing her breasts, and it felt amazing, but her pussy was clenching on air.

"Owen..." she groaned, and he raised his head to look at her.

"Do you want to be fucked, sweetheart? Right here on my desk?"

"Yes."

Owen yanked open a drawer in his desk and grabbed a condom. She propped herself up on her elbows, watching him. He opened his pants, freeing his erection, and she couldn't stifle a gasp at the sight of it. He was bigger than any man she'd been with before, but she wasn't nervous. If anything, it made her want this more.

Ripping open the condom, he rolled it on and lifted her off her desk. His kiss was rough this time, and she matched his intensity, nipping his lip.

That seemed to snap the last threads of his control. Spinning her around, he reached around to the front of her pants, unbuttoning them and yanking them down along with her wet panties. She was bent over the desk, and he immediately moved in close behind her.

His hand ran down her spine, and she looked back over her shoulder at him. His dark eyes were wild, but he didn't take her yet. He moved his hand from her back to her ass, caressing her skin. Then, his fingers slipped between her legs.

"Look at you," he said, his voice little more than a growl. "So wet and ready. You know what you want, don't you? I like that."

Ruby parted her legs, gripping the edge of the desk as he lined himself up at her entrance. He slid inside of her, stretching her in the best way. Ruby let out a cry of pleasure as her hips thrust back to meet him, so eager for more. His hands were on her hips, holding on so tight that she was sure she'd have bruises later, but she didn't care. The slight pain just increased her pleasure as he started to work himself in and out.

There was something about the fact that they were both still mostly dressed that made this even hotter. There was nothing sweet or intimate about this. It was raw and rough. It was exactly what she needed.

The office was filled with the sound of their bodies slapping together and heavy breathing. Sweat broke out over her body, and Owen snaked a hand under her body to clutch at her breast. Leaning over her, he kissed the side of her neck as he started to pound into her harder and faster. Ruby cried out his name as he groaned into her hair.

Her pleasure built until she was flying, her heart racing and her body tightening in all the right places. The room seemed to spin, reality melting away until there was nothing but this moment, this pleasure.

Owen shuddered and came with her, the two of them locked together as they lost themselves in bliss and satisfaction.

When it was over, he kissed her neck again, running his fingers through her hair. *This* was a tender moment, and she needed it. Turning to look at him through hooded eyes, she gave him a small smile.

"That was..."

"Amazing," he finished for her.

Standing, he pulled out and got rid of the condom while she straightened up on shaky legs. She was pulling her pants back up when her eyes landed on the still-open desk drawer where Owen had grabbed a condom. There were a couple of other condoms loose inside as well as a stress ball and one other item that made her stomach drop.

He had a handgun in his desk.



He'd just tucked himself back into his pants when he turned around and saw Ruby staring into the open drawer with a frown on her face. Reaching out, he slowly pushed it in, but it was obviously too late. She'd seen the Glock.

Ruby's eyes shifted to him, and he could see the unasked question there. Most people knew who he was and what he did, or at least suspected it. But Ruby wasn't just new to this restaurant. She hadn't even been in the city for long.

She didn't know that he was a part of a criminal organization, and he didn't want her to. What he did never bothered him before. It was the life he was born into. He didn't have a choice of career paths with his father running the mafia. He was expected to go into the family business and fighting that destiny would have been useless. When his dad died three years ago, Owen was in his early thirties and had been a part of the organization for more than a decade. Taking over in his father's absence felt like the right thing to do.

But what would Ruby say? Would she understand or would she look at him with judgment and fear in her eyes?

The thought of that made his chest feel tight.

"It's always good to have protection, just in case," he said, offering up the only explanation he could without admitting to anything nefarious.

"Oh."

She didn't seem entirely convinced, but she didn't question him further. Closing her bra, she buttoned up her shirt as much as she could with half the buttons missing. Grabbing his suit jacket from the back of his chair, he draped it over her.

"Don't worry," he said. "No one will notice."

She shrugged. "Even if they do, it's no one's business what went on up here."

Owen pulled her close and kissed her again. He liked a confident woman, and Ruby definitely had that going for her.

Still, he almost couldn't believe what just happened. He'd been determined to ignore his attraction to her, but he just couldn't help himself when she came close. He had to have her, and he couldn't bring himself to regret it. She was amazing.

But now, he had to go. His shipment was arriving at the docks in an hour. His men should have already been in place, but he wanted to personally oversee it.

He'd missed his opportunity to eat dinner, but he didn't care. He'd satisfied a much more primal hunger.

"I guess I should probably go," Ruby said. "Um...thanks."

He grinned as she blushed. Shaking her head at herself, she headed toward the door, mumbling under breath. He caught enough of it to know that she was embarrassed by thanking him. He stifled a laugh, not wanting to make her feel worse. He followed her to the door, opening it for her and stealing yet another kiss.

God, she stole all of his self control without even trying.

When she was gone, he returned to the desk and grabbed his gun, tucking it into the back of his pants. He couldn't help wondering what Ruby would think if she knew that he was walking around with it.

That thought just highlighted all the reasons he was trying to keep his distance. The sex was great, but he couldn't let it go further than that.

Locking up his office, he drove to the docks, trying to put Ruby out of his mind. He needed to focus on the job.

Arriving at the docks, he saw that Declan was already there with a dozen of their men. The docks were dark and there wasn't much activity at this time of night. He'd paid off the employees to get them out of the way, and the boat with their shipment would be arriving soon.

"Any trouble?" he asked his brother as he approached.

"Nothing yet. It's been completely quiet. We have men in position at the other end, and I've just radioed the boat captain. It's on track to arrive in fifteen minutes."

Owen nodded and took a walk. There was an area with huge shipping containers nearby and even though it was a gated area, he didn't like that there was so much that he couldn't see. Anyone could be hiding there.

But he walked past anyway, following a straight line that led to the far end, where he saw four more of his men looking antsy. Their eyes were darting around the darkness surrounding them, and they all had weapons drawn. Owen knew they were probably thinking of the two men they lost last time they had a shipment come in.

"I haven't seen anything," he told them. "Stay sharp. I expect trouble."

There was no point in sugar coating it. If the Italians made a move tonight, he was prepared to put as many of them in the ground as possible. He headed back to the other end of the docks, where Declan and the majority of his men were standing. Everyone was tense and silent, jumping at shadows.

But nothing happened. No one showed up with guns blazing. The ship arrived fifteen minutes later without anyone ambushing them.

Owen wasn't sure what to think of that, but he told Declan to stay vigilant as he got onto the boat. The captain had already been well paid, so he didn't even question Owen as he headed for the shipping container.

Opening it up, he expected to see crates stuffed into the space, enough product to supply to most of the city. Instead, there was nothing.

Owen stood for a long moment, just staring at the dark interior of the shipping container. Even with the lack of illumination, it was obvious that nothing was there. Somehow, the Italians got to their shipment before it even arrived.

“Fuck!” he yelled, slamming the door of the container shut.

How could they have pulled this off? Now, he had no new product and he looked like a fool. He was pissed enough to kill.

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Two days later, the restaurant was packed. Owen didn’t usually linger in the dining room during the busy times, preferring to just walk through and make sure things were running smoothly, but tonight, he parked himself on a barstool and sipped his scotch.

He didn’t even try to pretend that he wasn’t watching Ruby the whole time. She was busting her ass, waiting tables with a smile on her face. That smile always reached her eyes, and he liked that. She practically glowed with happiness most of the time, and he was drawn to that like a moth to a flame.

Maybe it was because he didn’t know how to live like that himself. He coveted the ability to be happy the same that he coveted her.

Shaking his head at his own thoughts, he had to wonder when he started getting philosophical as he finished off his scotch. Then again, it had been a hell of a week. Focusing on the one good thing that happened to him this week was the only thing he could stand to do.

So, he watched Ruby.

It was easy to come to the realization that he wanted to spend more time with her, but it wasn’t just sex that he had on his mind. He wanted to know her better. A few light conversations here at the bar each night weren’t doing the trick.

Ruby had glanced over in his direction several times before she finally came over to him.

“Are you planning to just sit here drinking all evening, or can I get you something to eat?” she asked.

“How about we try stew and soda bread again? I never got around to eating it last time.”

That adorable blush appeared on her cheeks again as she was reminded of what they did in his office two days ago.

“Coming right up.”

She left him and he ordered another drink. By the time she brought his food, he’d made a decision.

“You’re off tomorrow night, right?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes. Are you keeping tabs on me?” She was smiling, so he knew the idea didn’t bother her.

“Maybe I like to know when you’re here.”

“Would it make me too egotistical to ask if that’s why you’re here right now?”

“Not at all,” he said. “You’ve felt my eyes on you.”

“Is staring all you plan to do?”

His cock turned to steel at the suggestive tone of her voice and the heat in her eyes. The urge to sweep her back upstairs and take her on his couch this time was nearly impossible to resist, but the restaurant was full of people, and he knew she was needed here.

“Come to my place tomorrow night for dinner.”

*Bad idea. Terrible idea.*

But he was tired of fighting against this.

Ruby pretended to think about it for a moment, but he could already tell what her answer would be.

“Okay, I guess I can do that,” she said with a teasing glint in her eye.

“Good. Because I wasn’t going to take no for an answer anyway.”

“Do you *always* get your way?”

He just chuckled and started eating as she went back to work. He tried to tell himself that this date was just a way to get into her pants again, but deep down, he knew it wasn’t true.



## RUBY

Owen's house was amazing, with a modern style featuring lots of glass and black siding. She was starting to suspect that she knew what his favorite color was.

The plot of land where it sat was huge, and there were trees at the back of the property, so it felt secluded, even though it was located in a residential area. The place was huge, even though he'd told her that he lived alone when he gave her the address last night.

Ringling the doorbell, she felt nothing but anticipation while she waited for him to answer. After they slept together, she wasn't sure what would happen between them next. They didn't exactly talk about if it meant anything, and Owen wasn't an open book. But this date had to mean that he wanted more, right?

He opened the door, and she stared at him in shock. This was the first time she'd seen him dressed casually. The faded jeans and black T-shirt showed off his body in a way that his fancy suits didn't. The casual clothing made him look more approachable somehow, more human.

"Are you going to come inside or just stand on the porch all night?" he asked with a smirk on his face.

"Is that dinner I smell?" she asked, stepping inside.

She was in a front hall with a high ceiling. There was a dark hardwood floor and white walls. To the right, she saw a staircase with a beautifully carved



banister.

“I made us some lasagna.”

“Italian food? That’s a surprise.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know about you, but I get enough Irish food at the restaurant. Don’t tell my mother I said that, though.”

Ruby laughed and followed him through the huge living room with a marble fireplace and dark leather furniture. They came to the kitchen, and the smell of garlic and cheese was thick in the air. Owen went straight to the oven and pulled out some garlic bread.

“I can’t believe you cooked for me,” she said, smiling. “That’s so sweet.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and mumbled, “I cook all the time...no big deal...”

She laughed. His attempt at being humble was so cute, but she wasn’t going to tell him that, sure he wouldn’t appreciate it.

They sat down to eat at his dining room at a large table. Owen seemed stiff, and she couldn’t stop looking over at him as she ate the delicious meal. He was a great cook, and she wasn’t sure why she found that to be so surprising.

“Do you use this room much?” she asked. It seemed too formal and didn’t suit him at all.

“Hardly ever. I almost didn’t have it included in the plans when I had this place built, but I figured I might want to entertain sometime.”

“So, where do you usually eat?”

“Standing at the kitchen island, mostly.”

“You had this place built?”

He nodded. “Yep. I can give you a tour after dinner if you’d like.”

“I’d love that.”

As they ate, he asked her questions about herself, just like he did when he came down to the bar for a drink in the evenings. It started out simple enough. She told him about her love of animals and music. But he started to probe for more details about her life, and she ended up sharing the whole story of small-town gossip that led her to move to Misso City.

Ruby had always been an open book, and she didn't mind sharing this stuff with Owen. She wanted him to really know her. The problem was that he didn't give as good as he got. When she asked him about himself, he was cagey, responding in the simplest terms or just being vague. He changed the subject twice.

It was frustrating. She wanted to get closer to him, but he was making it impossible.

When they finished eating, Owen put their dishes in the sink, insisting that he'd deal with them later. It was time for that tour.

Owen led her through the downstairs first. He had a home office, which she found surprising, considering how much time he spent at the restaurant. He showed her the bathroom and finally, at the back of the house, he opened a door to reveal a massive home gym.

It was no wonder this guy was in such good shape. He had just about everything a person could need here. Treadmill, elliptical machine, weights, and a chest press. The floor was made of blue rubber and there was a wall of mirrors on one side of the room. It looked like a professional gym all for one person.

Ruby spotted a punching bag hanging from the ceiling, and strolled over to it with a grin. "So, I guess we've solved the mystery of how you look like that."

"Like what?"

She rolled her eyes. He had to know what she meant. He wanted to hear her say it. "Come on, dude. Your body looks like it was carved from stone. Like a Greek statue or something."

He looked amused as he crossed his arms over his chest, making his biceps bulge. "Is that so?"

She slapped his hard arm and gestured to the punching bag. “Do you know how to fight?”

“Enough to get by. I’m not much of a fighter.”

He was lying. She wasn’t sure how she knew it, but she did.

“Teach me,” she said impulsively. “Show me some moves.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

He hesitated for a moment. “You could get hurt.”

She took his hand and pulled him to an empty spot on the floor. “I trust you.”

“You have terrible instincts.”

It was said as a joke, but she could see sincerity in his eyes. She tightened her grip on his hand, trying to tell him without words how she felt about him, that she meant it when she said she trusted him.

“Show me a few things, just in case someone gets handsy at the bar again.”

“That guy won’t be coming back,” Owen said darkly. He dropped her hand and came to stand in front of her. “But I guess I could show you a few things.”

Ruby raised her hands in front of her like a boxer, making fists. Owen grinned.

“You need to worry more about your feet,” he said. “The way you’re standing, a strong breeze could knock you over. Try putting your feet shoulder width apart, toes pointing toward me.”

She put her arms down and did what he said. Owen slowly curled around behind her as he spoke.

“The first rule in defending yourself is try not to be put in a position where you’ll have to do so. Stay aware of your surroundings at all times. You never know where danger lurks.”

He was at her back now, and a shiver ran down her spine as she felt his breath on the back of her neck. She understood his meaning. He thought he was dangerous, and the rumors she'd heard at the restaurant certainly made that seem true, but she refused to believe that he'd ever hurt her. His hands came to her shoulders and he slid them down her arms.

"If you can't avoid danger and someone gets close enough to put their hands on you, go for their vulnerable spots. Eyes, nose, throat. All soft and easily injured."

"So I should punch someone there if they attack me?"

"Using a fist could hurt your hand. You'd be better off with a palm strike." He was pressed up right behind her as he took her wrist and held it up. "You want to rotate your shoulder back and put as much force as possible behind throwing your hand forward, fingers up and the heel of your palm facing out. Go for the nose."

He moved her body through the motion in a shockingly intimate way. Her heart raced as she let him control her like this. His warmth seeped into her, and she inhaled his spicy cologne. She could feel that he was hard. Her belly fluttered and she was suddenly much less interested in learning self defense.

Turning in his arms, she boldly made a move, popping up on her toes to press her lips to his. Owen responded immediately, his arms coming around her to pull her body flush against his. She was hungry for him, so desperate to get closer that she dropped her hands to his belt and started opening it. She wasn't wasting time.

Owen's tongue dominated her mouth, and his hands groped every part of her, but as soon as she got his pants open, she pulled away from his kiss and dropped to her knees. He went still as he stared down at her.

"What are you?"

His question was cut off by his own moaning as she pulled out his cock and swiped her tongue over the tip. There was a bead of moisture there, and something about the salty taste made her body hum with pleasure.

Wrapping her hand around the base of his erection, she opened wide and took as much of him into her mouth as she could.

“Oh, fuck,” he barked out, his hands going to her head. He didn’t push her down further onto his cock, but his fingers did intertwine in her hair as she started to work her mouth up and down. Her hand stroked the part she couldn’t fit inside, and it didn’t take long for her to find her rhythm. His other hand came around to the back of her thigh, holding on.

The noises Owen made turned her on more than anything ever had before. Gasps and moans filled the large gym, and kept her going even when her jaw started to ache.

“I’m close, sweetheart,” he said, his hands tightening in her hair. “So fucking close.”

Suddenly, he was holding her in place and thrusting himself into her mouth. She gagged at first, but she forced her throat to relax and her hand kept him from going too deep. His hips snapped forward in fast, uneven thrusts until he groaned deep in his throat and came.

She looked up at him as he released into her mouth, loving the way that he looked as he orgasmed. The cords of muscle in his neck stood out and his face screwed up, his lips parted. His abs tightened, and he finally looked down at her right at the end, his eyes burning into her as she swallowed every drop.

When he released her head, she rose to her feet, unable to keep the slightly smug smile off her face. There was something so empowering about making a man like Owen come undone that she couldn’t help feeling proud of herself.

He tucked himself away and swept her up into his arms. She let out a yelp of surprise as her legs were knocked out from under her, and then he was carrying her bridal style out of the room.

“What are you doing?” she asked with a light laugh.

“We haven’t finished the tour yet.”

“I see. And what do you plan to show me next?”

“The master bathroom. I think you’re going to love the shower.”

She had a feeling he was right about that.

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Hours later, Ruby awoke to the sound of pounding in the middle of the night. She sat up with a gasp in Owen’s bed, clutching the sheet to her naked chest as she took a second to get her bearing and register the the sound she heard was frantic knocking coming from downstairs.

Blinking, she turned to Owen who was already slipping out of the bed. The room was dark, but the small amount of illumination from the moonlight coming in through the window allowed her to see him open his nightstand and grab a handgun.

Her blood ran cold at the sight of it. What was it he said at the restaurant? For protection? Just in case?

It made sense, but it didn’t sound true then and she didn’t believe it now. There was something about Owen that made her think he knew how to use a gun like that and had done so before.

“Stay here,” he said. She couldn’t even respond as a million thoughts raced through her mind. He didn’t stick around to hear what she had to say anyway.

When he left the room, she made a split-second decision. She wasn’t going to wait up here while he dealt with whoever was at the door. She needed to know who she was in bed with. The man hadn’t shared anything significant about himself with her, so the only way to get answers was to go out there and see what was going on.

Not wanting to turn on a light and attract attention, she pulled on the first item of clothing she picked up from the floor, Owen’s T-shirt. It was big on her, falling to her upper thighs. Maybe a little more revealing than she’d normally be comfortable with wearing around other people, but she was too focused on getting downstairs because the knocking had stopped.

At least, she hadn’t heard a gunshot. That had to be a good sign.

She didn't see anyone at the entrance to the house, but she could hear Owen talking to someone in the living room. Holding onto the railing and tiptoeing down the stairs, she listened closely.

"What the fuck happened?" Owen asked, his voice commanding in a way that definitely shouldn't have sparked her arousal, given the situation.

"It was the Italians, of course. The bastards raided our gambling spot on Raceway Road."

"Damn it!"

There was a thud and Ruby imagined that Owen just punched something. She'd reached the bottom of the stairs, and she paused, debating whether or not she should stay here and listen or try to get closer.

In the end, her curiosity won out. She crept across to the doorway of the living room, peeking around it until she saw a man sitting on the couch with what looked like a knife wound bleeding on his upper arm. Someone had sliced the guy, and instead of going to a hospital, he was here, rummaging through a first aid kit just like the one that Owen had used to treat her hand. That gave her a pretty good idea of just what kind of person he must be. People that didn't go to the hospital when injured had something to hide.

"We didn't have any casualties, but we're going to have to relocate the games," the man said. Looking closer at him, she saw that there were a lot of similarities between the man and Owen. They *had* to be related.

"More money lost," Owen said bitterly. She hadn't been able to see him before, not wanting to lean too far into the doorway and get caught snooping, but he walked into view. He looked angry, and he was pacing around agitatedly. "How am I supposed to run a criminal empire without any product to sell and my most profitable gambling ring broken up?"

There it was. Ruby's heart dropped as his words sank in. What Claire said was true. Owen was a criminal. But not just any criminal. He was the guy in charge.

*Criminal empire.* That had to mean mafia. Even though she meant it when she told Owen she trusted him, it freaked her out to find out who he really was like this.

He'd told her he was dangerous, and now she realized that he wasn't really saying he would ever hurt her. Being near him was dangerous.

The two men had continued talking, but she wasn't paying attention anymore. She needed to get out of here.

Now in a hurry, she turned around and headed back up the stairs. She was too worried to go slow and careful, and when she was halfway up the stairs, her foot landed in the wrong spot. The stairs made a creaking sound that was definitely loud enough to be heard in the living room. The sound of conversation cut off, and she rushed up the stairs before Owen could catch her there.

She didn't bother trying to be sneaky anymore. Flipping on the light, she started to search around for her things. Most of her clothes had come off in the bathroom, so she went there first, gathering up her clothes. Her heart was racing as she stepped back into the bedroom.

She'd just pulled on her jeans when the door opened and Owen walked in. As their eyes met, she finally felt fear. It was immediately followed by guilt. She didn't want to see him as a bad guy. He'd never given her a reason to think he would hurt her. But at this moment, she couldn't control her body's response to him. Adrenaline flooded her system, and she instinctively took a step back. The look of hurt that flashed across Owen's face made her chest ache.

"What did you hear?" he asked.

"Enough to know that you're a..." She didn't want to use the word criminal, but she didn't know how else to put it.

"I'm in charge of the mafia," he said, shocking her with his honesty. He ran his hand through his hair, and shook his head. "I've never actually said that out loud before."

"Why?"

"We don't talk about it. *Ever*."

"But you're telling me?"



Owen stepped closer, and she forced herself to stay in place. “I don’t want to keep secrets from you. And I don’t want you to fear me. I’d never hurt you.”

“But...you hurt other people?”

“Only when I have to. It’s a part of my job sometimes, but I don’t enjoy it.”

He took another step closer and the look of hope in his eyes kept her still. She felt so conflicted. Her mind was screaming at her to leave, but her gut instinct - and her heart - were telling her that Owen wasn’t really a bad man. He surely did bad things sometimes, but he’d been so good to her since they met.

“I should really leave,” she said.

He nodded. “I know. But I don’t want you to go.”

She realized then that she didn’t want to either. Owen moved slowly as he closed the rest of the distance between them. She knew he was going to kiss her, and she had no intention of stopping it. He was honest with her, and now it was up to her to decide what happened next.

She wanted to kiss him. So, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes. This kiss wasn’t like any of the others they’d shared. It was sweet and tender. He didn’t linger for long, and when he pulled back, he placed his forehead against hers and brought his hand to her cheek.

Her heart was full, and she knew that she was going to accept Owen for who he was, flaws and all.

“Do you want to meet my brother?” he asked.

“Is that the bleeding guy downstairs?”

Owen chuckled. “Yeah.”

“Okay.”

He took her hand and led her back downstairs. She didn’t feel nervous with Owen at her side, but it was still shocking to see Owen’s brother stitching

up his own arm. She couldn't imagine doing that to herself, but he didn't even flinch as he worked to close up his wound. In fact, he smiled at her.

"I didn't realize you had a guest," he said, winking at her.

Owen placed an arm around her waist and glared at his brother. "Don't flirt, Declan."

Declan chuckled. "Look at you, all defensive. Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"This is my girl," Owen said.

"Also known as Ruby," Ruby added with a chuckle.

She didn't hate this possessive side of Owen one bit.



OWEN

It had been two weeks since Ruby discovered the truth about who he was. He didn't realize how scared he was for her to find out until he saw how anxious she was to be around him. It was exactly what he didn't want. Ruby should never fear him.

But after they talked, things were shockingly good between them. Ruby took it better than he ever expected.

Still, he tried not to share the darker side of his life with her. He didn't want her to worry or be afraid. The only thing that he thought she needed to know was that he was feuding with the Italians. He didn't know how much intel they had on him, but if they knew about Ruby, it put a target on her back.

That was the last thing he wanted. It was the reason that he tried to keep his distance from her, the reason that he felt like he was too dangerous for her.

But there was no turning back now. Ruby was *his*, and he'd just have to do whatever was necessary to keep her safe. That included telling her to stay out of the Italian's part of town. Luckily, it was a small slice of the city.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Ruby asked as he drove them to a music festival in the southeastern area of the city. "Didn't you say the Italians were a problem on the east side?"

"They are, but there's a small neutral territory where this festival happens to be taking place."

A music festival wasn't usually his thing, but he found that Ruby was able to talk him into doing things that he wouldn't normally do. She liked to have fun, and she tended to bring him along for the ride.

He didn't mind. Ruby made him feel happy for the first time in forever. That loneliness he'd been living with for so long was gone. He was busier than ever, splitting his time between running the organization and Ruby, but he didn't mind it.

When they arrived at the festival, he started to have reservations. The city had closed down a two block area where various bands were set up on temporary stages. There was a beer garden and food vendors on the street. It was crowded and noisy, and he immediately wanted to return to the peace and quiet of his office back at the restaurant.

But when he looked at Ruby's happy face, he kept his mouth shut. Her eyes were lit up with excitement, and he knew that she wanted to share this experience with him. He paid their way in, and she intertwined their fingers as they walked along.

There were four bands spread throughout the two block area, and Ruby wanted to see them all. Apparently, he'd underestimated just how much she loved music because the cover bands represented different styles of music, from pop to rock to classics. They even had country. But Ruby stopped to listen to them all, and she sang along to the songs, seeming to know every word. He told himself that he'd have to play piano for her sometime. It was a skill that he didn't share with many people, but his mom had taught him how to play when he was a boy.

"Come on," Ruby said, a smile splitting her face as she pulled him out in the crowd in front of the stage to dance to the band playing classic rock.

"I'm not much of a dancer," he said, going along with it anyway.

"Just don't think about it too much. Let the music move through you." Her eyes swept up and down his body. "I know you've got good rhythm."

"I'll try, but I'm not promising anything."

But it didn't take long for Ruby to get him to loosen up. Before he knew it, he was grinding against her, the sounds of the bass guitar vibrating his

sternum. It was actually fun.

Except that his senses were finely tuned to pick up on danger. He could tell that someone was watching him. Looking around, he looked eyes with a man standing against the brick face of a coffee shop nearby. He was sipping a beer and watching Owen.

No, Owen realized. He was watching both of them. The man's eyes skimmed over Ruby more than once. At that same moment, Owen recognized the guy as part of the Italian mafia. He immediately flipped into protective mode, and his hand started to reach around to grab the gun at his back.

He stopped himself, knowing that it was a terrible idea. Not only was he surrounded by witnesses, this was neutral territory. There was no fight to be had here, but it still bothered him that the guy was watching Ruby with a little too much interest. He promised himself to keep her safe.



## RUBY

“I’m glad you were able to fit in some quality time with me,” Michelle teased as they walked out of a boutique together, shopping bags in hand. “Ever since you found yourself a new man, it’s like I never see you anymore.”

“We live together,” Ruby pointed out. “You’re the first person I see in the morning, and the last one before I go to bed at night.”

“When you’re not shacking up with Mr. Dreamy,” Michelle said. She was grinning, so Ruby knew it was a playful jab. “When do I get to meet this guy, anyway?”

“How about we go have lunch at the restaurant? I’m not sure if he’ll be there, but he might. And I can use my employee discount.”

“What are we waiting for?”

They got in Michelle’s car and headed for the restaurant. Ruby worked the dinner shift, so this was her first time coming for lunch. They sat at a table near the bar, and Michelle looked around appreciatively.

“This place is really nice,” she said. “I’ve never been here before.”

“I’m glad to hear that you like it,” Owen said from behind Ruby, and she turned around to find him with a charming smile on his face. “I’m Owen. You must be Michelle.”



“I am,” Michelle said. “It’s nice to meet the man that has my bestie so smitten.”

“*Michelle,*” Ruby hissed, her cheeks heating. Her friend was right, of course, but she and Owen hadn’t talked about their feelings for each other yet, and she didn’t plan to do it here in front of Michelle.

“And I’ve heard a lot about you,” Owen said. She’d seen Owen interact with a lot of people over the past couple of weeks and he wasn’t usually so smooth and friendly. “Ruby says you’re an amazing website designer. I might have to give you a call. Ours could certainly use an update.”

“Look at you, trying to get on my friend’s good side,” Ruby said, nudging him with her elbow.

“I’m also paying for lunch,” he said, bending to press a kiss to her cheek. “You ladies get whatever you want. Enjoy yourselves.”

Ruby couldn’t help watching him walk away until he disappeared down the hallway leading to his office.

“Wow,” Michelle said, “you have stars in your eyes.”

Ruby turned back to her. “I think I’m developing real feelings for him.”

“And he’s a good guy?”

“Sure. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. It’s just that he’s got kind of a sexy danger vibe going for him.”

“You picked up on that?”

“Well, you also mentioned it when you first met him.”

Ruby bit her bottom lip, considering what to say. Finally, she decided to go with a vague version of the truth.

“He’s good to me. There might be some...questionable things in his life, but I trust him.”

Michelle nodded, as if she understood. “As long as he treats you right, that’s all that matters. Much better than that asshole ex of yours.”

Ruby laughed. She was definitely right about that.

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Ruby’s body was sore in the best ways. She was laying in Owen’s bed, trying to catch her breath after a rough session with Owen. He was in the bathroom, getting rid of the condom, and he returned to her just as she was getting comfortable under the sheets. With a sleepy smile, she lifted the blankets up for him to join her. It was dark in the room, but she could see his outline as he climbed into the bed beside her.

She was pulled into his arms, and he kissed the top of her head. Ruby relaxed, her head resting on his shoulder while her fingers traced circles on his broad chest.

“It’s so peaceful here,” she murmured.

“I like that you feel that way with me,” Owen replied, stroking her hair. “Not a lot of people do. Probably just my mom. Maybe Declan.”

“You haven’t told me much about your family.”

Owen didn’t reply right away, and she worried that she might have tread on a topic that he didn’t want to discuss. Finally after what felt like a long time, he spoke.

“Things haven’t always been good in my family. Let’s just say that peace wasn’t a concept I was familiar with growing up with my dad. He was an intense person.”

“Intense?”

“An asshole, basically. All he ever cared about was power and money. He ran the organization with an iron fist. He hurt people when he didn’t need to and some of that cruelty came out at home as well.”

Ruby went still, not liking what she was hearing. “Did he hurt you?”

“Sometimes. The man demanded obedience in all things, whether you were his son or a member of the mafia. When I was a kid, I did my best to keep the brunt of his anger from my mom and brother.”

“That fell to you?”

He shrugged. “I’m older than Declan. And my mom...she’s a kind woman, a pure soul. I don’t know how she ever ended up with a man like my dad, but she didn’t have it in her to stand up to him.”

“That’s a hell of a burden on you as a kid.”

She could almost see it in her mind. Owen as a teenager, standing between his dad and Declan. She pictured his dad as a tall figure in a suit with a cigar in his mouth and a cruel laugh. She had no idea if the image her mind conjured was accurate, but it sent a chill down her spine anyway.

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve always had responsibilities, ever since I was born,” he continued. “One of the things that drew me to you in the first place was the way that you seem happy and fun. That music festival you dragged me to? I never would have done something like that.”

“Well, it sounds like you missed out on learning how to be happy. If you don’t learn that as a kid, it can be tough. Don’t worry, I’ll be here to help you loosen up when you need it.”

Somehow she knew he was smiling, even though she couldn’t see him in the darkness.

“My dad died three years ago, and I swore that I wouldn’t be like him when I took over the organization. I stood by that vow, but I didn’t realize how unhappy I was before. It was the same joylessness that I sensed in him. But I don’t feel like that anymore.”

Ruby pressed a kiss to his chest. She knew without being told that Owen didn’t open up like this for just anyone. He was sharing a part of himself with her that he didn’t let others see. She felt so much closer to him than before, that connection she’d felt from the beginning deepening.

Owen was unlike any other man she’d ever known, and she could feel herself falling for him more every day.



## OWEN

He finally figured out what happened to his shipment. It had been an obsession for him over the last few weeks, ever since they somehow intercepted his shipment. If he didn't have Ruby to distract him, the problem probably would have driven him crazy.

He made inquiries and tracked the shipment back to the source. That was how he discovered that the shipment wasn't intercepted. It was stolen before it even got onto the boat. Finding that out was the easy part. It turned out that the captain was paid off twice. Apparently, the Italians paid him more to act like he had the shipment and keep Owen from figuring out when it was stolen.

He paid dearly for that double cross.

But Owen wasn't sure exactly when or how the Italians were taking the drugs. In the course of his investigation, he found out that Mancini was in South America, visiting the same country where Owen's drugs came from. That obviously wasn't a coincidence.

So, Owen spent the last two weeks digging into what the man was up to. In the end, he hired a private investigator, and now he was sitting at his desk, reading the man's report.

He had to admit that he was surprised by the information within. Mancini traveled to South America to meet with some of his own men that had been there for two months. Considering that his mafia was so much smaller than

Owen's, he never would have expected the man to deplete his own numbers further by sending a dozen men to another country.

But it paid off for the man. His shipment was missing because those bastards stole it on that end, taking it from the boat before it even left for Misso City. He was reluctant to give Mancini credit for anything, but his men taking the drugs without the cartel knowing was almost impressive.

Of course, he wasn't going to let it happen again.

Picking up his phone, he called his contact down south. Alonso picked up on the third ring, his voice hoarse.

"This better be important," he said in lieu of a greeting. Owen knew that the time difference meant that it was the middle of the night there.

"It is," Owen said. "It's about my missing shipment."

"I told you, I've sent another one. It'll arrive next week."

"Not that. I figured out what happened."

There was a moment of silence and when Alonso spoke again, his voice was much clearer. "Tell me."

"The Italians stole it from you. Mancini has a team in place on your end and they stole the drugs from *you*."

Owen knew that wording it that way would piss Alonso off, and that was his plan. If Mancini stole from him, the cartel didn't give a shit. They got more business when Owen placed another order. But for the Italians to steal from them directly...that was a sign of disrespect. Mancini sent men into their territory and messed with their business.

"You don't have to worry about that happening again," Alonso said, his voice deadly. Owen knew that the cartel would not only increase security, but Alonso was a ruthless son of a bitch that would put any of Mancini's men he found in the ground.

It was too much to hope that Mancini himself would be stupid enough to stick around in South America long enough to get caught by the cartel, but it looked like the Italians had made themselves another enemy.

It was a small win, but Owen would take it.

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Almost a month had passed since the first time he slept with Ruby, and he'd never felt so strongly about a woman. He'd opened up to her in ways that he'd never opened up to anyone.

With her, he didn't feel like he had to put on a show and the tough, no-nonsense leader of a criminal organization. There was nothing to prove.

He'd never even considered bringing a woman to meet his mother before, but as he walked down the hallway to her apartment with Ruby at his side, he wasn't allowing himself to overthink it. His mom was always asking him about whether he had a woman in his life, and now he did. It would make her happy to know that. He had a suspicion that she worried about him being alone.

He knocked twice and opened the door to his mother's apartment. This time, she was sitting in the living room area, relaxed in the recliner with a book on her lap. Her white hair was wrapped in a scarf and there was a mug of hot tea at her side.

"Surprised to see me?" he asked when she looked up and met his eyes.

"Not at all. It *is* Tuesday."

Tension that he didn't realize he felt bled out of him as he realized that she was having a good day. She remembered what day it was.

"I am a little surprised to see that you've brought a guest," she said, turning her attention to Ruby.

"Mom, this is Ruby."

"I knew it," she said, rising slowly from her chair. "I've seen a change in my boy lately, and I just *knew* it had to have something to do with a girl."

Owen groaned, but Ruby just laughed. "I'm perfectly happy to take credit for the changes you've seen. Now, what are we reading?"

Ruby sat on the loveseat while his mom settled into her chair. Before long the two of them were discussing the mystery novel that his mother was reading, which it seemed that Ruby was already familiar with.

It did something funny to his chest to see the two of them clicking so easily. Like it was expanding somehow, making room for emotion that was unfamiliar to him. Happiness? Affection?

He didn't bother to dwell on it. Letting the two of them get to know each other, he went into his mother's room and checked the place out, making sure it was being cleaned properly and that her laundry was taken care of. He paid a fortune for her to live at this place, and he liked to stay on top of things. A few weeks after she moved in, Owen discovered that her laundry wasn't being done regularly. They blamed staffing issues, but he didn't accept that excuse. He'd laid down the law, insisting that his mom receive the best care, and he kept a close eye on things ever since.

Seeing that everything was in order, Owen returned to the living room to find that his mother had moved to sit beside Ruby on the loveseat. There was a photo album open on her lap.

"This is a picture of Halloween in 1995. That's when Owen dressed as Sonic the Hedgehog. It was his favorite video game."

"Oh my God, he's so cute," Ruby cooed.

Owen rolled his eyes. "Are you kidding me? I was in the other room for five minutes."

"And while you were gone, I spotted the picture album on the bookshelf," Ruby told him. "Your mom has kept so many pictures of your childhood. It's amazing to see you grow up between these pages."

"Amazing is not the word I'd use," Owen mumbled.

"Don't be so grumpy."

Sighing, he sat down and folded his arms across his chest, knowing that he looked completely put out. But deep inside, he liked listening to them talk. By the end of their visit, the women were laughing and carrying on like they were old friends.



He hated that they had to cut the meeting short, but it was nearing dinner time for his mother, and he was eager to get Ruby somewhere alone. She didn't want to eat in her room today, so Owen and Ruby walked with her down to the dining room, making sure she was seated comfortably before leaving.

As soon as they stepped through the outside doors, Ruby let out a long breath and giggled when she met his eyes. "I think that went well, don't you?"

He put an arm around her shoulders and walked with her toward the car, "It went more than well. I never thought I'd say this after just an hour-long visit, but I think she might like you even more than she likes me."

Ruby leaned against him as they walked, and he got that funny feeling in his chest again. "I guess I know how to turn on the charm."

"She's a good person, and she senses that about you," he said.

They got into his car, settling into the seats. Before he could take off, she looked at him seriously. "Why did you bring me here today?"

He almost gave her the reason that he'd told himself, that he knew seeing him in a relationship would make his mom happy. But there was more to it than that, and she deserved to know.

"Because you're important."

It wasn't his most profound statement, but Ruby gave him a soft smile.

He drove them back to his place. Ruby didn't have to work tonight, so Owen headed into the kitchen to whip up some dinner. Ruby followed him.

"Do you need any help?" she asked.

Owen shook his head. "You just grab a bottle of wine for us."

He pulled some pork chops out of the refrigerator while she picked a bottle from the wine rack. He found himself watching her as she opened the cabinet above and grabbed a couple of glasses, and it struck him how domestic this situation was. It felt good to share his personal space with her like this, and they'd been doing that a lot lately. It had only been a month,

and it was laughable to think that he'd tried to avoid a relationship with her. She'd become a huge part of his life in such a short time.

Ruby turned around with the glasses in her hand and caught him staring. "What are you thinking?"

"That you're here so much that maybe you should just move in."

Ruby's eyes went wide with shock. Owen didn't intend to ask her to live with him, but once the words were out, they felt right. His home wouldn't feel so cold if she was here.

"I-I'll think about it," Ruby said. She sat down the glasses on the counter and moved closer to him. Her palms landed on his chest and she looked up at him. "But I want you to know..."

She trailed off and her eyes darted side to side as she hesitated. He cupped her chin, tilting her face up until she met his eyes again.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think I love you," Ruby said, looking scared for the first time since he met her.

She *loved* him. It seemed almost impossible to him that a woman like Ruby could have fallen for him. He knew he wasn't a good man, but he was selfish enough to take anything she gave him anyway.

Deciding that dinner could wait, he lifted her into his arms, her legs around his waist while they kissed. He devoured her, his tongue slipping inside as he walked them out of the room. He didn't want to waste time, so he took them to the living room instead of upstairs. Lowering her onto the couch, Owen slowly stripped her out of her clothes.

He loved seeing her like this, naked and flushed and flat on her back beneath him. Her skin was smooth and her nipples were rosy peaks begging for his mouth. He made his own clothes disappear and lowered himself onto her. They kissed again, but he didn't linger there. His lips trailed along her jaw and her neck, making her gasp and shudder. She was always so responsive to his touch.

There was never a mystery when it came to Ruby. She'd been his open ray of sunshine from the start, friendly and honest and holding nothing back. She was the opposite of him in so many ways, and he knew that was why he loved her. He didn't say the words back to her, but he knew that he felt the same and he was going to show her that.

He ran his tongue along her collarbone before he reached her breasts. Bringing his arms around her back, he pulled her up to give him better access as his tongue lavished her breasts. Ruby gripped his arms, her fingers digging into the muscles. She brought her legs up, circling his waist, and he could feel her wet heat against his cock. It slid through her folds without entering her, driving them both wild.

But he wasn't ready for that yet.

Moving further down her body, he threw her legs over his shoulders as he pressed his chest against the couch cushions and buried his face between her legs. Flattening his tongue against her, Owen licked up her center, and Ruby cried out in raw pleasure. He placed one hand on her lower stomach to keep her still and slipped two fingers inside of her. She was always so damn wet for him, and he met no resistance, despite how tight and wet she was.

His lips latched onto her clit, and her moans made his erection throb. He pumped his fingers in and out, his eyes flicking up to watch her face contort in ecstasy. Her legs tightened around him, and she screamed his name when she came.

She was gorgeous.

He lifted his head and fisted his cock, moving between her parted thighs. She was panting from her climax, her gray eyes watching him with reverence as he lined himself up at her entrance. Silently thankful that she was now on birth control, he slid himself inside, groaning as he felt her tight pussy with no barrier between them.

Once he was all the way inside, he paused for a moment, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. He could see the love in her face as she gazed up at him, and he swore to himself that he was going to do whatever he could to

be worthy of it. He might have been a bad guy in the eyes of the law and his enemies, but he would always treat Ruby like a queen.

Moving slowly he started to thrust in and out of her. He wasn't in a hurry tonight. This wasn't a frenzied, passionate round of sex. He was making love for the first time in his life. He never would have thought that he would like it slow and steady like this but with Ruby, it was amazing. He rocked his hips and kissed her, basking in the knowledge that this was the kind of sex that nourished the soul. It was born of need and affection and a promise that neither of them had spoken out loud.

Words weren't needed in this space. It was just the two of them, caressing and kissing, and a building heat that drove them both to the precipice of pleasure at the same time. Owen buried his face in her neck as he came, his body shaking and his cock releasing inside of her in a primal act that brought on an entirely male sense of satisfaction.

It was perfect. *She* was perfect.

He still hadn't said the words back to her, but he didn't think it mattered. There was no way that she didn't know what she meant to him.

Snaking his arms around her, he held her, and no matter what was going on outside of these walls, it felt like everything was right in the world.



## RUBY

She couldn't believe that Owen asked her to move in with him. It seemed too soon on paper, but she already knew she loved him, so maybe it wasn't that crazy. That was why she said she'd think about it.

It had been two days, and she'd thought about almost nothing else.

She'd never met a man like Owen before. He could have a tough exterior, and she knew that many of the people at the restaurant feared him, but he had a softer side too. She couldn't help feeling like that part of him belonged to her.

In the end, all that really mattered was that he made her happy, despite their differences.

It was her day off again, but Owen had business to attend to. He said it in a way that told her he was talking about his mafia obligations. He never elaborated on that, and she didn't ask. She'd decided that she didn't need to know about that part of his life. It didn't matter. All she cared about was the man he was when he was with her.

Michelle was out at a meeting with a client. She usually worked from home, but sometimes she had to put in some facetime with her employer. So, Ruby had the apartment to herself. She wanted to take advantage of the alone time to relax, so she was in the living room binge watching a sitcom she'd already seen all the way through twice and painting her toenails bright pink.

But her mind lingered on Owen. The way he made love to her the night he asked her to move in was unlike any other time before. There was emotion poured into each touch and kiss. She felt cherished.

He didn't have to tell her how he felt. She knew in her heart that they were on the same page. Owen was much better with actions than words.

Despite that, he *did* offer to share his home with her. That meant the world to her.

She just still wasn't sure if she was going to do it. It was a huge step even though she loved him, she was worried that moving too fast would be a mistake. Would they get sick of each other? But the idea of waking up in his arms every morning almost made it worth the risk.

Her turbulent thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the apartment door. She had ordered Chinese food to be delivered, and her stomach let out a little eager grumble as she got up to answer the door.

She grabbed her purse on the way, and was digging around in it for her cash when she pulled open the door. But when she looked up, she knew right away that the man standing there wasn't the delivery guy. It wasn't just because he didn't seem to be carrying any food.

There was menace radiating from the tall man in front of her. He was dressed in black and scowling at her. She stared at him for a second, struggling to make her brain work and give her something to say.

But she didn't get the chance to move past her surprise and question him.

The man put his hand on the door and shoved it open, forcing her back. Ruby gasped and stumbled, barely keeping her balance as the guy stepped into the apartment and shut the door behind him.

Her stomach twisted as she realized she was in danger. This man was scary and advancing toward her with a deadly calmness that was chilling. Ruby scrambled away as he got close, tossing her purse in his direction.

"Here," she said, the quiver in her voice betraying her fear. "All of my money is in there. I have cash. Just take whatever you want and leave. You don't have to hurt me."

He kept walking toward her as she rambled, ignoring her purse that bounced off his chest and landed on the floor. Ruby clumsily backed away until her back hit the living room wall. Her heart was pounding against her ribcage, and she could barely breathe through her panic.

Then, the man let out a deep chuckle, and her knees felt weak from her terror.

“I don’t want your money,” he said, and she had the vague thought that the man spoke with a confidence that reminded her so much of Owen and his men that she’d seen at the restaurant that she was suddenly sure that he must have been a part of the mafia. Maybe the rival one that Owen told her about. “I’m here for you, little girl.”

He was getting so close now, and his words confirmed what she already knew. She needed to run, to escape this guy. Her phone was in her bedroom, and there was a lock on the door. If she could just get to it...

Refusing to allow herself to hesitate, no matter how scared she was of the big guy, she dove to the side and ran. She must have surprised him with her sudden movement, because he didn’t react quickly enough to stop her from darting around him.

Focusing with everything she had on getting to her room, she ran past the kitchen table on her way to the short hallway that led to the bedrooms. Knocking over two chairs to hopefully trip him up, she refused to look back and see how close he was. The apartment wasn’t big, which meant that his long legs could eat up the small distance quickly. She had to move faster. She put all of her effort into speeding up, fueled by adrenaline and desperation. Her heart leapt as she got closer. She was sure she was going to make it.

Until a meaty hand closed around her arm, yanking her backward off her feet.

Ruby landed hard on her back, knocking the air out of her lungs. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but she couldn’t let herself just lay here. His grip on her was awkward now that she was on the floor, so she ripped her arm out of his grasp and rolled to the side before he could get ahold of her again.



Struggling to take a deep breath, she crawled around to the living room while the guy cursed her for being so difficult.

*Tough luck, asshole.*

The coffee table was right in front of her, so she grabbed a candle in a glass holder and chucked it at the guy, still on the floor. Her eyes were watering from her efforts to breathe, but she still saw him duck the candle.

She also saw him pull out a gun.

*Shit.* What the hell was she going to do? She didn't have a weapon close at hand. She didn't even *own* a gun. Maybe she should have asked Owen for one.

But she never could have anticipated this. It had to be happening because she was with Owen. He'd never forgive himself for this.

All the fight left her as the man pointed his gun at her face. Her mind went blank, and she froze. Was this it? Was she about to be killed in Michelle's apartment?

The man advanced on her, and she was just glad that her friend wasn't here. As terrified as she was, things would be so much worse if Michelle was dragged into this.

"Say goodnight, bitch," the man said, grabbing her arm in a bruising grip this time and raising the gun above his head. She barely had time to wonder why he wasn't shooting her when he brought the butt of the weapon crashing into the side of her head and everything went black.



## OWEN

Owen signed the last paper in a stack of them and sat back in his chair. This was a first. He'd finished his paperwork early this month. Everything was in order and he could finally get out from behind this desk.

Earlier, he had to go to the location of the new gambling ring to make sure that everything was ready to begin operations again. He'd purchased a storefront, where Stevie had helped him find someone to sell high-end women's fashion, and the back half of the large building was being used for illegal gambling. Connor had overseen the project, and Owen was happy with how it turned out.

Now, it was almost dinner time and finishing his paperwork early meant that he could go see Ruby. He'd have the kitchen make something for them before he left. He wasn't in the mood to cook tonight.

He was about to leave the office to take care of that when the door burst open. Owen was shocked to see Stevie rushing inside. She never came in without knocking, knowing that he could be handling some kind of troublesome business. She was panting as if she'd run up the stairs.

"Owen, you have a phone call. I transferred it up here."

He frowned. There was worry etched into the lines of her face and he had a feeling that he wasn't going to like whatever he heard when he picked up that receiver.

He did it anyway, giving a gruff greeting to whoever was about to ruin his night. “This is Owen.”

“Owen? Oh my God...I was worried I wouldn’t be able to reach you. You have to come quick.”

The woman on the other end of the line was speaking so quickly that he almost didn’t catch all of her words. She was sniffing, and he didn’t recognize her voice.

“Come where?” he asked. “Who is this?”

“It’s Michelle. Ruby’s friend.”

His grip on the phone tightened until he heard the plastic creak, a warning that he was about to break the thing. Anxiety clawed its way into him, making his stomach roll and his blood rush to his ears.

“What’s wrong?” he barked into the phone. “Where’s Ruby?”

“I don’t know! I came home and she wasn’t here, but it looked like there was a struggle, and then I saw the blood...”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes. Lock the door and don’t call anyone else.”

Stevie had already left the room when he picked up the call, and he was glad that there was no one around him right now. Panic and anger were turning his mind into a roaring rush of violent thoughts, and that didn’t bode well for talking to anyone.

He broke every speed limit on the way to Michelle’s apartment, mentally cursing himself for not insisting that she move in with him. His home was secure. No one would be able to get to her there.

Owen knocked on the door of her apartment, calling out to Michelle so that she’d know it was safe to open. He didn’t bother to greet her as he strode into the apartment. His entire being was finely tuned to figuring out what happened to Ruby. No one mattered.

He was two steps into the apartment when he saw the first couple of drops of blood on the light hardwood floor. There was a trail, and it led him to the

living room where there was much more. It wasn't enough to be fatal, but the idea of Ruby bleeding at all made him feel gutted.

Was she stabbed? Shot?

Why was she taken?

But he already knew the answer to that. Ruby was his girl, and that put a target on her back. He knew that going into this relationship, but he'd done it anyway, like a self-centered prick.

He should have protected her, never should have let this happen.

Swallowing back the bile that appeared in his throat at the thought of what could be happening to his ray of sunshine, he turned to Michelle.

"Anything other than the knocked over chairs and blood that you've noticed?" he asked, his voice sounding cold even to his own ears. Michelle looked uneasy, and he couldn't blame her. He was furious, and that was never a good thing. Owen might try to be a better man than his father, but the ability to be ruthless and cruel existed within him. Having Ruby taken from him brought all of that to the surface.

"Just her purse on the floor by the door with everything in it," Michelle said. "I was gone all afternoon, and I just got home and saw this..."

"Did you call the police?"

Michelle bit her lip. "I thought about it, but Ruby told me..."

She was being timid, and he could feel himself losing patience with her. He didn't have time for this. But she was Ruby's best friend, and if he upset her, Ruby would be mad at him when he got her back.

And by God, he was going to get her back.

"She told you I'm in the mafia?"

"Well, not in those words, but yeah. I thought that you might need to know about this first."

"Good call," he said, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. "The police would just get in the way."

He called Brogan first, ordering him to get the surveillance footage from the electronics store across the street. They had to have a camera outside, and Owen wanted all the footage for the day immediately. Brogan was a good soldier. He didn't ask any questions, even when Owen added that he should obtain the footage by any means necessary.

Next, he went into Ruby's room. Her phone was sitting on her nightstand. There would be no way to track her without that. Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, he picked up a pink scrunchie that was next to her phone. It felt silky between his fingers, but not as soft as her hair.

A sudden wave of grief tried to crash over him. Pain made his heart feel like it was being squeezed and his hand shook when he closed it around the scrunchie.

*No.* He couldn't do this. He couldn't give into his worst nightmare, not now. Ruby needed him.

Slipping the scrunchie onto his wrist, he left the room and called Declan to come get Michelle. She couldn't stay here. The place had been compromised. It surprised him when she didn't argue, but he figured that she was pretty freaked out about what was going on.

When he was alone in the apartment, he picked up the kitchen chairs and placed them where they were supposed to go. Then, he ditched his suit jacket and started to clean the blood off the floor. He couldn't stand to look at it a moment longer, and he knew that Ruby wouldn't want to see that if he got her back.

*When* he got her back.

God damn it, he was going to get her back.

Brogan walked into the apartment just as Owen finished with the floor. His knuckles were busted, and Owen figured that he had to convince the owner of the electronics store to give him the security footage. That was why Owen chose him to handle it. He got things done.

Brogan helped himself to a bottle of water from the refrigerator while Owen watched the footage on Ruby's laptop at the kitchen table. It was silent in the apartment as he fast forwarded through the first half of the day. Nothing

stuck out until he saw a black sedan park at the side of the apartment building. He paused it as the driver got out, peering closely at the figure.

Brogen came around behind him to see. "Is that-"

"Yeah," Owen cut him off, grinding his teeth together. "Leo Mancini."

Leo was the son of the Don. there was no doubt in Owen's mind what would happen next. Sure enough, when he advanced the footage fifteen minutes, the man walked out of the side entrance to the building with a human-shaped blanket in his arms.

Because it wasn't the main entrance and he moved quickly, no one was around to notice as the bastard put Ruby inside of his trunk. Owen stared at the screen until the car drove away, cold fury running through his veins.

"Call everyone," he told Brogan. Have them meet me at the club in an hour. I'll make sure it's cleared out."

"What are you going to do?" Brogan asked, nothing but mild curiosity in his voice, but Owen knew better. Brogan didn't like to see women hurt. He met the man's eyes.

"We're going to war with the Italians. They'll regret ever taking my woman from me."

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Twenty-four hours had passed since Ruby was taken, and Owen hadn't slept. He couldn't. The guilt and rage kept him going, and he clung to those emotions. If he didn't, the worry and grief tried to take over, and he wasn't any good to Ruby like that. They took her alive, and that meant that there was still a chance of finding her that way, but only if he kept pushing.

"Boss?"

Owen looked up from his phone to see that one of his men was standing in the doorway. He was a low-level enforcer named Ivan. He was young, but had a lot of potential, so Owen pulled him to help find Ruby.

“What?” he snapped.

He knew he was being an asshole to everyone, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was on edge, and anything could set him off.

He’d been reading a text from one of the cops on his payroll that let him know they had a BOLO out for the car that Ruby was taken in. Owen was able to find more footage of it driving away from the apartment and get the license plate.

Of course, Leo probably ditched the car. But Owen had to chase every lead.

“We brought in one of the lieutenants.,”

Owen stood. “Where?”

“The basement.”

Owen usually worked out of his office at the restaurant because it was discreet, but this operation required space and privacy that he couldn’t get there. So, he’d shut down the nightclub. It was the weekend, and Declan had pointed out it was a costly decision before Owen told him to keep his damn mouth shut.

The club was big and soundproof to keep away noise complaints when they have live music. Owen could do a lot here without worrying anyone would discover it. Plus, there was a bar where he could drink without being reminded of Ruby. Not that she wasn’t constantly on his mind. She haunted his thoughts.

Rolling up his sleeves, Owen entered the basement to see that one of the Italian’s lieutenants was tied to a chair with duct tape over his mouth. He had a black eye already, he looked furious.

*Well, that makes two of us.*

Ivan and Declan were in the room, but they stayed back, letting Owen deal with this. Going straight to the man, he ripped the duct tape off his mouth. He winced, and Owen almost chuckled. A low tolerance for pain would come in handy for him.



“You know why you’re here,” Owen said. It wasn’t a question. “Tell me what I want to know.”

“Fuck off,” the Italian sneered.

Owen was punching him in the mouth before he even made the conscious decision to do so.

“Where is she?” Owen shouted while the man spit out blood.

“Do you think I’m an idiot?” he replied, shaking his head. “I tell you anything, and I’m as good as dead.”

“You’ll never leave this basement,” Owen said. “My woman was taken from me, and no Italian gets away from me until I have her back.”

The Italian started to pull at the ropes binding him to the chair, but it did no good. He cursed and struggled, and Owen watched, waiting for him to accept the situation.

“Let me out of here, you bastard,” he shouted.

“The thing you should be worried about is what I’m going to do to you to get the information I want,” Owen said, pulling a set of brass knuckles out of his pocket. They were old school, but he liked to stick to the classics.

“You asshole,” the Italian replied, but there was fear in his eyes.

Owen punched him in the ribs this time. With the brass knuckles, it had a hell of an impact, and he heard a couple of ribs break. The Italian howled in pain.

He didn’t hold out for long after that. There was blood running from his nose and he was breathing heavily when he finally told Owen what he wanted to know.

“She’s being held in a warehouse for now. Old meat packing place on Trotter Road.”

“Why?” Owen asked, using a rag that Declan handed him to wipe the blood from his hands. “What’s the point of holding her?”

“The Don. He’s not back from South America yet, but when he is, he plans to make an example out of her.”

The fucker smiled a little at that. Owen’s blood pressure shot up so fast that he felt light-headed for a moment.

“She’s innocent in all this,” he said, more to himself than the Italian.

“Mancini doesn’t care. She’s your weakness and if he can exploit that, he will.”

That reminded Owen of his father. Mancini was just like him, and Owen had to put an end to him. But he needed to get Ruby back first.

“Take care of him,” he told Ivan as he walked by. He was halfway up the steps when he heard the shot.

Now, all that was left was getting his woman.



## RUBY

It was impossible to tell how long she'd been held prisoner, but it had to have been at least a day, and she was starting to get worried. She was being held in a windowless room with a cot and not much else. The room wasn't well ventilated, and she was uncomfortably warm the whole time.

She was taken to the bathroom a couple of times and fed once. Each time she was taken to the bathroom, it was a different broody and mysterious man that refused to answer any of her questions about why she was here. In fact, they refused to speak to her at all.

But they didn't hurt her. Aside from the blow to the head she took when she was abducted, they'd mostly left her alone. She put her hand to the wound on the right side of her head and winced. It had bled, and the first time she was led to the bathroom, she'd been shocked to look in the mirror. It was like something out of a horror movie. She'd cleaned the blood off as best as she could, but it was still crusted in her hair.

She needed a shower, but that wasn't happening any time soon unless Owen rescued her. She was sure that he would try to. He was probably frantically looking for her right now. But would he succeed?

The door of the room opened, and she saw another unfamiliar face standing there.

"I don't need to use the bathroom," she said. She was getting tired of playing their game.

“Come on,” the man demanded, and she knew it would do no good to argue. Standing up from her cot, she followed the guy into the nondescript hallway. But he didn’t turn in the direction of the bathroom. Instead, he went the other way, and he grabbed her arm above the elbow in a bruising grip to pull her along. Her heart raced. The unexpected could not be a thing in this situation.

It wasn’t long before they walked into an open space with high ceilings. Looking around at the industrial design and the boarded up windows, she realized that this was an old warehouse.

There were ten men waiting for them, and one of them had a video camera in his hand. She was being recorded, which sent a chill down her spine.

“Ah, so this must be Ruby,” one of the men said, and she focused her attention on him. He was an older man, maybe in his sixties, with salt and pepper hair and a goatee. He was short, but she could tell that he was a powerful man. It was obvious in the way that the others watched him, as if waiting for orders. “I’m Rocco Mancini.”

*Uh-oh. This is really bad.*

Owen didn’t tell her much about his job, but she knew about the Italians because he felt she needed to be warned to avoid their territory. She knew that this man was the Don of the Italian mafia.

“Why am I here?” she asked, sounding braver than she felt.

He chuckled, radiating arrogance. “I’m afraid that you’re just a means to an end, my dear. No hard feelings.”

He pulled a handgun out, and it wasn’t difficult to put the pieces together. This was about hurting Owen. That was why she was being recorded. This bastard was probably going to send Owen the video of her death. It was sick.

She wasn’t going to make this easy on him.

Calling upon the one brief self-defense lesson that Owen gave her, Ruby positioned her feet the way that Owen taught her and shoved her hand into the face of the man holding her, hitting his nose with her palm.

He cried in shock and pain, releasing her arm to hold his nose as it gushed blood. Ruby took advantage of the opportunity, running away from him and the Don and all the other dangerous men. It was probably futile, but she had to try. There was a door on the other side of the warehouse. It had to be an exit.

A shot rang out behind her, and her heart skipped a beat, terror seeping into her bones. But it missed, and she didn't stop. She couldn't. Reaching the door, she grabbed the handle and pulled.

Nothing happened. Letting out a choked sob, Ruby tried to push and pull at it frantically, but it did no good. It was locked.

The Don laughed, as she stood there, dread making her feel sick. "Foolish woman. You're just one civilian. You can't hope to get away from us."

Ruby turned around and faced the man as he started to walk toward her, knowing that this was where she would die.

But a deafening crash changed everything. A car came barreling through the door of the loading bay near where the other men were. Most of them scrambled out of the way, but not all of them were fast enough.

That probably should have bothered her, seeing that death and destruction, but her eyes were latched on the man behind the wheel. Owen had come for her. Before the Italians could recover, he got out of the car with a gun drawn while a Declan got out of the other side and a group of his men flooded into the warehouse through the new hole.

She wanted to run straight to Owen, but bullets started to fly, and she wasn't an idiot. There wasn't a clear path to him, so she ducked behind some crates along the wall, and stayed low, silently praying to whoever might listen that she and Owen got out of this alive. The crates were all along one side of the warehouse, she moved in the direction of Owen and his men, staying crouched down to make sure she wasn't seen by the enemy.

It was slow going, and the shooting was starting to decrease before she was halfway there. Unable to deny her curiosity, she peeked at the scene just in this to see the Don and a couple of the others slip out the door she'd tried to get through. Apparently, they had a key.

She didn't like the guy got away, but she couldn't worry about that when the shooting suddenly ceased and Owen called out for her.

"Ruby?" he yelled, fear and desperation clear in his voice. She'd never heard him sound like that. "Ruby!"

She stood, running around the crate she was crouching behind and heading to him. Not caring who was watching, she threw herself into his arms, knowing that she was safe again.





## OWEN

Owen held Ruby tightly and willed his heart to stop trying to beat out of his chest. He'd seen her when he drove into the warehouse. She was standing there, alive and waiting for his rescue.

Then, the shooting started and he lost sight of her. He was so scared that she'd gotten caught in the crossfire that he nearly fell apart in front of everyone.

He pulled away from her just enough to look her over and assess for injuries. She seemed fine except for the wound on the side of her head. That explained the blood. Head wounds always bled a lot.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, her eyes welling with tears. "I was just so scared that I wouldn't see you again."

"I'll always come for you," he said, cupping her cheek and swiping a tear away when it rolled down her cheek.

Her eyes landed on the scrunchie on his wrist. The corner of her mouth quirked up, a shadow of her usually bright smile. "That's a new look for you."

"I took it from your room. I wanted a piece of you with me."

"He's not here," Declan said from behind him. "Mancini got away."

“Did we get Leo?” Owen asked, not looking away from Ruby’s face.

“I think I clipped him, but he’s not here.”

Owen sighed. Both of them got away. *For now.*

He would get his revenge for this, no matter how long it took.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” he told Ruby, pressing his forehead to hers. He didn’t care who was around to witness this tender moment between them. He was so damn relieved to have her back in his arms that it felt surreal, and he wasn’t ready to let go. “I swear, I’ll keep you safe from now on. Whatever it takes.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” The words came easy as he said them for the first time.

He pressed a kiss to her lips, short and sweet, and he was ready to get away from this death and chaos. Ruby didn’t belong here.

“Sir,” Ivan said tentatively, not wanting to interrupt. “We’ve checked the crates. It’s all our missing product.”

Owen finally turned away from Ruby, keeping an arm around her. She wasn’t getting more than a couple of inches away from him for a while.

“This area of the city is now Irish mafia territory,” he told his men. There were bodies scattered around, the Italians that they took out on display for anyone to see. For *Ruby* to see. He wanted to wrap this up and get her out of here. “I know that the warehouse district had been under Italian control forever, but I’m done with this shit. I’m ready to take the fight to them.”

There was a cheer from his men, showing their agreement with his decision. Everyone was sick of the Italian aggression. It was time to go to war.

Keeping Ruby at his side, he left the warehouse, ready to take her to his home for good. As good as it was to have her back, he knew that this was just the beginning. More trouble was on that horizon, but they would be ready for it.

## EPILOGUE

## RUBY

Two weeks after her abduction, Ruby woke up in the middle of the night with a gasp. It wasn't a nightmare about her experience that had her awaking like that. It was the damn alarm blaring through the house.

Beside her, Owen was already on the move. Ruby groaned.

*"Again?"* she had to shout to be heard over the alarm.

Owen just nodded with a grim expression, completely in the zone as he popped the magazine into his gun like some kind of badass action hero. He left the bedroom without a word as if he expected to go face down a league of Italians right outside the door.

The sound was one of the motion sensors he'd set up outside the house. Ever since she officially moved in with Owen, which was right after she was taken, he'd been so overprotective that she worried about his stress levels. It was sweet at first, the way he hovered over her and was so determined to keep her safe, but now it was starting to drive her a little crazy. He was just so over-the-top.

Like this outdoor motion sensor thing. She wasn't too concerned because the last time it went off, it ended up being a stray dog pooping on their lawn.

When Owen returned a few minutes later looking relaxed, she grinned. "What was it?"

“Rabbit.”

She shook her head as he got back into the bed. “Why don’t we just get rid of the outdoor sensors? We already have a top of the line security system in the house. No one is getting in here without us knowing.”

“I don’t want anyone getting near the house without us knowing. This is about your safety and there’s nothing more important than that.”

She couldn’t help rolling her eyes at his grumpy response. Smiling, she moved closer and trailed the tips of her fingers up his arm.

“But...aren’t I safe with you?”

“Of course, you are,” he replied immediately, the look in his eyes suggesting that he believed she was truly questioning that.

“Hey,” she said, straddling his lap and putting both hands on his cheeks to make sure he held her eyes and could see her sincerity. “I know that. It’s my point. You’re here, and I’m safe with you.”

His hands came to her ass, pulling her nightgown up. Ruby kissed along his jaw and nipped his ear. Owen groaned.

“I really should go reset the sensors,” he mumbled.

“Don’t leave me like this,” she said, grinding herself against his erection.

Suddenly, she was flipped onto her back. Reaching up under her nightgown, he ripped off her panties. Raising her leg up onto his shoulder, Owen pulled his cock out and plunged himself into her in one smooth thrust.

Ruby cried out in pleasure, her leg lifted like this allowing his cock to hit just the right spot inside of her to make her see stars.

“So fucking good,” Owen growled, riding her hard and fast. He was rough, and she loved every second of it.

Holding onto his arms, she threw her head back into the pillow and got into the pleasure of this. Owen was always amazing in bed, and she liked it best when he was like this, wild and raw. He took what he needed from her, and

it always sent her skyrocketing into orgasmic bliss. This was now different, and when it was over, she laid at his side, wrapped in his arms.

“How about a compromise?” she asked.

“Hmm?” he replied sleepily.

“The sensors. I say we keep them off.”

Owen sighed. “Ruby-”

“No, hear me out. Just when you’re home with me. We’ll keep the outdoor sensors off and...you’ll teach me more self defense.”

“I don’t know...you could get hurt while learning.”

“But my limited knowledge probably saved my life at the warehouse,” she pointed out. She’d filled him in on everything that happened when she was taken, and she knew it was a sore spot for him, but she also knew that she had a good point.

“Okay, fine,” he said. “You always seem to get your way, don’t you?”

She tilted her head back and kissed him, laughing. “That’s just because you love me.”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I do.”

Ruby was still smiling as she placed her head on his shoulder and slipped back to sleep.

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# **RUTHLESS GUARDIAN**

## BOOK 2 BLURB

**I'm not usually the kind of woman that attracts trouble...**

I spend most of my time at work or med school, and I don't have any enemies...

So, it comes as a complete shock when I'm abducted by the Italian mafia.

They want to put my medical knowledge to use.

I don't have much of a choice when I'm surrounded by armed men.

But when they dump me back at home as if nothing ever happened, I know that I can't let them get away with it.

That decision leads me to Brogan.

He's part of the Irish mafia,

Who happen to be the enemies of the men that took me.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?

But Brogan quickly becomes more than that.

Going from bodyguard to lover, he shows me how protective and caring he can be.

But he keeps me at a distance when we're not in bed together, an annoying sense of honor making him believe he's not good enough for me because of

the violence in his past.

What he doesn't know is that I have a secret, one that will change both of our lives in about nine months.

Between a mafia war, med school, and pregnancy, I have a lot to worry about.

But my biggest fear is that this tough mafia man will break my heart in the end.

*Will he open his heart and let me in? Or am I going to raise our child alone, pining for a man that has more good in him than he thinks?*

**RUTHLESS GUARDIAN is Book Two in the "Vengeance & Vows" series, a thrilling mafia romance that will leave you breathless. Join Amy and Brogan, as they navigate the treacherous waters of the mafia and fight to protect the ones they love. Don't miss out on this heart-pounding adventure!**

**[Click Here To Read Book 2](#)**

**SNEAK PEAK**

## RUTHLESS GUARDIAN (CHAPTER 1)

*Amy*

Five a.m. came way too quickly. Amy felt like she'd just closed her eyes when the blaring of the alarm clock pulled her from sleep. She groaned as she slapped the snooze button, knowing that she wasn't going to take advantage of the extra nine minutes it could give her.

She needed to get up and moving, or she would be late. She was supposed to open up Wilbur's Coffee Shop in an hour.

She moved around her room quietly as she got dressed, not wanting to wake up either of her roommates. Crossing to her desk, she picked up her pathology textbook and shoved into her backpack along with three other massive books covering topics she was learning in med school. She'd be spending her breaks at a table in the coffee shop, studying.

It was usually cool in the early morning, so she pulled a hoodie over her head before she slipped out of the apartment, locking the door behind her. The building was mostly quiet at this time of day, though she did hear a baby crying in one of the apartments as she waited for the elevator.

The building was old, and the elevator had broken down three times this year, but she made it to the ground floor with no trouble. It was still dark out as she stepped out onto the sidewalk. Even at this time of day, there were some cars on the street, but she didn't pay much attention to them as she headed for the parking lot. There were no other people in sight.

Her backpack was so heavy that it was already making her shoulders ache. She thought about the massage she got last month, an uncommon treat that she gave herself as a reward for making the Dean's list. It wasn't cheap but God, it was amazing to have someone work out the tension in her muscles. Money was tight, but maybe she'd splurge on another one soon.

Amy was so distracted by thoughts of a deep tissue massage that she didn't even sense the danger nearby until it was too late.

She'd just reached her car and opened the backseat to put her backpack inside when the sound of metal sliding across metal came from right behind her. Her brain barely registered that someone just opened the door of the van parked next to her before a hand clamped over her mouth.

Panic flooded her system immediately, and she tried to jerk away from whoever was behind her, but a strong arm came around her chest, dragging her backward. Her arms flailed out wildly, but there was nothing for her to grab onto. Amy kicked out with her legs too, but all she managed to do was shut her own car door.

She tried to scream, despite the arm around her chest making it difficult to draw in a full breath, but the sound was muffled by the hand still clamped over her mouth.

"Get her in the van," a man's voice came from nearby, but it wasn't the one holding her.

*Oh, God.*

If she ended up in that van, she'd probably never be seen again.

Desperation made her fight harder, and she reached back to try to do some damage to the man that grabbed her. My hand closed on this hair, and I pulled with all my strength, drawing a pained cry from the lips of the man.

But he didn't loosen his grip on her. If anything, he held Amy tighter, making it hard to breathe.

She bowed her back and jerked her head from side-to-side, trying anything she could to get loose. The apartment building was so close, and there were so many people inside. If she could just make a run for it...

When a man moved to stand in front of her, all hope of escape was extinguished. He was huge, tall and heavyset. But the thing that really made an impression was the cold humor in his eyes. As if this was a game or something.

He was fucking abducting her and looked like he was having fun.

Anger and fear mixed together to make her reckless. Lifting her foot again, she kicked the man as hard as she could right in his bulging stomach.

The act forced the man behind her backward, and they went tumbling into the damn van together, but not before she saw the big guy doubled over, his breath leaving him in a *whoosh*. His eyes met hers, and the rage she saw there made her heart sink.

*Did I just make things worse for myself?* That hardly seemed possible, but she pulled it off.

As soon as that thought crossed her mind, her world went black. Someone in the van shoved a black bag over her head. The hand on her mouth and the arm around her chest disappeared just as she heard the van door slide shut. She was officially trapped in this van.

Amy took several big gulps of air while her arms wrenched behind her back and secured with a plastic zip tie that bit into the skin of her wrists.

Opening her mouth wide, she let out an ear-splitting scream.

It didn't last long. A blow to the side of her head knocked her onto her side on the hard metal floor of the van, and she let out a grunt of pain.

"Shut up," a voice hissed.

The van started moving, and she could feel despair threatening to overwhelm her. What did these men want from her? She was flat broke and had no family, so they weren't likely to get a ransom, if that was what they were hoping for.

Or maybe this was about something else? It sure didn't feel like a crime of opportunity. These guys were waiting for her. If she was targeted, they had



to know that she wasn't going to be their ticket to a big payday, and she hated to think of what else they could want her for.

This was a nightmare.

But she had to keep my head on straight. As tempting as it was to give in to the panic and fear, Amy knew that wasn't going to help her. She'd likely just get hysterical, and she didn't need another blow to the head on top of everything else.

She just needed to think. The van turned to the right, and she figured they were leaving the parking lot. Okay, she'd try to keep track of the turns and guess where they were taking her. Then, if she saw an opportunity to escape, she'd have an idea of where to go.

It was a weak plan, but it was all she had and focusing on a solution made her feel a little better, a little more in control in a completely out of control situation. This whole thing was still terrifying, but she couldn't let myself assume she was doomed. She wasn't going to just lay down and become another statistic.

*Twenty-something woman goes missing and is never heard from again. Probably the victim of human trafficking.*

Nope. Not her. She wouldn't stop fighting until she got away from these creeps.

They turned again, to the left this time, and it was sharp, making her slide to the right until her back was pressed against the toe of someone's boot. That got her thinking about how many men were in the van with her.

There was the one that grabbed her. She didn't see him, but he was strong. Then, the big guy she already pissed off by kicking. Then, she assumed there was a driver.

So, three? Maybe more.

God, she hated that she couldn't see anything. It made it so much harder to keep her panic under control. She tried to focus on my breathing. In and out. In and out.

“This better work,” one of the men in the back of the van with her muttered. “If Leo doesn’t pull through, the boss will probably kill you for suggesting it.”

“Me? I’m not the one that shot him.” That second voice came from right above where she was laying on the floor. It belonged to the owner of the boot. Was it the man that dragged her into the van? There was something familiar about it, like she might know the guy. But who in the hell was it?

“Maybe not, but you’re the one that talked him into this stupid plan.”

Plan? What plan? Someone was shot?

“The normal doc we use is out of the fucking country. Someone had to come up with an idea.”

Her thoughts were a confused jumble as a little voice she couldn’t quite suppress in the back of her mind kept screaming at her to run or fight or do *something* to get the hell away from these men. From her studies of human physiology, she knew that was her fight-or-flight response pushing her body into a reaction that wouldn’t truly help her in a situation like this. Flight was impossible in a moving vehicle and fighting at least three men wasn’t an option even if her hands weren’t secured behind her back and she could see.

*Focus on breathing.*

She was panting without realizing it, and she forced herself to take in a deep breath, thankful that the black fabric covering her head wasn’t too thick. As she exhaled, the truck took another left turn, and she inwardly cursed. She had no idea how much time had passed since the last turn, so it really did her no good to track them. With her mind racing and her heart pounding against her ribcage, the passage of minutes felt distorted. It could have been five minutes or twenty.

“I’ve never seen Mancini so pissed,” a new voice said. It sounded further away than the other two. The driver, maybe? “I guess the Irish are calming the warehouse district now.”

“Fuck,” the familiar voice muttered. “I guess moving against them was a bad idea.”

“Don’t let him hear you criticize him,” a new voice growled. “He’ll put a bullet between your eyes for that.”

So, there were four of them. Her chances of getting away from them got worse and worse by the minute. And the things they were talking about...

What kind of twisted shit were these guys mixed up in? It sounded like some kind of underground criminal organization crap she’d seen in movies.

*Well, they must be based on reality more than I realized.*

She hadn’t moved in a while, and her shoulder was starting to hurt from the way she was laying, but she was afraid to even adjust her position. The men weren’t paying any attention to her, and she wanted it to stay that way. She wasn’t sure why they took her, but something in her gut told her this wasn’t a normal abduction. They talked about a plan, and she had a feeling she was a part of it.

But why her? And what could they want if not money or her body?

The van suddenly slowed down, and Amy’s throat felt tight as it came to a stop. This was it. Whatever destiny awaited her, she was about to find out.

The door of the van was opened again and rough hands pulled her out. She didn’t even try to resist this time, despite the way the taste of fresh air through the thin black fabric flooded her system with adrenaline that urged her to flee.

It wasn’t the right time. She’d get nowhere in this condition. So, she stumbled along as a man with a bruising grip on her bicep dragged her forward. She was led up steps and the creak of a door opening met her ears.

The black bag was whipped off her head with no warning, and Amy blinked as her eyes adjusted to the brightness of the room and took in the strange scene in front of her. She was standing in a normal-looking living room. The walls were a light blue color and the gray couch and loveseat were facing a big TV mounted on the wall above the fireplace. The navy curtains were closed, but she could see faint sunlight peeking in around the edges, indicating that they’d been in the van long enough for the sun to rise.

It could have been anyone's house - a family home perhaps - if it wasn't for the five scary as hell men in the room, staring at her. She recognized one of them as the big man that she kicked, and he glowered at her from where he was leaning against the wall.

All of them were dressed in black and she counted three handguns in sight, but there was no doubt in her mind that they were all armed. Amy's knees felt weak as her eyes darted around. Aside from the big angry guy, there were two men on the couch, sitting at opposite ends, one on the loveseat, and one standing in the doorway leading to the kitchen with his arms crossed over his chest.

Each and every one of them were giving off aggressive vibes. It was in the way they glared at her and held themselves, even the ones sitting down. They all looked ready to fight at a moment's notice. If it was an intimidation technique, it worked. She swallowed hard.

She'd almost forgotten about the man holding her arm until he released his grip on her and the blood flowing made her limb tingle. Turning to him, she felt her breath catch in her throat.

She knew this man.

Kind of.

He was her co-worker's boyfriend. He came into the coffee shop sometimes to see Wendy, and Amy had always been uncomfortable around him. He was loud-mouthed and cocky, and she'd seen Wendy with bruises on her wrist once that looked suspiciously like a handprint.

Much like the ones she'd probably now have on her arm.

What was this guy's name? She struggled to remember for a moment before it came to her.

"Matteo?"

His jaw clenched when she said his name, as if it made him angry that she knew who he was.

“Shut up,” he snapped as she pulled out a switchblade. Her heart stopped for a moment, but he just used it to cut the zip tie binding her. “Come with me.”

He started to reach for her arm again, but Amy jerked backward as she rubbed her wrists, the skin red and sore.

“Lead the way,” she said tensely. She didn’t have much of a choice other than to go along with this for now.

Matteo turned to a hallway leading off the living room, and she followed, nibbling on her lower lip nervously. There were doors lining the right side of the hallway, and they passed two before Matteo paused and pushed open the third.

It was a bedroom, and there were two more men in here. She stepped inside behind Matteo, her eyes on the man in the bed. He was hurt somehow, based on the way his face was scrunched up in pain. His brow was wet with sweat, even though it was cool in here, and his breathing was heavy.

“Is this the doctor?”

Amy’s attention was drawn to the other man in the room as he asked the question. He was standing by the bed with his hands tucked into the pocket of his black suit. His dark eyes were trained on her, and his mouth was a thin line as he frowned at her.

*Doctor?*

“No,” she said, noting that this man was older than the others here. There were fine wrinkles around his eyes and he had salt and pepper hair. “I’m not a doctor.”

“She’s almost a doctor,” Matteo butted in, shooting a dirty look, as if she’d said something wrong. “My girl says she’s in med school.”

*Oh.*

That was why she was here? To treat this man for some kind of injury?

“You’re going to help my son,” the older man said with all the authority of someone that was used to getting his way. “If he makes it, you’ll be

returned home.”

She swallowed hard around the lump in her throat. “And if he doesn’t?”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Ice raced down her spine.

“Let’s just say, he’d better make it.”

The threat was clear. Her life depended on how this turned out.

Damn it, why did her manager have to hire Wendy three months ago? The woman sucked at her job and now her boyfriend had dragged Amy into some kind of seedy bullshit.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

There was no point in throwing herself a pity party. The terms of this arrangement had been clearly laid out. She had to help the guy in the bed, who was probably in the mob or something, if she had to guess.

Whatever. If she was going to be a doctor, she was obligated to treat anyone that needed it, so she might as well get this over with.

“He’s been shot in the left side,” the older man said.

Amy let out a long exhale. That didn’t sound good. Approaching the bed slowly, she saw Matteo and the older man tense in her peripheral vision, but no one moved to stop her as she lifted up the blanket. The man’s shirt had been removed, and a towel had been pressed against his side secured in place by duct tape that wrapped tightly around his abdomen three times.

“Uh, what is this?” she asked. The towel was white, which made the dark red blood that had seeped through even more jarring in contrast.

“One of my men did that to apply pressure to the wound and stop the bleeding,” the older man said.

“Is the bullet still inside of him?” she asked, her mind running through all the ways she’d read about treating a bullet wound. She’d never actually done it before, but she was going to have to figure it out.

“No,” Matteo said. “I looked at it before he was taped up. The bullet ripped through his side, but not deep enough to get lodged inside.”

Amy nodded, forcing her mind to focus on the problem at hand and not the threat against her life. She was good at that sort of thing; compartmentalizing things so that she could line up her priorities and get things done

She turned to Matteo. “You should probably cut the duct tape so I can see what I’m working with. Is there a bathroom nearby where I can wash my hands?”

“Across the hall,” the older man answered.

She didn’t waste time. Rushing across the hall, she closed the door behind herself and headed for the window next to the sink. The glass was frosted, preventing her from seeing out, and when she tried to open it, the thing didn’t budge. She was dismayed to realize that it was nailed shut.

No escape that way.

Cursing under her breath, she washed her hands and returned to the bedroom. Matteo had removed the tape and towel, revealing the wound she was dealing with. Matteo was right, the bullet ripped through the man’s side, but it technically grazed him. There was no entrance or exit wound. It was just a jagged hole in the man’s side and she was going to have to stitch up. It wouldn’t be pretty, but she could do it. Meeting the man’s eyes, she could see that they were hazy.

“Has he been drugged?” she asked.

“We gave him a pain killer,” the older man answered.

“So, you have access to medical supplies?”

“I can get my hands on anything.”

His cocky response made her want to roll her eyes, but she held it back and focused on rattling off the supplies she would need to clean and stitch up the wound. She asked for antibiotics too.

Matteo left the room, but the older man stayed behind, watching her with curious eyes. Amy sighed.

“I don’t suppose you plan to introduce yourself?” she asked, exasperated. There was a straight-backed chair in the corner, and she pulled it up next to the bed to take a seat. “I assume you know who I am.”

He nodded. “Amy Jacobs.”

She waited for a moment, but he didn’t continue. The sound of a train distracted her, and she wondered for a moment just where they were. It sounded close. Her eyes darted to the window, but the curtains were pulled closed in here too.

“Rocco Mancini.”

Amy blinked and returned her attention to him. “What?”

“My name,” he said. “It’s Rocco Mancini.”

*Mancini*. That was the name mentioned in the van. Based on the way the men spoke about him and the powerful aura he emitted, she guessed this was the guy in charge. And he said her patient was his son.

The stakes just kept getting higher and higher.

She didn’t know what to say after that. It wasn’t exactly a pleasure to meet the guy.

“I’m Leo,” her patient said, his voice little more than a pained groan.

She regarded him, wondering what he was doing when he was shot. Was someone defending themselves? Was it another criminal?

Matteo returned sooner than she expected, and she started by giving Leo an injection of penicillin. The next shot went right next to the wound to numb the area. Cleaning it and stitching it up would hurt like hell without it. She was a little ashamed to realize that she didn’t really care how much it hurt him. It went against what was expected of her as a doctor, but she decided not to give herself too hard of a time. She was under a lot of stress, after all.

When she pictured treating patients as a doctor, it wasn’t as an abducted person with a threat against her life hanging over her head. Leo tensed and sucked in a sharp breath as she gave him the local anesthetic, but he relaxed



just minutes later. Prodding his wound, she looked for evidence of pain, but he couldn't feel a thing.

She got to work cleaning the injury under the watchful eyes of Matteo and Mancini. No one spoke. Leo even fell asleep, finally getting relief from the pain while the wound was numb.

The silence seemed thick with tension, and Amy felt like she was in danger of being attacked at any moment if these mobbed-up jerks didn't like something she did. It took all of her concentration to keep her hands steady as she started to sew up the wound.

It took longer than she expected, both due to the uneven edges of the wound and her nerves making her move more slowly. When she was finally done, she leaned back in her chair with a sigh.

"Are you finished? Is he going to be okay?"

Mancini actually seemed concerned as he questioned her. She nodded.

"Yes. I don't see any signs that he lost too much blood. He's been stitched up and the shot I gave him should help with any potential infections. If you can get your hands on some pills, he should probably take antibiotics for a week."

"That won't be a problem."

She stood, relieved that she was able to pull this off.

"Keep the bandage on for two days, and he'll need the stitches for a couple of weeks." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other while the men stared at her. "So...can I go?"

Mancini looked at his son. "Not yet. I want you to stick around until he wakes up. If he's doing okay when the sun goes down, I'll have you dropped off at your apartment."

Her heart sank. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand to see that only a couple of hours had passed. She was going to have to spend all day here?

"But he'll be fine-" she started, but Mancini cut her off.

“I’ve made my decision,” he snapped. “Let’s go while he rests.”

Amy was led back downstairs where the men were still in the living room, watching TV and chatting. She didn’t know what to do with herself. She wasn’t going to sit next to any of them.

If only she had her cell phone with her, she could go to the bathroom and call the police. She didn’t know where she was, but they could trace those calls, right?

But she tucked the iPhone into the side pocket of her backpack this morning, so it was in the backseat of her car, completely useless to her. Mancini went outside, and as the door opened, she considered trying to make a run for it, but she wasn’t stupid. These guys would catch her fast.

Her eyes gazed longingly at the glimpse of the outside world she had as Mancini slipped out, and she realized that she could see the Donovan Hotel in the distance between trees that lined the street outside. It was a landmark building downtown. She must have been outside the city.

She wandered into the dining room, where the men could still see her with the open floor plan, and took a seat. She knew instinctively that they wouldn’t want her out of their sight. Settling in, she didn’t have anything to do but wait.

The minutes stretched into hours, and she spent the whole time edge, just waiting for something to happen. It was amazing how normal these guys seemed, considering that most of them spent their morning abducting her. They came and went. Watching TV or messing on their phones when they were at the house, and she got the impression that they were guarding Leo. And her, of course. Even if it seemed like they weren’t paying any attention to her, she knew they were very much aware of her presence.

Someone brought fast food to the house in the afternoon, and Amy was so hungry that she didn’t hesitate to eat the burger Matteo tossed at her.

Leo woke up not long after that, and she was summoned upstairs. Mancini had left the house hours ago, but Matteo stuck around and watched her as she examined the wound. She didn’t see signs of an infection forming, but

she had Leo take the pills now on his nightstand anyway. Matteo also gave him another pain pill.

Three hours later, the sun was setting as Mancini finally returned. There were three men in the living room as he strode into the house, and they all straightened their spines like they were soldiers suddenly in the presence of their general. He ignored them.

Setting his sights on amy, still sitting in the dining room, he gave her a cold grin. "It looks like it's time to go home, Miss Jacobs."

"Y-you're really taking me back?"

She'd been thinking about it over the last few hours, and she wasn't sure if she dared to believe such a thing. She's seen faces and learned names. Wouldn't they hide that sort of thing if they had any intention to let her go?

Mancini's grin widened. "I'm a man of my word. But let me reassure you of this," he knelt down so that his face right in front of her as he loomed over her, "if you dare to breathe a word of this to *anyone*, my boys will come get you again. This time, you'll end up at the bottom of Lake Kissinkki. Once my guys are done with you, I mean."

Amy's blood ran cold. "I won't. I won't say anything."

Matteo closed in from the side and the black bag was shoved onto her head again. Her anxiety spiked, but she didn't fight this time as she was dragged out of her chair and outside of the house.

The van ride felt longer this time. They were either taking a longer route or it just felt that way because she was so eager to get away from these men. When the van stopped and the door slid open, the hood yanked off her head and she almost sobbed with relief. She was in the parking lot of her building again. As she was shoved out, she nearly lost her footing but was able to catch herself on the hood of her own car.

The tires of the van screeched as it drove away, and Amy didn't even look back at it. Grabbing her backpack from the car, with her keys and cell phone inside, she run into the building, ignoring the stares of people she passed in the lobby along the way. She took the stairs, unwilling to wait for

the elevator. When she reached her apartment, she fumbled with her keys, her hands shaking.

Now that she was back, all the terror that she'd been pushing down all day to get through the situation bubbled up to the surface. When she finally got inside the apartment, she locked the door with the deadbolt behind her and went straight to her room, even though her roommates were out. She locked that door too. Then, Amy sank onto her bed, trembling.

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