

ONE

Brodie McCormack had told her that she wasn't allowed to leave his property, but he had done little to welcome her into his home. Zara Bandini chose to view his indifference as acceptance because he hadn't banished her after commanding her to stay. The truth was he'd given up caring about everything since his Uncle Art had been murdered, so she couldn't be insulted by his inattention.

With every new demonstration of apathy, she became more worried about her love's mental state. Grief was a dangerous beast that could consume and contort a man until he became unrecognizable. Brodie, the man she'd fallen in love with, was still in there, he was just struggling to navigate the path back to her.

At thirteen, Brodie McCormack had lost his parents. Now at thirty-three, he'd lost his guardian and mentor. Since his life was torn apart by the death of his mother and father in an explosion on their boat twenty years ago, Art had been his rock. After that tragedy, Brodie had lost his way, and it had been up to Art to guide his nephew through the trauma.

Three months had passed since they'd watched the Kindred Chief succumb to the gunshot wound delivered by Albert Sutcliffe in the Atlas warehouse. Since that day, Brodie had locked himself in the manor he'd inherited from his parents and shunned the world.

The task of keeping the sniper alive had fallen to her and Zara had done her best to look after him, but she feared that wasn't good enough. He just didn't seem to want to liberate himself from the darkness that was his perpetual companion.

During his long periods of aversion to company, she had been afforded the chance to explore McCormack Manor and learn the quirks of the building. What began as a way to entertain herself grew into a bigger project. She tended to forgotten rooms, welcomed the light, and put her own touches around the place, taking the harsh masculine edge from the home that had once been a palace meant for Brodie's mother.

Living in a large city, in an apartment without exterior space, she hadn't had a recent chance to test her yardwork skills. Zara had been raised in the country and was no stranger to getting dirty. When she waded out onto the grounds, it struck her that she'd missed toiling in the sunshine.

Maintaining such a vast estate wasn't a task meant for a single person. Zara embraced being tossed in at the deep end because she needed the distraction. Broken objects could be repaired with time and attention. Her lover was broken too, but fixing him wasn't as simple as a new coat of paint or a few soft furnishings.

So much of McCormack Manor had gone to ruin with Art and Brodie as its distracted caretakers. The Kindred had abroad missions to focus on, meaning uncle and nephew were rarely here for any more than a few weeks at a time. Hence how the place had fallen into disrepair. Since Art had pulled a teenage Brodie out of his parental bereavement funk, no one had spent such an extended period of time here.

On that particular day, Zara Bandini was just finishing up with her checks in main security in the basement of the grand gothic manor house. It had become her daily duty to inspect the systems, to make sure the perimeter was secure, and that all the cameras were unobstructed. In the months since losing Art, she'd become efficient through necessity more than desire. At first, filling the chief's shoes was daunting, but it had become clear that no one else was going to step up to the plate and these routine duties wouldn't perform themselves.

Glancing at the clock, she registered the time. If she wanted to be punctual for the funeral, she would have to speed up. The last thing she wanted to do was arrive late. Her entrance would be conspicuous given that she was expected on the front pew.

While typing in the last commands to the computer log, she stood up. Rolling the seat away with her locked knees, Zara remained bowed over the keyboard to conclude her work. With a final keystroke, she

adjusted one of her diamond earrings with two fingertips and straightened to scan the bank of monitors in front of her once more.

Satisfied that she'd completed her duty, she hooked her purse over her head to let it rest across her body and headed for the exit. Thinking about the grim day ahead, she went into the blackened basement corridor. Funerals reminded her of the day they'd buried her mother. Pity had surrounded her and at fourteen, she should have been thinking about boys and makeup. Instead, she went from caring for her withering mother to caring for a home she did not intend to die in.

Her father and brother would have been happy to keep her in the family home, cooking and cleaning, and never again thinking about the future. But she wouldn't repeat her mother's mistakes. Zara wanted to make something of herself, and while her life hadn't followed the path she might have projected, she had made a difference in the world—albeit with Kindred help and guidance.

Zara would much rather blend into the background today. But she'd agreed to sit with Grant McCormack, CEO of CI, who was grieving the loss of one of his youngest VP's. Losing a vibrant man, full of such potential, was a shock. As a victim of a mugging gone wrong, they'd lost him to murder, which distressed the high society members he moved amongst.

Since meeting Raven, which was Brodie's professional alias, she'd become more accustomed to death and wasn't so surprised that these kind of things could happen. Bunking in with a professional marksman would do that to a girl. Especially when he had a habit of putting bullets in men who got too close to her.

Zara would be happy to avoid memories of her mother and the other more recent losses she'd suffered. If she could, she would limit her time at the wake. After showing her face, she should be able to sneak out early. Grant would have plenty of hands to shake, giving him plenty of distractions.

Hurrying along the basement corridor toward the stairwell at the end, she came to an abrupt halt when the door to her left opened. Brodie startled her from her thoughts when he emerged from the gym, damp from the shower, wiping a towel over his jaw. His brown hair was wet and because personal grooming wasn't high on his to-do list these days, it hadn't been cut in months.

She hadn't been aware that they'd occupied the same floor because she hadn't sought him out this morning. These days he didn't surface from his bedroom until closer to noon—if he came out at all.

Giving her the once over, his expression registered no change in his thoughts. "What's with the getup?" he asked, still examining her demure black dress and conservative heels. "You going to a costume party?"

It didn't surprise her that he didn't know what time of the day it was or what season they were in. It was just another example of his lack of focus. The outfit she was wearing had been typical of her daily wardrobe before Brodie came into her life. Now, she spent more time in casual or workout clothes, or items that she didn't mind getting dirty in the yard when she went out to work in the muck.

There wasn't any affection or joy in his features. Brodie had become a shut in, and there were times she feared she'd never be able to reach him again. "I'm going to a funeral," she said, edging closer to curl her fingers around the waistband of his shorts.

Any glimmer of conversation spelled a good day. Savoring every chance to connect with him, she wouldn't give up on him or let him be lost forever. He needed a constant, a touchstone, and she wanted to be that beacon for him.

By the way he was looking down his nose at her, she could tell he was considering possibilities. "Anyone I know?"

"I doubt it," she said, trailing a fingernail up the center of his vest. "He was a VP at CI. He was killed by a mugger. Random shooting."

The story didn't interest him, she could tell by how his attention cooled. Nothing seemed to interest him anymore, except brooding solitude. Sometimes he drank into the night, sometimes she wouldn't see him for days. Other times, he kept her locked up with him so he could gorge himself on her body. Those times were physical. He wouldn't talk to her, not about anything but sex. But there had been times she gleaned his inner needs in the way he touched her.

One of the less enjoyable tasks that had fallen to her was arranging for the engraving of Art's headstone. With Tuck's help, they'd affixed the granite slab to Art's plot. Tuck took off as soon as the job was done. He hadn't opened up to her, but she could tell that Art's death was taking its toll on the hacker too.

Dirty and tired, tears had stained her face when she'd come back inside to find Brodie waiting on the stairs for her. It was nights like that one which kept her love for him alive. He hadn't said anything, he'd

just taken her hand and led her up to his bedroom where he made quiet love to her before holding her against him all night.

Later on, she discovered that he'd watched her and Tuck working from one of the high manor towers that gave him a partial view of the headstones through the treetops.

Thinking of that day always made her crave his devotion. "Do you need anything before I go?" she asked.

Slowly, his head angled to the left. Zara clung to him during these rare interactions and always took the opportunity to touch him when she got close enough. The physical connection spurred on her desire to stay at the side of this man who was floundering.

Whipping the towel off his neck, he dropped it to the floor then groped for the zip under her arm. He slid it down. As it descended, her heart rate ascended. She didn't have time for games. Didn't have time to sate his wants now, but if she said no, Brodie would only want her more.

"I'm late," she said, but he grabbed her ribcage and rushed her against the wall with a thump that expelled the air from her lungs.

The strap of her purse slipped from her shoulder to her elbow and encircled her upper body until she straightened her arm and let it fall to the floor in a wide loop around her feet.

With narrow eyes and lips, his gaze drilled into her. "Sorry, baby, you won't be going to that party," he murmured.

A funeral wasn't a party and she didn't know why he would object to her going. It could be he didn't want her being around Grant, which she would be if she went to any CI event. Maybe he was worried about her well-being and didn't want her to go to a solemn occasion without him there to support her. It was more likely that he was just horny and didn't want her to stray when he required her attention.

The shadows beneath his eyes betrayed that she'd been wrong. He wasn't awake early as she'd thought, he hadn't gone to bed yet. He'd emerged from the gym, so she guessed that he'd worked out before taking his shower, which was something he did when he was frustrated. It was possible he'd tried to exorcize his arousal through physical exertion or maybe he'd had a rough night of grief. Either way, she wished he'd sought her out sooner.

"What you got going on under the dress?" he asked and stepped back to pull her straps from her shoulders, though they only fell as far as her elbows before the dress caught on the apex of her breasts, hiding from him what she wore beneath. He wasn't patient. Grabbing the neckline, he tugged it down and seemed pissed off to find her bra there blocking his view.

But he leaned away to get a look at her legs beneath the hem of her dress. When his lit eyes landed on hers, she felt exposed. She didn't have to be naked for Brodie to know her habits. "Let me see 'em," he grumbled and, although he was tense, he did seem to be enjoying this game.

With the heels of her hands on her hips, she gathered up the fabric of her dress just enough to let the lace tops of her stockings peek from beneath. She knew how to tease him, knew what he wanted to see. His gruff single laugh made her shoulder blades press deeper into the wall at her back as her pelvis rose towards his. Coming a step closer, he took her hips, but only long enough to give them a brief squeeze before he let go.

"Take off your panties," he said, and she was sure he was going to take her here, against this wall in this darkened basement hallway.

She'd already given in to one of his commands, and his attention was enough to arouse her into forgetting about the plans she'd made. Picking her skirt higher, Zara found the elastic of her thong and pulled it down, past the lace summits of her hold-ups. Bending at the waist, her face was in his crotch when the fabric got to her ankles. He got closer, close enough that when she looked up, her nose brushed the solid length of him that was throbbing beneath his shorts.

Stepping out of the panties, she left them on the floor and grabbed the waist of his shorts with intentions of freeing him, but Brodie had other ideas. He intercepted her wrist, and while she was still bent over, he turned and dragged her towards the stairwell.

This was his house, they were alone, not even Art was around to happen upon them, but that could've been why Brodie chose to hurry her up to his bedroom. Screwing her in the hallway, without any concern of being discovered, was another reminder of what they'd lost.

Brodie got her up to his bedroom and didn't slow when he reached the door, he got them inside and dragged her over to the bed. Her dress was still hanging on her arms, but when he flung her face first onto the mattress, he grabbed the hem of it and tugged it down to expose her. Zara pushed onto her hands to look around, the first thing she noticed was the blackness of the space she'd once considered a

haven. The room was a mess, beer and bourbon bottles were on the bedside table with empty glasses and dirty plates beside them.

When she got the chance to come in and clear up, she did. But his erratic moods sometimes left her feeling unwelcome. Often Brodie flat out demanded that she leave him alone and get out.

His fingers skimmed down between her ass cheeks and around until he made contact with her feminine threshold. Plunging the digits deep into her, he circled and spread them to expand her inner passage, testing how her body would yield for his cock.

“Your pussy’s all juiced up, baby,” he grumbled.

She always got wet when he talked, whether it was dirty words about what he wanted to do to her, or commands meant to put her in her place, Zara gave her heart and her trust to the man she loved without reservations.

Brodie worked her for a few seconds and when he pulled her hips upward, she knew he was going to enter her from behind. Zara let herself be contorted, let herself be pushed and pulled for his pleasure because she gave him something no other woman did, he had everything he needed right here. Zara was his and although he hadn’t spelled it out yet, she knew that Brodie belonged to her. She gave him what he needed whenever he needed it and the possessive nature of his rough hands were enough to show her how grateful he was for her sticking by him.

Once he had quenched his desire in her body, he would need sleep, meaning she might still have time to show face at the wake. But Brodie had been her priority since the day that Art died and that wasn’t going to change now. She’d stay here, in his room, in his bed, for however long he wanted her there. Everything was secondary to her love for him and once he emerged from the isolation of his grief, their connection was going to be stronger than ever.

He massaged inside her, curling his fingers to explore her g-spot and twisting his hand to abrade her with his knuckles. His actions made her tense and relax all at the same time. Brodie was a combination of contradictions that proved how complex his character was, he wasn’t a killer who reveled in the scent of blood. He was a good man with morals of his own, even if they didn’t match the morals of the masses.

Preparing herself for his entry, she began to sway forward and back, using his wide fingers as a tool for her release. But while one hand was delivering pleasure to her, the other grabbed her arm and flipped her to her back, then with his shins over her thighs and his weight pushing into her shoulders through the heels of both hands, he growled down at her.

“You want out of here so bad?” he asked with a sneering smile that reeked of menace. “Prove it.”

This was his sport. She never refused to play these role play games with him because for every second she tried to get away from him, she’d spend twice as many seducing him or lying in his arms when they were done.

Taking a moment to build up air in her lungs, she kept her expression tight. When her eyes pinched, he lunged down, trying to snag her bottom lip, but she turned her head away and began to struggle.

“Get off me,” she said, trying to lift her legs, but she couldn’t kick out, the solid mass of his powerful thighs gave her as much room as a concrete block would. Still, she wriggled, turning her face away from his every attempt to kiss her.

“You’ve got something I want,” he said and bit her earlobe.

The pain was pleasure. There was no fear here, only stimulation. Brodie was strong. He worked hard on his body to make sure it was a weapon able to protect her. Trying and failing to free herself from his control was a reminder of how resolute he was to have her. His potency intoxicated her.

His weight came down to pin her pelvis onto the mattress and the pulsing proof of his intentions pressed itself into her. On feeling him so near, she began to writhe against that pleasure, but he surged forward making it impossible for her to move.

Releasing his grip for long enough to tear the strip of fabric between her bra cups, she shrieked. That was one of her favorite bras and if she’d known this was going to happen, she wouldn’t have worn it. But her chagrin was erased when his stubble tickled her cleavage and moved deeper until the rough hair on his face scratched on the sensitive skin of her breasts.

Using the tip of his tongue, he licked his way to one nipple, circled it, and then crossed to the other. She expected the same delicate touch, instead he stole her nipple into his mouth and sucked it so hard a spear of pain shot through her and settled against the heat of her engorged center.

“I have to go,” she said, but her resistance was lessening.

“You give me what I need,” he said. He chose that moment to elevate his hips to free himself from his shorts. She sensed, or maybe hoped, that he meant those words because that admission would mean

more to her than any game. “You’re my horny little plaything.”

The game wasn’t over, and she was pulled back into it when Brodie rose up to grab her inner thighs, he pulled her legs apart and leered down at the swollen pink flesh of her glistening vulva. Zara was ready for him, her body was on fire, her nerves fizzling, she wanted this, wanted his hands, his mouth, his dick, all of it. Being intimate with Brodie was a rollercoaster, there were ups and downs, and just when you thought you had a handle on what he’d do next, he’d flip her upside down in a loop-the-loop.

“That’s what I need,” he murmured and curled his fingers around his shaft.

His hand moved up, then back down. He squeezed himself from hilt to head. Watching him pleasuring himself while remaining fixated on her body was a new kind of thrill. Even though it seemed like he was committing a private act, she wanted to be a part of it.

Sitting up, she barely got her balance before he seized her throat to pin her against the mattress. He came down over her so their upper bodies were parallel. Her knees made contact with his thighs, so she rubbed her legs up and down his, but the fabric of his shorts was still around his thighs and made complete skin-to-skin contact impossible. But she wasn’t disappointed.

Her throat was uncomfortable, but he wasn’t squeezing, just using his hand to keep her right where he wanted her. From how his other arm moved, she knew he was still pleasuring himself. But the intensity in his eyes, that wouldn’t leave hers, was a connection deeper than the one they were going to make with their bodies.

“Baby,” she whispered and stroked up his torso. “Talk to me.”

His brows snapped down. His frown was always an indicator of his annoyance. He widened his knees to spread her legs farther and she gasped at the burning ache in her upper thighs, but he pushed forward and impaled her with the organ he’d been caressing.

Because he was fucking her so fast, she couldn’t breathe right. His frown was still there, fixed on her, pissed off that she’d let a moment of intimacy creep into their game. Brodie didn’t shy from intimacy, but he liked to be the one who initiated softer moments. Somehow, he’d known she didn’t mean she wanted dirty words from him. She wanted to know his heart because until he confessed his grief, there was always a chance it would consume him.

Her eyes closed as he shunted her body up with his powerful thrusts. His frame receded from hers, she relaxed for a beat, then tensed to rise up and meet his plunges with her own. Being a part of his body, for these precious unions, cleared her head and centered her thoughts in a way no other exercise or meditation could. Brodie was her rock and when she was with him, she never doubted her decisions.

All she needed from him was this commitment, and given what he’d recently lost, it meant a lot that he trusted her. It would have been easy for him to reject everyone. He could’ve retreated inside, cancelled all security clearances except his own, and disappeared from the radar forever. Instead, he was sharing his life with her. It just so happened that at the moment, his life existed inside the McCormack Manor walls.

Hot, wet bliss burned her veins and she had to grab his shoulders, to use him as traction, because she was losing her ability to keep up. Brodie batted her arms away and grabbed her hips, holding her at the angle he needed to increase his pace further. Just as she screamed out his name and the meteors of orgasm shot through her body, Brodie cursed, surged forward, and released his liquid into her.

Seconds of silence flitted between them. As soon as he made eye contact, she opened her mouth to talk, but he scowled again, let her go, and got off the bed to head for the bathroom. He slammed the door and she heard the click of the lock. He was done with her and now she’d been dismissed.