

Chapter One

Astrid

Sunlight spills across the hardwood floors of *Ines's Atelier*, turning every corner into a painting. The place smells like citrus soap and turpentine, bright and biting at the same time. The walls are a riot of color with handwoven baskets from the islands, local watercolors, racks of canvas and brushes arranged in a kind of cheerful chaos.

It's impossible to be in here and stay pissed off. Trust me, I've tried.

I tuck a stray curl back into the sloppy pineapple bun perched on top of my head, knot my wrap skirt tighter around my hips, and flash a too-wide smile at the couple browsing the acrylics. Tourists, judging by the way the guy's socks are halfway up his calves and the girl keeps snapping photos of the price tags like they're museum exhibits.

"Let me know if you need anything," I chirp, voice sweet enough to rot teeth.

My phone buzzes in my apron pocket. I duck behind the register, flipping it out with one hand while pretending to reorganize the counter display. Olivia's name lights up the screen.

"Boss lady," I say, answering with a grin. "Miss me already?"

Her laugh crackles through the speaker. "Always. Listen, I just wanted to say the frames you ordered are perfect. They're going to make the shelter's fundraiser look so good. Thank you, Astrid."

A weird little knot forms in my chest. I don't do well with genuine praise. It itches under my skin like a sweater I can't peel off.

"Don't get soft on me now, Liv," I tease. "Next thing you know, you'll be sending me edible arrangements and shit."

Olivia snorts. "No promises. I'll call later, okay? Big news coming."

I hang up with a shake of my head, shoving the phone back into my apron.

Big news. Probably another project I'll throw myself into so I don't have to think about the other, messier parts of my life.

I tuck the phone away, but for a few seconds, I just stand there behind the counter, fingers resting on the cool edge of the register.

Olivia's voice still echoes in my ear—bright, steady. A tether I didn't realize I'd been gripping so tightly until she tugged it.

Most people come into your life like rainstorms. Loud, messy, and leaving wreckage behind.

Olivia drifted in like mist. Quiet, and unassuming. You breathe her in before you even realize she's there. And once she is, there's no shaking her loose.

She never asked me for the ugly pieces. Never tried to dig through the wreckage I'd buried under a thousand smiles.

And in return, I never asked her why she showed up in Honolulu with a borrowed name and eyes that never stopped scanning exits.

We built something between us anyway on silence and stubbornness, on the unspoken agreement that trust didn't need a birth certificate to be real.

I'd bleed for her.

I suspect she'd do the same.

I shake the thoughts off, rolling my shoulders back until the sunshine mask slips neatly into place again.

"Was that your secret girlfriend?" Beth calls from the aisle where she's alphabetizing paint sets. She's wearing a pair of glittery cat-eye glasses that clash fantastically with her neon yellow apron.

"Jealous?" I quip, grabbing a handful of pens that need restocking.

Beth sticks her tongue out. "Only because you clearly have more game than me."

I'm mid-eye roll when the door chimes and the air fucking shifts.

I don't have to look up to know it's him.

The energy snaps taut, like a rubber band stretched to the point of breaking. A wall of heavy, black presence fills the shop, smothering the sun-drenched vibe under the heel of a boot.

I glance up, and yep—there he is.

Rocco.

He's standing there with his broad shoulders wrapped in a fitted black t-shirt, tattoos peeking from under the sleeves like smoke. Cargo pants cover his legs like he's about to kick down a door. His feet are fitted into combat boots tracking a trail of dried mud across Ines's freshly scrubbed floors. His shaved head glints under the sunbeams slashing through the windows. And his scar—Christ, that scar running down the side of his cheek catches the light just enough to look like a blade carved him open.

He doesn't smile.

He never fucking smiles.

Instead, he just stands there like a damn storm cloud, dark eyes scanning the room like he's memorizing every exit, and weakness.

I plaster on my brightest, most obnoxiously cheerful grin.

"Well, if it isn't Captain Sunshine," I call out, loud enough for Beth to snort behind a display of sketchbooks. "Welcome to the happiest place on earth."

Rocco's gaze cuts to me, sharp and assessing. There's no amusement or irritation in those steel gray eyes. Just that blank, unnerving stare he's perfected so well it should come with a warning label.

I sashay out from behind the counter, twirling a pen between my fingers like a baton. "What can I do for you, big guy? Need a glitter pen? Maybe a nice set of watercolors for your murder journal?"

His mouth almost twitches, but he doesn't take the bait.

"Frames," he says, voice like gravel rolling downhill. "Olivia's order. They're late."

I press a hand to my chest, feigning shock. "Late? Impossible. I run a tight ship here at the S.S. Sparkle Shack."

"Not tight enough," he says flatly.

God, he's such an asshole.

"Let me check the system," I chirp, spinning back toward the register with an exaggerated swing of my hips, just to piss him off.

His gaze drags over me, slow and deliberate, and for one reckless second, my skin prickles with awareness.

Nope.

Not going there.

That's a highway to hell with no exits.

I hammer at the keyboard, pretending not to notice how close he gets, how the heat of him makes the tiny hairs at the back of my neck stand on end.

"You're in luck," I announce brightly. "Shipment came in this morning. They're in the back. But if you want them, you're gonna have to help carry them out. Big strong guy like you shouldn't mind a little heavy lifting, right?"

He just stares at me. No blink or shift. Just steady, suffocating intensity that makes it feel like the floor's tilting under my feet.

I smile wider. It's either that or punch him.

"Unless you're scared of getting glitter on your scary boots," I add, winking.

Beth snickers from behind a shelf.

Rocco exhales slowly, like he's making a conscious decision not to strangle me right here and now.

(Which, honestly, fair.)

"Lead the way," he growls.

I spin on my heel, leading him toward the storeroom, already plotting exactly how much more I can needle him before he snaps.

The truth is, poking the bear is safer than letting him see how he actually makes me feel raw, exposed, and unsteady in ways I can't afford. Or admitting I want said Bear to pin me to the wall and have his way with me.

I'd rather set the world on fire than let a man like Rocco know he has that kind of power over me.

The storeroom smells like cardboard, citrus cleaner, and whatever candle Ines knocked off a shelf last week. It's cramped, stacked high with inventory, the air heavy with dust and too many unspoken things.

Rocco ducks under the doorframe like the space resents having him in it. His boots thud against the concrete, echoing too loud in the tight space.

I gesture toward the shelf. "Frames are over there, behind the rainbow yarn and the unicorn stickers. Very intimidating."

He doesn't crack a smile. Just moves past me with all the grace of a loaded weapon, every step calculated, deliberate.

"You know," I muse, arms folded as I lean against the shelves, "for someone who looks like a henchman from a Bond film, you're surprisingly good at silent judgment. Ever consider a career as a professional glarer?"

He crouches in front of a box, peeling the packing tape with fingers that look like they could break necks and thread needles with equal ease.

"You know that you talk a lot right?" he mutters.

"Only when I'm nervous," I shoot back. "Or bored. Or trapped in a small space with a human thundercloud."

The corner of his mouth ticks. That's the second almost-smile today. If I get three, I'm buying a lottery ticket.

He lifts the box of frames like it weighs nothing. Muscles bunch under his shirt, tattoos shifting with the movement, and I hate the way my stomach flips.

"You good?" he asks.

I blink. "Huh?"

"With your staring problem."

My cheeks go hot, but I recover fast. "Please. I was mentally redesigning your wardrobe. Step one: color. Step two: sleeves."

He turns, box balanced on one shoulder. "Done?"

"Not even close," I mutter, grabbing a smaller box and following him back toward the shop.

We push through the swinging door, the bell giving an annoyed jingle like it knows we've been up to no good. Beth raises an eyebrow as we re-enter. I toss her a look that says later.

Rocco sets the box down near the counter without a sound. His body doesn't make unnecessary noise. It's like even gravity respects him.

He turns to leave. "You already know the address to deliver them to. I've got something to attend to."

I don't know what the hell comes over me, but I call after him.

"Hey, Rocco."

He pauses. One boot already out the door.

"If you ever need help alphabetizing your murder victims or testing out scary glares, I'm your girl."

He looks over his shoulder. "Noted."

The door shuts behind him, but the heat of him lingers like smoke.

Beth whistles low. "You've got it bad."

I shove the box toward her. "I've got indigestion."

"Sure," she hums. "Indigestion with biceps and a felony record."

I don't respond. If I open my mouth, I might say something honest.

Lord knows, I'm not ready for that kind of vulnerability.

My attention snaps to a kid who's maybe four or five as he comes tearing around the corner of an aisle, his sneakers skidding on the polished floor. His elbow clips a precarious tower of glass bottles stacked near the window.

The crash is inevitable; If I stayed still. I move before I think.

Before anyone else in the shop even gasps.

Two long strides and I'm there, one hand grabbing the bottle mid-fall, the other steadying the kid with a firm but careful grip.

Glass doesn't shatter.

The boy blinks up at me, wide-eyed and gaping, like he's not sure if he's about to be scolded or hugged.

"Easy there, Speed Racer," I tease, ruffling his damp hair. "This ain't the Daytona 500."

His mother rushes over, apologies tumbling out of her mouth. I smile and wave them off, tossing a wink at the boy before handing him off gently.

Beth's jaw hangs open, but she snaps it shut with a nervous laugh, picking up a few stray bottles from the floor.

Everyone else in the shop goes back to browsing, the near disaster already fading into just another moment.

My skin prickles and I turn.

Rocco is standing at the door. I thought he left. He's staring at me, arms crossed over his chest, eyes narrowed into thin slits.

That wasn't normal.

Not for a shop girl or for anyone who's supposed to be harmless.

I paste a sugary smile onto my face and throw him a cheeky salute. "Guess all those years of waitressing taught me good reflexes, huh?"

A lie so flimsy it flaps in the breeze between us.

For a second, his gaze sharpens. Like he sees past the smiles, colors, the laughter and the jokes to the thing underneath.

I turn away before he can strip me bare with his stare, pretending to rearrange a display of metallic paints.

But inside, my heart jackhammers against my ribs, my pulse spiking for reasons that have nothing to do with fear.

I wipe my hands on my apron, pretending to be busy, pretending I don't know he's there, pretending that I'm not watching through the curtain the second the bell above the door stops swinging.

Rocco doesn't walk away immediately.

He lingers.

Stands there on the sidewalk, cigarette tucked between two fingers, smoke curling around him like a ghost.

His brows are furrowed, and his shoulders are tense.

Like he's still trying to figure out what the fuck he just saw.

I clutch the hidden wooden bracelet beneath my sleeve, the familiar ridges digging into my palm. A tether and reminder of who I'm supposed to be.

I came here to disappear.

To be the sunshine girl no one looked too closely at.

And yet, a part of me buried deep and still somehow alive thrills at the idea of being seen.

Truly seen.

Even if the man doing the seeing looks like he could tear my whole world apart.

Maybe especially because of that.

Chapter Two

Rocco

The ocean gnaws at the rocks below, a steady, guttural sound that fills the hollow spaces inside me.

Same as every morning.

I sit where I always do—on the battered iron chair facing east, a cigarette burning down between my fingers. The metal's cold against my skin, the salt-heavy air clinging to the sheen of sweat slicked across my chest.

The first light creeps over the water, casting the world in bruised colors of deep purple, bruised blue, and angry gold.

It doesn't touch the room behind me.

The estate is quiet at this hour, the others are still dead to the world or pretending they don't bleed like the rest of us. My quarters sit on the edge of the property, a deliberate choice. There's fewer walls and fewer eyes here.

Inside, it's all bare floors and iron weights scattered like forgotten sins. An ashtray half-full of crushed cigarettes. A punching bag hanging like a broken promise.

There's no paintings, photos, or anything soft.

I don't need soft. Soft gets you killed.

My gaze drifts down to the burn scars carved across my left shoulder, pale against darker skin. A souvenir from a time when I was young enough to think loyalty meant safety.

Below it, the ink sprawls across my ribs, the curling flames of the fires that ruined my life twice reworked years ago into the wings of a phoenix.

A lie I tell myself every day. I'll rise, endure, and burn it all if I have to.

I take a long drag off the cigarette, the smoke scraping raw down my throat, and exhale slow.

Astrid's laugh cuts through my memory without warning—bright, sharp, and fucking reckless.

I scowl, grinding the cigarette into the ashtray hard enough to hear it snap.

I should've ignored her, walked into that ridiculous little shop, gotten the information I needed, and left without so much as a nod.

I'm supposed to be treating her like I treat everyone else; as an obstacle, a liability, or a problem to solve.

Too bad she didn't play by the rules.

All color and noise, clad in that stupid wrap skirt, talking too loud, and smiling too much.

As though she thought the world wasn't the sharp, hungry thing I know it to be.

It's a mask. I know it is.

I saw it slip.

That move was fast, precise, and instinctive.

It's not the kind of thing you learn waiting tables or selling art supplies to tourists with more money than sense.

She moved like someone who'd been trained, who knew what glass could do to soft flesh, and who'd had to move like that before.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, the floorboards creaking under the shift of my weight.

Who the fuck are you, Astrid? Because you're not what you pretend to be.

And I don't like not knowing what's hiding in plain sight.

I should walk away. I should report the delay, focus on the cartel business, and keep my head down.

But something about her gets under my skin in hot and reckless way that makes my carefully constructed world feel even emptier than usual.

And worse, some fucked-up part of me doesn't want to walk away.

There's a part of me that wants to peel that sunshine smile off her face and see what's bleeding underneath.

I push off the chair, rolling my shoulders until the scar pulls tight. Then I grab another cigarette, light it with a practiced flick, inhale deep.

The burn steadies and anchors me.

There's only two kinds of people in this world—predators and prey.

I know which one I am. I know what it costs to pretend otherwise.

Astrid Emroy better figure it out too before someone worse than me notices the cracks she's trying so hard to hide or before I decide to find out just how deep they run.

The cigarette burns too close to my fingers before I notice.

I let it sear for a moment, skin singing, before flicking it into the tray.

Pain reminds me I'm still here.

That the past didn't kill me, no matter how many nights I begged it to.

I push to my feet, the boards creaking under my weight, and head toward the back of the room where the heavy bag waits.

My knuckles are bruised from yesterday, ribs aching from a fight I picked on purpose just so I could pound someone into the ground.

Nothing strips the noise out of my head like blood and repetition.

I start slow.

Jab. Cross. Hook.

My body remembers even when the mind doesn't want to. Sweat drips from my jaw, falling silently to the floor.

It's only after the second round that the memories come, thick and choking, like they always do.

I was twenty-one. Stupid, hungry and believed I was invincible.

She wore yellow the day the warehouse went up in flames.

A thin sundress, sticky with sweat, laughing as she taunted me for being late and told me I was the only person in this rotten world who ever showed up for her.

She said it like a joke. I should have known it would become a curse.

I loved her the way only broken men can love—like she was the last cigarette in a burning building, the last sip of water after a week in the desert.

I loved her desperately, and dangerously.

Yet, I failed her.

The explosion tore through the warehouse with a sound I still hear when it's too quiet.

The heat slammed into me, knocked the air out of my lungs, peeled the skin off my back.

I crawled through smoke and rubble, screaming her name until my voice gave out only to find what was left of her. A cheap necklace I gave her. Her body was gone without a trace. The stupid necklace should have burnt all the way to hell and left her for me.

Her scream, a sound not made for human throats, echoing between the metal beams as the fire swallowed her whole still haunts me.

I punched my fists bloody on the ground of that fucking place, sobbing like a child, promising things to a God I stopped believing in a long time ago.

Pain married rage that night. I haven't been whole since.

A sharp knock at the door pulls me back.

I wipe the sweat from my face, chest heaving, and bark, "Yeah?"

Jason steps in.

He's young blood with square shoulders, dark hair cropped close, the unmistakable gait of a man who's willing to break bones even without a signal.

He gives me a once-over, eyes flicking from my bare chest to the blood smeared on my knuckles, and says nothing.

Jason knows better than to comment on what he doesn't understand.

"There was a breach last night," he says instead in a low voice. "Small group. Near the coast."

"Rivals?"

He shrugs, but there's tension in his jaw. "Could be. Could be drunk kids. No signs they made it past the second perimeter."

I nod, but something twists in my gut.

Coincidences don't exist in my world.

"No sign of trouble near town," he continues. "But I'll keep an eye."

I grunt, and he hesitates like there's something else he's not sure he should say.

Finally, he mutters, "The big man wants a word when you're done brooding."

I let out a low, humorless laugh.

"Tell him I'll be right there."

Jason gives a short nod and steps out, leaving the door swinging shut behind him.

I lace up my boots, my body moving on autopilot, but my mind is already ten steps ahead.

The walk across the estate is long enough to clear some of the cobwebs from my head.

The Silvestri compound sits on acres of prime Hawaiian coastline, a fortress dressed up like a paradise.

Security cameras blink from hidden nooks in the stone walls.

Men with discreet earpieces roam the paths between the guest villas and the main house. And somewhere, always, there's a sniper in the trees.

It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you.

When I step into Alessandro's office, my face remains carefully blank.

Alessandro Silvestri, my Boss and brother, leans back behind his massive desk, a tumbler of whiskey in one hand even though it's barely seven in the morning.

He doesn't say hello or smile.

Neither do I.

"You look like shit," he says, studying me like he's assessing a weapon for flaws.

"Feel like it too," I grunt.

He smirks, but there's no warmth in it. "You've been spending time around Astrid."

It's not a question.

Alessandro doesn't waste words on questions he already knows the answers to.

"Because you entrusted me with ensuring Olivia's shelter dealings go smoothly and she's a vital part of that," I say flatly.

His eyes narrow. I know he hears the unspoken jab in my response. He taps the side of his glass. "Olivia's worried."

I almost chuckle.

"Olivia worries about stray dogs too," I mutter.

"Yeah." Alessandro shrugs and spreads his arms. "But some strays bite."

I hold his stare.

He's right. I hate that he's right.

"You want me to scare her off?" I ask, even though I'm not sure how possible that is.

He chuckles, low and dangerous. "If you could scare her, I'd be impressed."

At least we both know her bond with Olivia is inseparable and Astrid doesn't scare easily.

After a beat, he says, "Just...watch her. I know Olivia trusts her with her life, but I don't. There's something about her that I can't quite place my finger on."

I nod once, sharp and cold. He wouldn't be the Boss of one of the biggest Cartels in the United States if he wasn't perspective. Astrid has her sunshine persona down pat, but men like us who've seen the things we've seen learn to read people and pick apart the cracks.

Besides, what else can I do? Admit that I'm already tangled up in the gravity of her?

Or that part of me wants her secrets to become my problem?

Fuck that.

By the time I get back to my quarters, the sun is higher, slicing knives of gold across the worn floorboards.

I lock the door behind me, every bolt sliding home with a metallic snap.

Then I kneel by the old trunk shoved beneath the bed.

The key is worn smooth from years of use.

The lock sticks, like always.

I wrench it open anyway.

Inside rests the ghosts of my past.

A burned necklace with a blackened chain twisted like it tried to crawl away from the fire.

A bloodstained letter, the words long blurred by rain and regret.

A photo of me and her captured on a cheap disposable camera, smiling like fools who thought love could save them.

I reach into my back pocket and pull out something new.

A scrap of paper. Soft at the edges and smudged with graphite. It used to belong to Astrid until I stole it..

She left it behind at the house weeks ago, carelessly, as if it didn't matter.

As if she didn't know she was leaving pieces of herself lying around for men like me to find.

It's not a portrait of her, it's a portrait of me.

It's not the hard, scarred, and worn face I see in the mirror, but something rawer.

She caught the weight in my eyes, the tension in my shoulders, and the cracks I keep buried under fists and silence.

She sees me.

No one's seen me in a long, long time.

I fold the drawing carefully, place it beside the other relics, and close the trunk.

But the damage is already done.

I can't unsee it or unknow it.

Astrid is dangerous in ways even she doesn't understand.

And if I was a smarter man, I'd walk away now.

Instead, I light another cigarette and lean against the cold wall.

I decide to follow her tonight.

Not because Alessandro told me to keep an eye on her or because Olivia's worried.

Something deep and broken inside me wants to see what else Astrid is hiding; wants to touch the light before it burns me to ash.

Chapter Eighteen

Rocco

I thank God every damn day that I don't live entirely on the Silvestri estate.

I have my own place that's just far enough from the compound that I can breathe without being watched, but close enough to respond if Alesandro needs me. Privacy isn't just a luxury in this line of work. It's a necessity. Especially when I've got a woman like her in my home.

Because there is no way in hell I'd be able to do what I'm thinking about doing if we were back at the estate. Not with all those eyes and all those rules.

But here in my space, She's fair game.

Astrid stands in the center of my gym, stretching in slow, fluid movements. Leg extended high, back arching as she folds over. Hair tied up in a messy knot, tank top riding high over her ribs. Her leggings hug her ass like they were sewn on, and I swear to God, my brain short-circuits.

She's not even trying. That's the worst part. She's just moving, breathing, existing—and every muscle in my body is screaming to pin her down and make her feel what she does to me.

But I don't. Not yet.

Because I want to see what she can do.

"You good?" I ask, voice rougher than I meant.

She looks over her shoulder, smirking. "You're the one who invited me over. Don't tell me you're backing out already."

God, her mouth. Sharp enough to draw blood, and just sweet enough to make you want it.

"Just making sure you don't pull something," I say, stepping onto the mat.

She bounces lightly on her toes, rolling her neck. "Don't worry, Rocco. I'll go easy on you."

I grunt a laugh. "Big words. Let's see if you can back them up."

We circle each other slowly. Testing. Reading. She's got the look of someone who's been in a few fights and come out grinning. I like that. Like that a lot.

The first move is hers—a quick feint to the left and a jab toward my side. I block it easily, but the next one catches me off guard. She twists, drops low, and taps my shoulder before I can react.

"Point for me," she says, smug.

I narrow my eyes. "Lucky shot."

She winks. "Sure it was."

We go again.

She's faster than I expected. Lithe and clever, always a half-step ahead. She uses her size to her advantage, darting in and out before I can fully close the distance. She gets in two more shoulder taps before I decide to stop being nice.

"Alright," I mutter. "Playtime's over."

"Oh, are you finally going to try now?"

I lunge.

She tries to pivot, but I catch her mid-move and sweep her legs out from under her. She lands on her back with a thud, breath puffing from her lips—and then I'm over her, straddling her hips, hands on either side of her head.

Her eyes go wide.

So do mine.

Because fuck me, this... this is torture.

Her chest rises and falls, her skin flushed. She stares up at me like she doesn't know whether to hit me or pull me closer.

My fingers flex against the mat.

So close.

Too close.

"Call it," I say, voice low.

She licks her lips. "Not yet."

That's it. That's the moment the last shred of control I have starts to fray.

Her breath hitches.

Mine's already halfway gone.

I catch her around the waist just as she tries to slip past me again. Her body twists, light and fast, but I'm faster. My arms lock around her, dragging her flush against me. Chest to chest. Hip to hip. That damned tank top of hers doing nothing to hide the friction, the heat. The temptation.

We're both breathing hard now. Not from effort. From restraint.

Her ponytail's come half loose, curls spilling around her face. Her cheeks are flushed, mouth parted, eyes dancing with fire and mischief. And I want her.

More than I've ever wanted anything I wasn't allowed to have.

"Give up," I growl, voice low, rough in a way that comes from my spine and not my throat.

Astrid's lips curve into a slow, wicked smile.

Then she kisses me.

It's not tentative or sweet. It's bold and filthy and fucking brilliant. Her mouth crashes into mine like she's been starving for it, like she's waited long enough and finally decided to take what's hers.

I taste her, warm mimosa, a hint of sugar, and a wilder streak underneath. It kicks loose every restraint I've ever built for myself.

I groan, deep and involuntary, and that's my mistake.

She moves.

In a blur of strength and audacity, she shifts her weight, uses my distraction against me, and the next second I'm on my back with her thighs straddling my hips. My arms are pinned above my head, wrists trapped by her surprisingly strong grip.

She's panting. Smirking. Glowing like a devil in soft light.

"Too easy," she says, smug as hell.

I blink up at her, half-impressed, half-turned on beyond reason. My cock's already thick and straining against my sweatpants, and her position doesn't help. Not one damn bit.

"You cheated," I rasp, voice thick.

She cocks her head. "I adapted."

I narrow my eyes.

She leans down a little, and her hair brushes my jaw. The scent of her slides over me like a drug. Her breasts graze my chest. My fingers twitch against her grip.

“Then you deserve to be punished,” I say, voice like dark intentions and sin.

Her pupils flare.

I break her hold.

She gasps as I roll us, flip her onto her back, and cage her between my arms. My hips press between her legs. Her hands scramble against my chest, to pull me closer.

Her eyes are wild, her lips are kiss-bruised, and her legs are already wrapping around my waist. I haven’t even started punishing her yet.

I don’t kiss her this time.

I devour her.

My mouth finds hers with bruising intent, and she meets me with equal force, biting, gasping, hungry. There’s no teasing now, and no holding back. She’s heat and need and fire in my arms, and every second I’m not inside her feels like a personal form of hell.

I drag her up into my lap and tear the tank top over her head, the fabric catching for a second before giving way. No bra. Fuck. My gaze lands on those perfect breasts—high, soft, peaked with dusky nipples already tight and begging for my mouth.

I don’t make her wait.

I latch on, tongue swirling, teeth scraping just enough to make her cry out. Her hands dive into my shaved head, nails scraping over my scalp as I move to the other breast, worshipping it with open-mouthed reverence.

She’s writhing already, hips grinding against my abs like she can’t bear the distance between us.

I break away just long enough to rasp, “Leggings off. Now.”

She obeys, kicking them off with her panties in one swift motion, and my self-control shatters. She’s bare beneath me, skin flushed, slick and glistening between her thighs. My mouth waters.

I grip her thighs and yank her down the mat, spreading her open. Her breath catches.

“Rocco—”

“You wanted to adapt?” I say, voice low, molten. “Let’s see how you adapt to this.”

Then I bury my face between her legs.

She shatters like glass.

My tongue drags up her slit, slow and possessive, before circling her clit with devastating focus. She arches, moaning my name like a sin. I grip her thighs tighter, holding her in place as she tries to buck against my mouth. No way. I’m in control now.

“You taste like heaven,” I groan against her, then suck her clit into my mouth hard.

She sobs.

“I could die here. Right between your legs.”

“Fuck Rocco—”

Her voice is broken and desperate.

I slide two fingers on her folds and spread her wider for me as I suck and lick like a man possessed. Her walls clench, and I feel her building and tightening like a bowstring about to snap.

“Come for me, Astrid. I want to feel you lose it.”

Her entire body locks.

Then she falls apart.

It’s not delicate. It’s not pretty. It’s filthy and raw and beautiful. Her back bows off the mat, thighs clamped around my head, slick coating my face as she cries out my name like it’s the only word she remembers.

When she finally comes down, I don’t give her time to recover.

I pull my sweats down in one rough tug, grip her hips, and line my cock up with her soaked, swollen entrance.

“Last chance to run, baby,” I rasp, voice wrecked. “Because once I start—”

“Shut up and fuck me,” she breathes.

I drive into her in one brutal, glorious thrust.

She freezes and then screams.

Holy fuck.

She's tight. So tight I have to grit my teeth to keep from coming right then. Her heat wraps around me like a velvet vise, slick and pulsing and utterly perfect.

"Jesus, Astrid," I groan, burying my face in her neck. "You're gonna fucking break me."

She wraps her legs around my waist, nails clawing at my back as I start to move—slow at first, letting her adjust. But she rocks her hips up to meet mine, gasping, "Harder."

I oblige.

I pound into her, rough and deep, the sound of our bodies slamming together echoing off the walls. Her moans mix with my grunts, the mat scraping under us, the scent of sex and sweat and desire turning the air molten.

"You like that?" I pant, biting her earlobe. "You like being fucked into the floor like a good little girl?"

"God, yes...don't stop—"

I don't. I can't.

My hand slides under her ass, lifting her just right as I angle deeper, grinding against her clit with every thrust. Her breath stutters. Her eyes roll back.

"You're so fucking tight," I growl. "So good. So wet for me."

She digs her nails into my shoulders, legs trembling.

"I can feel you squeezing me. You gonna come again, baby?"

She nods frantically, too far gone for words.

"Do it. I want to feel you soak my cock."

She lets go.

Her scream punches straight through me as her body convulses, walls clenching around me like a fist. That's it. That's my undoing.

With a savage growl, I slam deep one last time and come hard, buried to the hilt. My vision whites out. My body locks. Every pulse of release hits like a lightning strike.

We collapse together in a tangled heap of limbs, slick skin, and pounding hearts.

My forehead rests against hers as I fight to breathe, still buried inside her.

Astrid's eyes are half-lidded, lips swollen, face flushed with the kind of glow you don't fake.

I'm not going anywhere.

And neither is she.

We lie there for a long moment, skin slick with sweat, bodies tangled in the aftermath. Her fingers trace aimless shapes along my shoulder, her breath still catching every few seconds like her body hasn't caught up to the calm.

I should feel satisfied and spent.

But something tugs at me—off-kilter and uneasy. I'm sure I missed something here. I had lost control with her.

Then I see it.

A thin streak of red smeared against her inner thigh, disappearing into the mess I left between her legs.

I freeze.

No fucking way.

I shift slightly, my hand brushing between her thighs as if needing proof. She winces, just a little, and that's when my chest goes tight.

"Astrid..."

She tenses.

I push myself up on one elbow, trying to catch her gaze, but she turns her face away, eyes fixed on the ceiling like she's somewhere else entirely.

"...tell me this wasn't your first time."

Silence stretches between us, louder than any scream. The kind that presses against your ribs like a weight.

She swallows. Then shrugs.

"Does it matter?"

It hits me like a goddamn freight train.

I roll off her, sudden and rough, like the air's been punched from my lungs. My back hits the mat, cold against overheated skin, and I stare up at the ceiling like it might give me answers.

But there's only her scent on my skin and the distant echo of her moans in my ears.

It matters.

It matters too fucking much.

I run a hand down my face, trying to make sense of the chaos unraveling inside me.

She gave me something no one else ever had.

She trusted me with that. With her.

And I took it like a starving man—greedy, desperate, blind.

I can still feel how tight she was. How her whole body had trembled. I thought it was from how good I made her feel. I didn't stop to question it. Didn't think.

Fuck.

I glance sideways at her. She's curled slightly onto her side, arm across her stomach, not looking at me. Not saying a word.

This wasn't just sex.

It was something else. It's something I shattered without knowing.

I don't even realize I'm holding my breath until my lungs ache.

And now I don't know what to do.

My instincts scream to pull her into my arms, to make her feel safe, and to tell her she's not just some girl I fucked on a training mat.

But another part of me, the darker one, the one shaped by violence and sins I'll never outrun, knows I'm the last person she should've trusted with something so sacred.

I don't deserve her.

Not her body. Not her first time. Not the soft way she looked at me right before she kissed me like I meant something.

Rocco Calderon doesn't mean anything good.

So I lie there. Heart in my throat. Staring up at the ceiling with her blood still on my skin and her breath just inches away.

And I don't know whether to hold her or walk away before I destroy her completely.