

A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a glass of whiskey with ice cubes. The glass is in the foreground, filled with a golden-brown liquid and several ice cubes. The liquid is splashing upwards, creating a dynamic, energetic scene. The background is dark, making the glass and the liquid stand out. The overall mood is sophisticated and gritty.

A
SINNER'S
promise

A DE BELLIS
CRIME FAMILY
NOVEL

KYLIE KENT

A Sinner's Promise

De Bellis Crime Family

Book 1

kylie Kent

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*This book is dedicated to whiskey, the drink that goes down
smooth, just like Giovanni De Bellis.*

Foreword

Content warning. This is a dark mafia romance. Please read with caution. Topics found within these pages include but are not limited to: sexual assault, graphic violence, blood, death, and adult language.

Birth of a Sinner

A De Bellis Crime Family Prologue

Kylie Kent

Prologue - chapter 1



I watch my four brothers relax and let loose. It's the night before Santo's wedding. The whole monogamous, *vowing to one single person for life* thing isn't for me, but it sure as fuck is for Santo.

If love really did exist in this cruel world, it would be what Santo has with his fiancée and soon-to-be wife. They've been together since they were teenagers. Shelli has always been around.

Out of my four brothers, Santo is the most empathetic. How he manages to remain positive and uplifting is beyond me. But he does. I assume a lot of it has to do with Shelli. She loves him unconditionally. Honestly, if I could pick a sister-in-law, she'd be it. The two are perfect for each other, right down to the annoying-as-fuck habit they have of finishing each other's sentences.

“You know, I always thought you’d be the first,” Gabe says. He’s only a few years younger than me, though you wouldn’t think it with the way he acts sometimes.

“Fuck off. What have I ever done to give you the idea I’d want a relationship, let alone full-on marriage?” I grunt at him before swallowing the contents of my glass. It’s no Cinque whiskey, our family-owned business. But it burns on the way down, a feeling I welcome like an old friend.

“Nothing, but I thought for sure the old man would have married you off as part of some deal by now.” Gabe shrugs.

I fucking pity the day my father tries to marry any of us off for a fucking business deal. I’ve seen it done. It’s not unheard of. But I’d kill the old bastard before I’d let any of my brothers or myself enter into a marriage like that. It was how my parents got together. And guess how that ended for my mum? With her body in a casket, six feet under at just thirty-five, months after our youngest brother was born.

After birthing my father five sons—yes, five—my old man killed her. Of course I have no proof of that, which is why he’s still breathing. But I know in my fucking soul that he did it.

My four younger brothers, Santo, Gabrielle, Marcello, and Vincenzo were all upstairs with the nanny that day. I remember walking past my father’s office and hearing the gunshot. And I remember the *thud* as a body hit the floor.

Later that night, my father sat all five of us down, even Vin, who was only a few months old and couldn’t understand a single thing that was going on. The cold bastard lined us up on the sofa, looked us dead in the eye, and said, “*Your mother is dead. Don’t cry for her, never cry for a fucking woman. Ever.*”

Then he got up and walked away, letting the nanny deal with the aftermath. Thankfully, Santo and I are the only ones who were old enough to remember that day. I was eight, Santo was seven. Gabe was five, Marcello two, and Vin—well, like I said, he was just a fucking baby.

To this day, I haven’t shed a single fucking tear over a woman and never fucking will. It’s the one lesson the old

bastard drilled into me that I can't let go of.

I look to Santo. "I'd kill the fucker if he even tried that arranged marriage shit," I say.

"I'd help," Santo agrees.

"You ever wonder how much better it's gonna be when you're boss, Gio?" Gabe asks.

All the fucking time, I think to myself.

The De Bellis organisation. While a lot of the businesses are legit, on the up and up as you would say, most of the money we make comes from our underground dealings. We're well known in Melbourne. Ask anyone who the De Bellis family is, and if the fuckers are smart, they won't open their mouths to utter a word.

Those who do have something to say? Well, I'd tell you to go ask them what happens to a rat, but you can't. It's hard to reply when you're nothing more than some bones and dust in a shallow grave.

My father has built a name for himself, ruthless, cruel, unforgiving. He is absolutely all of those things, and that's how he got to be the Don of the De Bellis Crime family, exactly how he stays on top. At least that's how he tells it.

Being the eldest son, that title, throne, curse... whatever the fuck you want to call it, it's getting passed down to me. As soon as the old cunt either dies or retires, but we all know the latter ain't ever gonna happen. I'll have to wait until he takes his last breath to run things the way they should be run.

Our organisation has been crumbling over the last few years. My old man is too fucking stubborn to see or acknowledge it. But, brick by brick, the foundation is falling. Fuck, at this rate, there probably won't be anything left for me to take over.

"What I wonder is how boring Santo's life is about to get once he has a ring on it." I laugh.

"Fuck off. Boring and Shelli do not belong in the same sentence. That girl is fucking amazing. I dare any of you

assholes to say otherwise.” Santo points a finger at each of us. “You haven’t so much as glanced at the tits and ass that’s on the stage right now. If this expensive wedding bullshit has made you too broke to afford a lap dance, bro, I got you. My shout. Fuck, take one to the back room for a happy ending,” Marcello says, pulling out his wallet and throwing four one-hundred-dollar bills onto the table.

“Put your cash away. Unlike you fuckers, I don’t need to pay for pussy. And why would I want *this*, when I have Shelli waiting for me back at the hotel?” Santo asks.

“Ah, because it’s your last night as a free man. And what the fuck do you mean she’s waiting for you at the hotel? It’s bad luck to see the bride the night before the wedding, bro,” Vin reminds him.

“She sent me a text and said she had something important to talk about. Told her I’d stop by her room when we got back.” Santo shrugs.

A waitress approaches the table with a new bottle of whiskey before refilling each of our glasses. “Sweetheart, my brother here is getting hitched tomorrow. Help me convince him he should have one last hurrah,” Marcello says to the girl, who’s only slightly more dressed than the chicks on stage.

“Married, huh? Well, if I knew that, I would have brought out the good stuff. But he’s right. You definitely need to have a little fun before you tie the knot.” She moves over to Santo. Leaning forward, she presses her bare tits into his face as she whispers something in his ear.

Santos shakes his head, keeping his hands firmly planted on the table as he squirms away from the woman. She’s fucking hot. Long legs, long dark hair, even darker eyes, and full, natural breasts. Sometimes I think Shelli broke my brother’s dick when she took his virginity all those years ago.

“You know, I’m getting married too,” Gabe chimes in, and we all look at him. “What? I am. One day, when I find a girl worthy of keeping my balls in her purse.” He smirks and pushes to his feet. “Come on, babe. You can show me all the

filthy things you just offered to do to him. The difference is...
I'll actually enjoy them.”

She grins, and Gabe disappears into the crowd with the waitress.

“He totally just took your last hurrah for you,” I tell Santo.

“He can have it. I don’t need it,” he replies.

I have to give it to my brother. He really does take this whole monogamy thing seriously. Never once have I seen Santo show even the slightest interest in another woman. I would assume there was a problem with his dick or something. But put Shelli in a room with him, and he’s all fucking over her like a dog in heat.

Prologue - chapter 2



You know that feeling you get when you wake up and just know the day is going to be fucking shit? Yeah, I got that right now.

It could be attributed to the jackhammering little cunt in my head at the moment, the twirling nausea rolling through my guts like a goddamn tornado. Or it could just be the De Bellis curse coming to bite us in the ass again.

None of my brothers believe me when I tell them that we're cursed. They think I just say shit for the sake of saying shit. But when every family get-together, celebration, whatever the fuck you wanna call it goes wrong and ends in us covered in either our blood or someone else's, then it's a fucking curse.

Even a family like ours should be able to celebrate a birthday without all hell breaking loose. Today, though, I fucking hope I'm wrong. I want Santo and Shelli to have the

day they've spent years planning. I want my brother to get his happiness.

One of us should at least, right?

I roll over, and my arm lands on a body on the other side of the bed. Shit. I look to my left and find a naked blonde passed out next to me. I nudge at her shoulder, and she stirs. I'd like to say I know her name, but I don't.

"Get up. You gotta go," I tell her.

"Huh?" she grumbles, slowly blinking her eyes open.

"Your time here has expired. I got shit to do, and you're not it. Sorry, sweetheart, but you have to leave." I finish my usual spiel with a smirk, one that typically has girls falling at my feet. Not this time, though.

"You're a fucking asshole," the blonde hisses.

Oh, this one has claws. Maybe I *should* have added her to my to-do list.

"And you fuck like a preteen getting pussy for the first time," she adds before pushing up from the bed and snatching her clothes off the floor.

My eyes travel up and down her body, and memories of last night slowly creep back into my consciousness. She was... fucking fun? Fun to fuck? Fuckably fun? Point is we had a good time. And I know I made her come at least twice.

I can feel the scratches down my back when I move to sit up on the bed. "That's not what you were saying last night when you were screaming my name."

The blonde looks at me. "Don't flatter yourself. I was just giving you what you wanted to hear. I'm a people pleaser." She smiles, then turns and walks into the adjoining bathroom. The door slams before I hear the water start running.

Is she taking a fucking shower? What the hell is wrong with this girl? Most chicks would have been out the door already, not helping themselves to my shampoo bottle in the bathroom.

I get up and find a pair of sweats in my overnight bag. I could just leave the room, go hang out with one of my brothers until this girl is gone. I don't do that, though. Nope. Instead, I sit back on the bed, scroll through social media, and wait for her to finish.

Twenty minutes later, a billow of steam flows through the door as she walks out of the bathroom fully dressed. Her hair hangs wet over one of her shoulders. Her face is completely bare of any makeup and, fuck me, she's even more gorgeous than she was last night when she was all painted up with those pouty fucking red lips.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "The water pressure's good, by the way," she tells me, bending down to pick up her discarded bag. Then she slips her feet into her heels and turns to leave.

"Wait," I call after her. Jumping out of bed, I chase the girl through the living room to the door.

With a hand on the knob, she glances over her shoulder and looks at me. "What?"

"I, uh, I didn't catch your name," I say, raking a hand through my hair.

"No, you didn't." She smirks. "See you around, Marcello. Or not," she adds before opening the door.

"Zoe, what the fuck?" a voice I know says from where a familiar figure is standing at the threshold of my room.

"Dom? What the fuck are you doing here?" I ask the last person I expected to be knocking on my door at this hour in the morning.

Dominic McKinley and I met when we both started school. Now I'm in my last year, about to finally fucking graduate. Why the fuck my old man insisted that we all graduate with business degrees beats me. I mean, they don't teach you the kind of skills our family deals in, in a classroom at university.

"Marcello, really? Fuck, it was nice knowing you, bro." Dom laughs while shaking his head at me.

“You didn’t see me here. You don’t know me. I’m out.” The woman—whose name I now know is *Zoe*—says to Dominic before skirting around him and hightailing it down the hall.

“What are you doing here and how the fuck do you know her?” I ask him.

“Your brother is looking for you. He thought he’d call my ass to hunt you down, because none of them could get a hold of you.”

“How’d you know where I was?” I lift a brow in question, and Dominic mimics the gesture. Yeah, he’s not going to answer that. “Then, how do you know her?”

“You heard her. I don’t.” He grins.

“You’re an asshole,” I grunt, letting the door close on his face.

Dominic reaches out and catches it before it slams shut. “Call Gio. It sounded urgent. See you at the wedding,” Dom says and then leaves as quickly as he appeared.

I walk back into the bedroom, and the name repeats in my head over and over again.

Zoe. Her name... and the words *you fuck like a preteen*. I want nothing more than to drag her ass into my bed and make her take ‘em back. My ego can’t fucking handle hearing a woman claim to be disappointed in my performance.

Picking up my phone from the nightstand, I switch it back on. I have ten missed calls from Gio, five from Santo, and six from Vin. That feeling from earlier, the one where I just know this day is going to be shit, comes back. Full force.

I dial Gio first. “Where the fuck have you been?” he asks me.

“In a hotel room. Why? What’s going on?”

“We can’t find Santo. He’s MIA, and so is Shelli. No one has seen or heard from either of them.”

“They’re probably off fucking their prewedding jitters out of their systems,” I say.

“Yeah, maybe...” He sighs.

“Where are *you*?”

“We’re at the Four Seasons. Santo booked a room here last night and never came back.”

“I’ll be right there.” I hang up.

As much as I want to think Santo and Shelli are just off fooling around like usual, I don’t think they are. It’s the fucking De Bellis curse again. That’s what it is.

Prologue - chapter 3



“Where the fuck are they? I’d get it if one of them had cold feet, but both?” I run a hand through my hair. “Actually, no, I wouldn’t fucking get it. It’s Santo and Shelli. Neither of them would have cold feet. So, where the fuck are they?” I ask my brothers for the millionth time as I check the clock on my watch.

“It’s the curse,” Marcello says.

“Marcel, for the last fucking time, there is no goddamn curse on the De Bellis name,” Gio grunts in reply.

My younger brother has had it in his head that we’re all cursed and shouldn’t even consider having relationships, because it’s never going to end well anyway. Personally, I think he watches too many fucking movies.

“Fine, don’t believe me. But it won’t change the fact that we’re all doomed. You’ll find out eventually when the curse

hits you.” Marcello sighs.

“It’s not going to hit me because I’m not ever going to fall in love. That shit is for people like Santo, not people like me.” Gio points a finger at his chest.

“Okay, this is not helping find him or Shelli.” I dig into my pocket and pull out my flask. It’s early in the day but is it ever too early for a healthy dose of Cinque? I’d say not. Taking a swig, I close my eyes as the smooth flavour explodes on my tongue.

Cinque De Bellis whiskey is the only legitimate business my brothers and I own independent of our father. As much as he tried to take over the idea when we were developing it, we all stood firm on the fact we didn’t want his filthy hands touching what was ours.

Our old man might be a great businessman. After all, no one gets to the position he’s at without having some smarts about him. But he has this uncanny ability to turn everything dirty. And I’m certain he would have found a way to use our whiskey to benefit him and his other business dealings. The ones that happen under the radar.

Don’t get me wrong, we’re just as involved in that side of the family empire as our father is. But it’s not like any of us had much of a choice. The day we turned thirteen, we were all handed a gun, put in front of a man, and told that it was him or us.

Father of the goddamn year right there.

Gio and Santo did everything in their power to try to keep us younger kids out of it. Tried to convince our father that he didn’t need all of us to work for him, but my older brothers were young themselves at the time. Even now, I don’t think the old man would ever listen to them. It’s always his way or the grave. You either fall in line or earn your spot at the morgue.

All of our phones sound out through the otherwise silent room at the same time. I pick mine up off the table.

Vin: Dad’s acting stranger than usual.

I look up at Gio and Marcel. “What has he done?” I ask, knowing in my gut that the disappearance of our brother has to have something to do with our father.

Gio shoots off a text, and I wait for Vin’s reply.

Gio: Define strange? What’s he doing?

Vin: He’s pacing around, asking where Santo is and mumbling about how he better not be late to the ceremony.

“What the fuck? He didn’t even want this wedding to go ahead to begin with. Why would he be worried about where Santo is now?” I ask Gio. The wedding is supposed to start in two hours. Although, at this point, I doubt there’s going to be a ceremony at all.

“We have to find Santo. He wouldn’t just up and leave or run off without telling one of us,” Gio says.

“Which means he’s still in the city,” Marcel adds. “Has anyone tried Shelli’s sister?”

Then it’s like a light bulb goes off in my head. Why didn’t I think to call Shelli’s sister?

Probably because they’re estranged, and the woman wasn’t invited to the wedding. But, still, if Santo’s bride has ran off, maybe someone in her family would know where she went.

I find the old contact in my phone and dial the number. “Gabe, what can I do for you?” the familiar voice asks through the phone.

“Have you heard from Shelli?” I question her.

“No, I think I’m the last person she’d reach out to,” Kristen says.

“Any idea where she’d go if she were to say... get cold feet or something?”

At this, Kristen laughs. “Shelli would not have cold feet, and there is no way she’d ever run off on Santo. Why? What’s going on, Gabe?”

“They’re both MIA. Shelli and Santo. No one has seen or heard from either of them since last night, and we’re about two

hours away from the whole *I do* part of the day,” I say. “Look, Kristen, if you have any idea at all where she’d be, or where they’d go, I need to know.”

“There’s a cabin. It’s about an hour’s drive from the venue. It was our father’s. He left it to me and Shelli. I don’t go there but I know Shelli and Santo used to visit heaps when we were younger. I’m sending you the address now.” Kristen pauses. “When you find her, let me know, please.”

“I will.” I disconnect the call, then quickly turn to my brothers. “Let’s go. It’s a long shot, but they could be at Shelli’s dad’s old cabin. Did anyone know she had a holiday cabin?” I ask them, and they both shake their heads at me.

Prologue - chapter 4



Cold. Everything is cold. I let the chill freeze me from the inside out. Basking in the numbness it leaves behind. I need it. The numbness. I need it to not feel anything else. Because feeling this is too much.

I look down at my fiancée's lifeless body as I hold her close to my chest. Today was supposed to be the start of our forever, the rest of our lives. The beginning to our end.

Now, it's just our end.

My fingers brush the matted strands of hair away from her face. I know it's Shelli even if her face is unrecognisable. The name—my name—tattooed on her wrist tells me I'm not wrong. I thought if I just sat here, holding her, I'd eventually wake up and realise this isn't real. I'm still waiting to wake up, though. She said she had something to tell me, something about the baby. My hand hovers over her stomach. Our child

was probably the size of a bean, but it was *ours*. Hers and mine.

Now, it's gone.

She's gone. The baby is gone. My reason for living it's all gone.

The door to the cabin bursts open, and I look up to see three of my brothers walking through the door before they all stop in their tracks. The shock evident on their faces as they take in the scene in front of them. I don't say anything.

What can I say?

"What...?" Gio starts to ask, then hesitates. He walks up and squats down in front of me. He eyes Shelli's body, taking in her beaten face, the dried blood all over her torso, arms, legs, everywhere. "Fuck. Santo, what happened?"

I blink at him. "She said she wanted to talk, told me to meet her here instead of at the hotel." My voice is hoarse, probably thanks to the fact I spent the entire night screaming at my fiancée to wake up.

"Santo... I..." Gio puts a hand on my shoulder and leaves the rest of his words hanging in the air.

"I found her like this. On the bed. She was... she had no clothes on," I say.

I wrapped the blanket around her, scooped her body up, and sat on the floor with her head in my lap. That's where I've been the whole night. In this spot.

"Gio?" Gabe bends down and picks something up off the floor. I don't see what it is. I don't care. Nothing matters anymore.

"He didn't," Gio curses under his breath. "I'm going to fucking kill him."

This has me looking up again. "Who?" I ask.

"Our father," Gio says, pinching a cufflink between his fingertips. One with the letters *DB* embossed on the front. The

same one that my father has worn every day for as long as I can remember. I blink. Then I let the coldness take over again.

If I'm frozen, I can't feel. Not the betrayal, not the loss, nothing but the numbness.

Prologue - chapter 5



I watch my father pace up and down the entryway of our childhood home. He doesn't know I'm observing him. I've always been good at staying out of sight. It was the key to my survival growing up in this house.

Right now, something is really fucking off with the old man. I've seen him nervous, and I've seen him angry, but this? Whatever it is, it's nothing I've ever witnessed before. It's like he knows something or someone is coming for him. And he's waiting for it.

My phone vibrates in my hand. I look down and see Gio's name flash across the screen. "Yeah?" I breathe out.

"You still with Dad?" he asks me.

"Yeah. Something is really off, Gio," I tell him.

"Who else is at the house?"

“There’re a few soldiers outside. Maybe five.”

“Get rid of ’em. Tell them to head to the church or something.”

“Why? What’s going on?” I question him.

“Just get rid of them, and make sure the old man doesn’t leave. I’ll be there in thirty,” he says.

I walk out the side door and find two of my father’s soldiers standing guard. “Hey, man, I need you all to head over to the church.”

“Now?” one of them asks.

I raise an eyebrow. I might be the youngest De Bellis brother, but a De Bellis I am. Gio has tried his best to keep me out of my father’s world. Little does he know I’ve stepped farther into the darkness than any of my brothers realise.

My father took it upon himself to turn me into a monster. In his image. I’m just a hell of a lot better at hiding it than he is. But these soldiers. They know. They’ve seen me at work. When my old man needs to pry information out of people, it’s me he puts into a room with them.

The quiet ones are always the most lethal.

It’s what he says every time I’m sent into a room to extract information, through whatever means necessary.

At first, I tried to say no. Told him to do it himself. That didn’t go over so well. Nobody says no to a De Bellis. And let’s just say, when it becomes a case of it’s you or them, fight-or-flight instincts always have you throwing your morals out the window and choosing self-preservation instead.

“Sorry, Vin, sure. I’ll get everyone over there,” the soldier says when I don’t respond to his question. Then I turn back around and walk inside the house, finding a spot in the shadows to continue to watch my father and wait.

Prologue - chapter 6



I always knew I'd be the one to end my father's life. It was a matter of when, not *if*. I don't know how I managed to make a one-hour drive take thirty minutes, but I'm glad I did. I park the car and ensure my gun is fully loaded before jumping out.

He doesn't deserve a quick death. I know that, but that's what he's gonna get purely because I can't be assed to put it off any longer. The horror on my brother's face haunts me as I make my way up the stairs.

As soon as I open the front door, I find my father in the foyer. He takes one look at me and starts backing up. "Gio, what are you doing here?"

I glance at the pistol in his hand. "Why'd you do it?" I ask him.

"Do what?"

“Don’t play dumb, Pop. I know you did it. What I don’t know is why?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. It’s time for us to head over to the church,” he says.

“*Church?* It’s funny. I always thought a man like you would burn the second he stepped foot in a church.”

“A man like me? You mean a man like *you*? You are a younger version of me, Giovanni. I made you,” he spits out.

“And now I’m ending you,” I say, then raise my gun and pull the trigger. The bullet lands right between his eyes before he can even think about aiming his own weapon my way.

I stand, rooted to the spot, watching as his body slumps to the floor.

Vin steps out from behind a pillar. He looks at our father and then at me. “About fucking time,” he grunts.

I still don’t move. I’ve dreamt of this moment for as long as I can remember—no, I actually remember vividly. Because I’ve dreamt of it since I was eight. And now that I’m in it, it’s very anti-climactic. I thought I’d feel something. Anything, relief, remorse. But I feel nothing. Nothing but grief and worry for my brother.

How the fuck am I going to get him through this? Santo has lived for that girl for so long. How is he supposed to live without her?

Whatever it takes, I’ll do it though. There isn’t any other option. I refuse to let this bastard take my brother from me too.

“Gio, you okay?” Vin asks me.

I smile at him. “Never been better,” I say. “Let’s torch this fucking place. I think it’s time for a change of scenery.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” he says, slapping a hand on my shoulder.

A Sinner's Promise

A De Bellis Crime Family Novel

Kylie Kent

Chapter One



The church is packed with people, so many that they're spilling out onto the lawn in front of the huge old oak doors. This funeral is one fit for a king, something my old man doesn't deserve.

In our world, though, appearances are everything. Which is why I'm sitting here, in the first row, next to my four brothers. Each of us wearing sunglasses, with everyone under the impression we're hiding watery eyes. The truth? We're all hiding our disdain and pure hatred for the burnt corpse that fills the coffin.

My back is stiff, shoulders square as I tune out the ramblings of the priest. Something else my father didn't deserve, a fucking church service with a man of God praying over him. There ain't enough fucking prayers and goodwill in the world to prevent my old man's soul from travelling downward instead of up.

It's the same direction I know I'll be going. I'll see him again one day and hopefully I get the opportunity to torture his fucked-up soul down there. I might be able to broker a deal or some shit. After all, everyone has a price, even the devil himself.

There's a woman sniffing right behind me. I turn my head and glare at her. She can't see it, though, thanks to the dark glasses. "You were nothing but a cheap whore he used to fuck whenever he felt the need. Don't sit here and pretend you're anything else. Dry the fucking waterworks. It's pathetic," I hiss at her.

Her eyes bug out of her head and she looks left and then right, checking to see if anyone else heard what I said. I don't give a fuck. Anyone who knew my father also knew his need to keep pretty little blonde girls half his age around him at all times. I can spot at least five of them sitting in the pews now.

I refocus my glare on the casket. That thing cost me five grand. If it were up to me, I would have left his remains to rot at the morgue. It was Marcel who went and claimed them, arranged everything for this farce of a farewell to a man nobody fucking liked.

Next comes the part I'm looking forward to the most, the part where my brothers and I carry the fucker out to the cemetery and drop that casket into the ground, burying the old man and all his filth along with him.

That's not entirely true, though, considering his filthy hands raised all five of us. *Tainted* all five of us with the blood that ran through his veins.

With the casket hefted on one shoulder, I look around the church, the same church my father made us come to every Sunday as kids. Not so that we'd build a faith in God. No, the fucker wanted to remind us what we all were. Sinners.

They taught us about redemption in Sunday school, but even God has a limit I'm sure. There is only so much one can forgive, and the list of sins that mar my soul, well, it's far beyond forgiveness.

We walk slowly, keeping our eyes straight ahead. I don't want to look at anyone else. They're either here because they're too fucking scared not to show face and offer their sympathies, or they're just as fucked up as my father was and are here to observe me. Assess where my head is at. They're trying to figure out if I'm ready for the position I've just landed myself in. I give them nothing, my face devoid of emotion. The only thing I feel right now is fucking hot. The heat is stifling while the weight of this casket on my shoulder is like my father's last *fuck you*.

Five minutes later, we stop at the gravesite, the ground dug up and dirt piled on one side. Spectators already filling the white wooden chairs that are lined up in neat little rows. They're not family. They're not friends. They're here to watch.

I wouldn't be surprised if half of them were here to make sure the fucker really is headed six feet under. My brothers and I are not the only ones finally free of my father. A lot of people have been waiting for this day.

It's the end of an era, the start of a new reign. A new beginning for us. I always swore that I'd get them far away from the old man's fucked-up shit one day. That day is today.

Although, as I look at each of my brothers now, I wonder if I'm too late. I know there are no saving graces for me, but I'd hoped for a better future for them. I don't know if I'm enough to make that happen. After all, I am my father's son. His successor. A position I've never wanted, but can't escape either. A position I also take very seriously, especially when the lives of my brothers are at stake if I make even the tiniest of mistakes.

Once the funeral is over, I rest a hand on Santo's shoulder. "Let's go get shitfaced," I tell him.

"I think that's the best plan you've ever had," he replies, his voice flat, emotionless.

I look at him, really look at him. I worry about all my brothers, but right now, it's Santo I worry about the most. How do I help get him through this without losing him completely?

How does someone recover after finding their fiancée dead the night before their wedding? And not just dead, but murdered by the hands of their own father?

Shelli was like a sister to us; we are all grieving her loss. But to Santo? That girl was his whole world. Which is exactly why I've never let myself get too involved with a woman. The heartache I see all over my brother's face right now doesn't seem worth it.

"Are we going or do you need a few more minutes to try to psychoanalyse me, Gio?" Santo grunts.

"I'm worried about you," I tell him.

"My fiancée died, because of me. My pregnant fiancée died," he repeats. "Forgive me for not feeling fucking cheery."

"I don't expect you to be rainbows and fucking butterflies. I expect you to be angry. Devastated. I can't and won't pretend to know how you feel right now, but I am here, Santo. I will always be here for you. Whatever you need." I place a hand on his shoulder, and he stares at it like it's burning him.

"What I need right now is fucking whiskey," he says, climbing into the back of a waiting SUV and out of my reach.

Gabe and Vin each give me knowing looks as they climb in behind him. I jump in after them, Marcel joining me a moment later. "What are we going to do?" Marcel asks me while gesturing to Santo.

"I don't know. Not leave him alone, for starters. I don't know where his head is at. One of us has to always be with him. Make sure he doesn't do anything he can't undo."

"Why do you think he did it?" Marcel asks, meaning our father. It's the same question that's been running through my mind on repeat since we uncovered who was behind Shelli's death.

"Who knows why the fucker ever did anything?" I reply. Silence falls over us. Two funerals in two days. Although Shelli's was a much more intimate and sombre affair.

It isn't long before we pull up to The Treehouse, one of the bars we own and often frequent. Stepping out of the car, I look left and then right before my four brothers step up next to me. Vin's only turned eighteen and we celebrated his milestone birthday here just a few months ago. Though, today it feels like it was a lifetime ago. I glance over at him and the grim look on his face tells me he has more stress than any kid in their final year of high school should have.

"Come on," I say, stepping towards the main entrance. The two bouncers hold the doors open for us, while I head straight for our usual booth. It's where we always sit. In the centre of the room, against the wall. From this vantage point, I have eyes on every possible entryway.

I sit in the middle of the curved booth, my brothers flanking my sides. By the time we're seated, a waitress is approaching, balancing a tray in one hand. She smiles but doesn't say a word before placing a whiskey glass in front of me and then one in front of each of my brothers. I watch as she continues to pour a healthy serving of Cinque into the glasses before briefly looking up and walking away. Odd. Usually our waitresses try to start up a conversation.

"She's new. Who is she?" Santo asks, his eyes glued to the girl's back as she saunters over to the bar.

"No idea." I pick up my glass and bring it to my lips. "Why?" I ask before sipping at my drink.

"We should know who works for us, and staff should greet customers," he says.

"She's probably nervous. I mean, with the way you're looking like you're ready to rip someone's head off, it's not surprising she didn't speak up," Gabe says.

"So... what happens now?" Vin asks.

"Now, we continue on with our lives," I tell him, before adding, "And you go back to school."

"All my uniforms went up with the house. There's also the whole not actually having somewhere to live," he says.

We've been staying at my private penthouse in the city. It's by no means small, but it sure as fuck seems it when you shove five grown-ass men inside. "I'm working on it. I've got an agent looking for a property now."

"We could all just get our own places. We don't have to live together," Marcel says.

"We're better off together. We need to show a united front, now more than ever."

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and read the message from the real estate agent I have house hunting for us.

KEITH:

I've found the perfect property.

He's attached a link to a listing. I don't bother opening it.

ME:

Send me the address and meet me there in forty.

I don't wait for his reply as I pocket my phone, looking up just as Santo is sliding out of the booth. "I've gotta go look at a house. Keep an eye on him," I tell my other three brothers.

Vin slides out of the booth and I follow him. Just as I'm standing, I see the reason Santo walked away. I shrug off my jacket and throw it on the table.

Guess we're doing this then.

Santo drags some dude back by the collar of his shirt. I don't hear what he says, but I do hear the sound of bones crunching when he spins the guy around, pulls his fist back, and connects it with the fucker's nose as I step up next to them.

"Ah, fuck."

The guy's friends all get up. Two of them go for Santo. Yeah, that's not fucking happening. I don't know why he

started this fight, or if it was even warranted, but like fuck will I stand by and let anyone touch my brother.

By the time I've got one of them on the ground, Gabe, Marcel, and Vin are all beside me.

"Well, that ended quickly," Marcel says, looking around the bar. Two guys are on the ground, knocked out cold, and another four are backing away, looking at us like we're a bunch of wild beasts.

"Get this shit cleaned up," I tell Gabe before stalking over to our table. I pick up my jacket and walk out to the waiting SUV, where two of my most trusted soldiers are waiting for me.

"Where to, boss?" Dan asks while James remains tight-lipped.

Boss. It's going to take a bit to get used to that. Until then, it's business as usual. So I pull out my phone and give them the address Keith sent through.

Chapter Two



I love my job. I really do... and here is the *but* part of it. It's long hours, weekend work, and I have to constantly deal with sleazy clients and even sleazier colleagues. It's like the office is a war zone at times. Only the fittest survive.

The competition in this particular agency is something else. I've been here for four months, and I still haven't managed to find my place yet. What I have found is the insane commissions that come attached to selling the elite properties we list.

This is where I've dreamt of ending up my whole career, working my butt off to reach this level. I knew I wouldn't be dealing with your everyday families, excited first-time home buyers at the beginning of their real estate journeys. Though I don't think anything could have prepared me for the entitled pricks I've had to paste on perfect smiles for. But let's face it,

money talks. And the people buying these properties are not short of a dollar.

For the last few weeks, I've been debating if it's worth it. The higher commissions, I mean. I can't quit, though, not when I worked so hard to get here. I'm telling myself that it's just the settling-in period. That it's taking longer than I wanted or expected it to. And that's all it is. Once I'm settled, I'll find my footing.

I shut down my computer. It's six at night, earlier than I'd usually be leaving the office, but I promised my sister that I'd meet her and her new boyfriend for dinner. I need to do the big sister thing and run a check over this guy she's been seeing.

Standing from my desk chair, I unplug my laptop and stuff it into my bag. Then I walk to the door and reach for the light switch, when one of the senior sales agents stops in my open doorway.

"Eloise, so glad I caught you. I need you to head over to the St Georges Road property in Toorak," Keith says, as casually as he would greet me with a *good morning*.

I do my best to school my features, the question burning on my tongue. *Why?*

I don't ask it, of course.

"I have a client who wants to see the house tonight, and I have to pick my daughter up from ballet. I can't make it there. All I need you to do is open the house, show him around, and then tell him to call me for the details."

I blink. So, basically, he expects me to do his bitch work while he collects the commission?

I want to tell him to shove it up his ass, but I can't do that. Instead, I offer him my well-practised, professional smile. "What time?"

"Six. Thanks, Eloise. You're a lifesaver. I mean it. The wife would have smothered me in my sleep if I bailed on picking up our daughter again," Keith says and then continues walking towards the bank of elevators.

Great, just what I need. I pull out my phone and text my sister.

ME:

I'm going to be late. Sorry. Got a last-minute house showing I need to do.

JENNI:

It's okay. How late?

I read her reply and calculate the amount of time it will take for me to walk a client through that monstrous house.

ME:

Should be there by seven thirty.

JENNI:

Okay, see you then.

I throw my phone into my bag and switch off the lights. It's not until I'm in the solitude of my car that I let out the string of curse words aimed at Keith. Showing a property tonight is the last thing I wanted to do.



I check my watch again. He's late. Whoever this entitled prick of a client is, he's twenty minutes late. I've walked through this property three times already, making sure I know the layout, what features to highlight, and so on.

I should call Keith and tell him his ass of a client has wasted my time. Of course I wouldn't say it like that. I'd be much more professional about it. I check my watch again, and then I hear a car coming down the drive. I peek out the window just as a large, tinted SUV stops in front of the door.

A man dressed in a black-on-black suit steps out of the front passenger side. He opens the back door and another man steps out. Scratch that, this guy isn't just an ordinary man; he's like some kind of freaking god from the old ages. Beauty that people pay thousands of dollars to achieve, yet it all looks natural on him.

I watch like a deer caught in headlights, unable to look away as this man steps away from the car. My gaze falls on thick, dark hair that looks like he's been running his hands through it all day while his eyes are covered by black sunglasses.

I mean, who wears sunglasses at this hour? The sun is setting. It'll be dark out soon.

Then my eyes travel down to his lips. Full, thick lips. I can almost feel the heat of that mouth on my skin. Moving my inspection along, I take note that he's wearing an extremely well-fitted suit, the fabric moulded to his wide shoulders and broad chest. My gaze travels farther south before snapping back up when reality crashes down on me. Just as I lift my face, he turns his head and it's like he's staring right at me.

Shit, shit, shit! Real professional, El. Ogling a client from a window.

I turn and head to the front door. Opening it, I paste a smile on my face just as he steps up.

“Good evening, welcome. I'm Eloise. I'll be showing you through the property. Come on in, Mister...” I let my sentence trail off.

Shit, did Keith tell me the client's name? I'm racking my brain, trying to figure that out, when the man speaks up.

“Gio,” he says while holding out a hand.

I glance at it and slowly place my palm in his. I intended for the gesture to be no more than a quick, polite handshake, but he doesn't let go when I attempt to pull back. Gio holds on tighter, tilting his head at me while removing his glasses with his free hand, before revealing a pair of the darkest-green eyes I've ever seen.

Why is my heart rate picking up? Why the hell am I nervous right now? I've done this a million times before. I know what I'm doing.

"Ellie, I was expecting Keith," Gio says, finally releasing my palm.

"It's Eloise, and Keith had a family emergency." I turn my back on him. I need a breather after being under his scrutinising gaze. I bet he's one of those assholes who thinks I can't do this job as well as a man can. Straightening my shoulders, I step farther into the house. "The property has seven bedrooms, nine bathrooms, four living areas, and a kitchen that any Michelin-star chef would kill to own," I tell him. I hear the door shut and then Gio's steps fall in line with mine. I walk into the first open space. "This is the formal living room."

Gio stops just short of the threshold. He looks around briefly and then his gaze lands on me again. "What's next?" he asks, sounding almost bored.

"Ah, this way. That staircase leads to four of the seven bedrooms. The one over there leads to the other three, and the primary is on that side." I point towards the foyer. "The kitchen and dining rooms are down that way. There's also a home gym, a cinema, and a bar to the left." I gesture to the hall that is just beyond the staircase. "What would you like to see first?" I ask him.

Gio's lips tip up at one side of his mouth, like he's trying not to smile, or maybe he's trying not to laugh. "Let's start with the lower level, work our way up to the primary," he tells me.

I do my best not to feel self-conscious as I show him through the property, not that he seems all that interested in it.

I'm not sure why he's insisting on seeing every square inch of the place if he already knows he doesn't like it.

Finally opening the door to the last bedroom, I step inside. The space is huge, luxury on top of luxury, with a walk-in closet that's the size of my whole apartment. "And this is the primary. The en suite has a full tub and a steam shower." I walk towards the bathroom door and can sense his eyes boring into my back.

It's unnerving having this man's attention on me. And it's pissing me off that I'm letting him get to me like this. I feel his body step up to my back. Too close to be considered professional. Lifting my head, I look at the reflection in the mirror.

Gio is at least two inches taller than I am, his face turned down and staring at me.

"Tell me, Ellie. Would you live here?" he asks.

I take a step forward. I need distance. My knees are already starting to shake. That feeling between my legs, the one I should not be having when showing a client through a property, is getting stronger and stronger.

"It's a beautiful home," I tell him.

"That's not what I asked. I said *would you live here?*"

I think about his question, really think about it, before shaking my head. "No."

"Why not?"

I step farther into the bathroom and turn around so I'm facing him. "It's not homey enough for me. It's cold. I don't know... If I have a family one day, I'd want to raise them in a home that was warm and inviting. Not something cold that resembles a museum." I shrug.

Gio steps towards me again. Instinctually, I back up until I bump into the marble counter. Gio doesn't halt his advances, though. No, he doesn't stop until he's right in front of me, his shoes kissing mine. "If it's not this house that has you excited, then what is it, Ellie?"

“Excited?” I ask him.

“You’re blushing,” he says, placing his fingers on my neck. “Your heart is beating fast.” Then he skims his knuckles along my collarbone.

I should stop him. I should shove him back. I don’t.

Then he leans in, his lips grazing my ear. “Your nipples are pebbled through your blouse, and your thighs are wobbling. I bet if I got down on my knees and lifted that tight little skirt of yours, I’d find your panties coated in your juices, wouldn’t I, Ellie?”

Well, if my panties weren’t wet before, they certainly are now.

“Um, this... no,” I say. My palms land on his chest—mistake number one. I can feel every hard muscle, and my fingers itch to roam, to remove his jacket, to skate up underneath his shirt...

“No?” Gio questions me. I feel one of his hands slide up the inside of my leg. I don’t know why I do it. I know I shouldn’t, but my thighs spread wider, giving him access. I can feel his smile against my neck. “I think you’re lying, Ellie.”

“I’m not... I...we can’t,” I stutter out. All arguments and any thought of stopping this—whatever this is—fly out the window when his fingers push my panties aside and slide up the centre of my pussy.

A moan leaves my mouth and my fingers curl around the lapels of his jacket. My knees give way. Jesus, the man has barely touched me and I’m ready to explode.

“If it’s not the house that’s got you this worked up, what is it, Ellie?” he repeats.

“I... I don’t know...”

“Yes, you do,” he says. His fingers glide up and down, exploring every bit of my pussy, circling around my clit, and then he inserts them into my opening.

“Oh god.”

“Tell me... what has you this excited?” he asks again.

“You,” I whisper.

“Good girl,” he says and then slams his lips onto mine.

Chapter Three



My tongue pierces through her lips when she gasps. She tastes like strawberries and something I can't put my finger on. Whatever it is, it's fucking delicious, and I want more of her.

My cock has been hard since the minute she opened the door. The fake smile she had on her face did nothing to lessen her beauty. *Fucking gorgeous*—that was the first thing that came to mind when I saw her. I made her show me the entire house just to have an excuse to look at her longer.

I move my fingers up, curling them around and rubbing on that magic spot. Her legs buckle as I push my body against hers harder. Her moans fill my mouth as I fuck her with my hand. I swallow her cries of pleasure while her pussy clenches around my fingers, her orgasm rushing through and causing her entire body to shake. I continue to slide up and down,

drawing out every bit of her pleasure. I pull my lips away from her mouth and her eyes slowly blink open.

“Holy shit,” she says, her chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath.

I remove my fingers from her pussy and bring them to my mouth, sucking until I can't taste her anymore. “Fucking delicious,” I tell her.

“I...” She shakes her head. “This... shouldn't have happened. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't...”

“You coming on my fingers is the best thing I've seen in forever. Trust me, Ellie, it should have and will be happening again.”

She shakes her head. She doesn't know that I don't take *no* for an answer. If I want something, I'm going to have it, and the thing I want more than my next breath right now is *her*.

Wrapping a hand around the back of her neck, I kiss the centre of her forehead and pull back. The tender gesture is foreign to me, and I have no idea where the urge to do it came from. “I'll be in touch,” I say and walk out.

“Where to, boss?” Dan asks as soon as I exit the front door.

“Home, but let's wait for her to leave first,” I tell him before jumping into the back of the car. I pull out my phone and message Gabe to check in on Santo, while I wait for Ellie to lock up the house.

A few minutes later, I see her step out. She stops and stares in my direction. She can't see inside; the windows are blacked out. I'm fighting the urge to drag her into this damn car, though. I'd love nothing more than to take her home to my bed. I don't do that. She looks freaked out enough already. I'll be patient. It'll be worth the wait.

I lick my lips. Her taste still lingers there.

Ellie turns and walks over to her car, a black Audi convertible. Not the safest vehicle in the world.

“Have someone tail her. I want to know everything she does,” I instruct Dan and James. Neither questions me.



I walk out to the kitchen and find all four of my brothers sitting at the breakfast bar. Gabe makes a point to look at his watch. “Are you sick?” he asks me.

“No,” I reply, refusing to play into their bullshit by adding anything more.

“Were you out?” Vin adds.

“No.” I take a cup from the cabinet and fill it with coffee.

“You’re always up before any of us,” Marcel says. It’s not a question, so I’m not going to respond to it.

“We’re leaving in ten minutes. We all have to be at the attorney’s office,” I tell them and walk out of the kitchen with my coffee in hand.

I would usually stay around, have breakfast with them, but I don’t want to deal with their interrogation. The truth is I was up. I spent hours on my laptop, looking up every bit of information I could find on Ellie. And then I spent another few hours wondering why I even care. It’s actually pissing me off that thoughts of her have been filling my head for the past two days. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her. I want her something fierce. I can’t remember a time I’ve ever wanted a woman as much as I do right now. I also can’t think of a single time I’ve denied myself for so long.

Two days feels like a fucking lifetime. I’ve been getting regular updates from James. He’s put one of the junior soldiers on her tail. For the last forty-eight hours, all she’s done is go to work and then back home. She spends long days at her office and has been the last one to leave each night. I don’t like that she’s working so late, walking out to her car by herself. Anything could happen to her. I’m telling myself that I only care because I haven’t had her yet. That once I’ve fucked her,

I'll stop following her. I'll stop worrying about what she's doing and if she's safe or not.

Emptying my cup, I set it on the side table near the elevator and head down to the garage. Dan and James are waiting by the cars.

"Morning, boss," James says.

"Morning," I mumble before getting into the back seat.

The ride to the lawyer's office is silent. Santo and Gabe are in the car with me. Marcel and Vin are in the SUV ahead of us. James pulls up out front of the building. I wait for him to open my door before I step out. I look up and down the street. It's a habit ingrained in me. One I won't stop. Looking for danger before my brothers get out of the car. I would much rather be the one to take a bullet aimed at us.

"Let's get this shit done. I don't even know why we have to do this. We already know that everything was left to Gio," Santo grunts.

"Us. Everything was left to us," I correct him. "I'm not running this shit alone, Santo. We are in this together."

"Let's just get it done," Gabe says. Marcel and Vin step up next to us.

"Let's go." I lead my brothers into the office. I look around the very plain interior, wondering why my father changed attorneys and why he chose one who barely looks like they can keep the lights on.

The secretary glances up, taking in the five of us. Her eyes widen and a deep blush creeps up her neck.

"We have an appointment," I tell her.

"Uh, yes. The De Bellis brothers. Mr Sawyer is expecting you," she says before gesturing to a door.

"Thank you." I nod my head and walk in that direction. Without knocking, I open the door.

The balding man behind the desk stands from his chair the moment we enter. "Mr De Bellis. Welcome. Come on in."

I don't say anything, not until I take a seat in front of his desk. "Mr Sawyer, let's not waste time here. Review whatever bullshit you have to review," I tell him.

The attorney scrambles with the stack of papers on his desk. "Ah, yes, of course. Your father had some very specific instructions in his will, regarding his various assets."

I raise a single eyebrow. I couldn't give a shit about my father's assets. I'll build everything up from nothing again if I have to.

"All the companies are left to Giovanni De Bellis," Sawyer reads out. "The car collection is to be left to Vincenzo De Bellis. The properties are to be evenly split between all five sons," he says, looking up at us. "A sum of three million dollars is to be left to an anonymous benefactor."

"What?" I ask.

"Three million dollars is going to an anonymous benefactor," he repeats.

"What the fuck do you mean *anonymous*?" Who the fuck is my father leaving three million dollars to?

"I can't say."

"You see, that's where we have a problem. *Can't* isn't in my vocabulary. Who did my father leave that money to?" I ask again.

"I don't know. Like I said, it's anonymous and the funds have already been transferred to an account," Sawyer tells me.

I reach over the desk and snatch the papers out of his hand. It's there. Everything he just read out is right there in front of me. I flip the pages but there's nothing that clarifies who that money went to. I pass the documents to Gabe. He's tapping away at his phone, and I know he's already checking all the bank accounts we have at our disposal.

I push to my feet and button my jacket. "Thank you for your time, Mr Sawyer," I say before spinning around and walking out the door with my brothers in tow. I don't say a

word until we're all enclosed inside the car. "Find out where the fuck that money went and to whom," I tell Gabe.

"On it, boss," he says, his eyes still glued to his screen.

I take out my own phone. It's time I get Keith to have Ellie show me some more properties. So I type out an email with very specific requests of what I expect to find in a potential listing. I also make note that I want the house to be shown by Ellie.

When the car pulls into the underground garage, I get out and stalk towards one of my other vehicles. I need to head over to Cinque and check on things there.

"Ah, boss, you want me to follow...?" James asks.

"No, I'll be fine. Stick around here," I tell him, jumping into my Lamborghini Revuelto. It was a purchase I made mostly to piss off my father when I turned twenty-one. *Mostly*. Because I fucking love this car. It's my favourite out of my entire collection.

Firing up the ignition, I close my eyes as she purrs to life. Then I drive out of the garage and pull into traffic. The Cinque distillery is a ninety-minute drive from town. But in this beast, it'll take me less than sixty.

As soon as I get out onto the highways, I slam my foot down and feel the power that is this car. All thoughts leave my mind. Well, most thoughts, because *she's* still fucking there.

Chapter Four



“Okay, that pint of Ben & Jerry’s really isn’t going to solve your mental breakdown,” I say before snatching the tub of sweet cream and cookies from my best friend Dani’s hands.

“I agree. It’s only going to make you sadder. But *this...*” Daisy adds, holding up a bottle of tequila. “This, my friend, will make everything better!”

Dani groans and covers her face with her hands. “I don’t think tequila and me are a good idea right now,” she says while watching Daisy pour out a tray of shots.

“You’re not in the right frame of mind to make responsible decisions, which is why we’re here to make them for you.” Claire places a plate of wedged limes in the centre of Dani’s coffee table with her declaration.

“I really appreciate you all being here and putting up with my overdramatic ass. Once again,” Dani tells us all.

“Nonsense. There is nowhere else we would rather be,” Daisy says, handing out a glass for each of us to take.

Picking up the salt, I lift Dani’s hand and lick the back of it before I pepper a generous amount of salt on the spot.

“Lick, shoot, suck!” Daisy yells out, and all four of us follow her very enthusiastic lead.

We’re here to help take Dani’s mind off the fact that her dipshit of an ex, who left her at the altar on her wedding day, just got married. To someone else. It’s only been a few months. I know Dani says she’s over it, but she’s not. I know this girl better than I know myself. We’ve been best friends since the second grade. There is nothing we don’t know about each other. Yet, as I sit here recalling the events from a few nights ago, it eats at me that I haven’t told her about my mystery client.

Tonight isn’t the night to bring it up though. What would I even say?

Oh, by the way, I received the orgasm of my life from some client who fingered me while I was meant to be showing him the property?

Yeah, I don’t think so. I’m ashamed that I let that happen. I don’t want to think about what my friends would say about it. I’ve worked so hard to gain respect in my industry, and that one act of weakness is enough to jeopardise all of it.

“Okay, another!” Dani says, slamming her glass down on the coffee table while Claire and Daisy cheer her on.

Daisy refills our glasses. I reach for mine and hold it in the air. Maybe getting wasted right now is exactly what I need—it’s not something I’d usually do on a Sunday night, but desperate times and all.

“To friendships that will never end,” Dani says.

“Hear, hear!” Daisy shouts. “Now, lick, shoot, suck.”

I down the liquor, feeling the burn travel along my throat. Then I look at each of my friends, so grateful for their presence in my life.

Dani is the more serious one out of our group. She's beyond beautiful but doesn't know it. She had dreams of becoming a lawyer until her dipshit ex convinced her to quit uni. Now she's a paralegal and about to start a new position with Melbourne's top firm.

While Daisy is a youth counsellor. Her rebellious teenage years spurred a passion for helping other young girls struggling through life much like she did. Even if she appears as though she'd be better suited on the catwalk. She's tall, with a great figure, but it's her eyes that draw you into her beauty. They're pale blue and as unique as she is.

Then there's Claire—the girl is incredibly smart and works for a top-tier finance firm. Honestly, she's the complete package. Beautiful with curves in all the right places, long dark hair, and the brains to go really far in the corporate world.

My phone dings with an incoming email notification, breaking me from my thoughts of my friends. I swipe it from the coffee table and open it. Because, technically, I never switch off. If a client wants to make an offer at this stupid hour on a Sunday night, then I'm going to take it.

I open the email that's come through. It's from Keith.

Eloise,

This slipped my mind to forward to you. Please refer to the attached email from my client, Giovanni De Bellis.

Regards,

Keith

I scroll down to the email from this client of his.

Keith,

I want to see more properties. Ensure they fit the following criteria:

·Must have a homey feel. Warm, inviting.

·**Must be suitable to raise a family.**

·**Must not resemble a museum.**

I expect Eloise to be the one to show and sell me any future properties.

Giovanni De Bellis

I nearly choke on my drink. Holy freaking shitballs! My words from the other night repeat back to me. When Gio asked why I wouldn't want to live in that listing in Toorak, I told him, *"It's not homey enough for me. It's cold. I don't know. If I have a family one day, I'd want to raise them in a home that was warm and inviting. Not something cold that resembles a museum."*

Why is he looking for a property that suits my criteria, instead of his own? And why do I have butterflies at the thought of showing that man more homes? Something about his full name sounds familiar. I repeat it inside my head a few times before I type it into Google.

His face comes up on the first page of results, along with the heading: *New Boss for the De Bellis Crime Family*. That's where I've heard that name before. The De Bellis family is whispered about through Melbourne, but I've never met any of them. Until recently, I guess. I honestly thought they were some kind of urban legend. Now, not only have I met one of them but I met the boss. And I let him finger-fuck me in the bathroom.

Shit. Shit, double shit. What the hell have I done?

"We need to go dancing." Daisy pulls Dani up from the sofa. "Let's go!" she screams.

"It's Sunday, Daisy," Dani says.

"Precisely why we should go. It won't be as busy." Daisy pushes Dani towards her bedroom. "Put a sexy little number on and come dancing with me, Dani."

"Yes, let's do it," I agree. Right now, I could really use the distraction.

"I'm in too," Claire says.

“We all have to work in the morning. I have a new job I’m starting tomorrow. I cannot be hungover,” Dani reminds us.

“Like you’ve ever been hungover in your life. Get dressed or I’m dragging you out in that,” I tell her, waving a hand up and down her body.

“Okay, but I’m coming home early,” she insists.



The bar is busy for a Sunday night. We’ve been here for a few hours, dancing to the point that my feet are sore. But every time I look at Dani, I can see how torn up she is over her ex. Then an idea pops into my head.

The best way to get over someone is to get under someone new.

I look around the crowded room. But it can’t be anyone of the douchebags here. No, I have a much better place in mind when it comes to finding Dani a new bedmate.

I lean into her ear. “Come on, I’ve got a place I want to show you. You’re going to love it,” I tell her.

She looks contemplative before she smiles back at me. “Sure, let’s do it.”

We make our way down the street and then turn onto a side alley.

“Is this the part where you murder me? Because, if that’s the case, don’t get any blood on these shoes. They’re really expensive,” Dani says, looking down at her feet.

“I’d remove your shoes first. Don’t worry.” I laugh. “Okay, promise me you’re going to keep an open mind,” I tell her before stopping in front of a red and white door.

“Why do I need to have an open mind?” she asks me.

“Because I want you to experience this just once. Who knows? It might inspire you to get the duster out and clear

those cobwebs.”

“Huh?”

I lead all the girls through the door, pausing at the counter. The sign above it reads: *Fire & Ice*. This place is owned by a woman I sold a house to last month. She told me I was welcome to stop by anytime. Well, I guess tonight I’m finally taking her up on her offer.

After talking to the girl behind the counter, I turn back to Dani. “Okay, you’re all set. Follow her. She’s taking you to your treatment room.”

“Oh, are we at a spa?” Dani asks me.

“Of sorts.” Daisy snorts. She knows exactly what this place is.

“Just go and watch. That’s all I’m asking you to do. Trust me,” I plead with Dani.

“Okay,” she says, and I watch my friend disappear behind the door.

“Come on, let’s wait outside for her to rush back out and yell at us.” I laugh.

Daisy, Claire and I lean against the wall opposite the door and wait for Dani. I honestly thought she’d be running out within minutes. The fact that she hasn’t means she’s either gone into shock at what she’s seeing, *or* she’s enjoying herself more than we thought she would. I hope it’s the latter.

When half an hour passes and she still hasn’t come out, I look to Claire. “Should we go in there and look for her?”

“Ah, nope. I think she’s okay?” Claire says, nodding to the door in front of us, where we see Dani walking out with a man. She’s so wrapped up in whoever this stranger is that she doesn’t notice us standing on the opposite side of the alley as she walks past.

“Well, shit, guess that worked out better than I thought,” I say more to myself.

“Way better,” Daisy agrees.

“Okay, well, I’m heading home.” Claire yawns. “I can’t believe we went out on a Sunday.”

“I’ll share a ride with you,” Daisy offers.

“I’m going to walk,” I tell them, and the girls stop to look at me. “I’ll be fine. You guys go. I’m only a few blocks from here.”

“We can walk with you,” Claire is quick to suggest.

“No, don’t be silly. Honestly, I’m fine. It’s like a ten-minute walk.”

“Okay, but text us the minute you’re inside your locked apartment,” Daisy says.

After hugging and promising to text both of them as soon as I walk through my door, I start making the trek home. The alcohol is wearing off and my feet are aching, but no way am I taking these shoes off. I get that feeling that I’m being watched, but every time I turn around, no one’s there. I speed up anyway, ignoring the fact that my feet are killing me.

Five minutes later, I push through my apartment door and secure the deadlock. I walk over to the window and peer out. Once again, the street appears empty. Nobody’s there—well, not that I can see. So I make my way to my bedroom, kick off my shoes, and fall onto my bed before pulling my phone from my pocket and texting the girls.

ME:

I’m home, safely behind locked doors!

CLAIRE:

Thank god!

DAISY:

Sweet dreams, buttercup!

I throw my phone onto the bed. I need to shower and then sleep for a few hours. Tomorrow, I have the task of finding Giovanni De Bellis a homey property, suitable for raising a family...

Oh shit, what if he already has a family? He *is* looking for a large house after all. Did I let a married man touch me?

Snatching my phone off the bed again, I jump down the rabbit hole of Googling every little detail I can find about Giovanni De Bellis. The one thing I don't see is any mention of a wife or kids. I decide to stop the madness and go for that shower. As it is, I'm looking at four hours of sleep... *max*.

Chapter Five



Fire & Ice.

I read the text that James sent me last night again. Ellie was at Fire & Ice. A fucking sex club. From what my men tell me, she was only inside the building for three minutes before she walked out with her friends and stood in the alley for another thirty.

What the fuck was she doing at a sex club? The better question is why does the thought of her being there send a fiery rage through my body?

When I received that message last night, I was close to going down there and confronting her right in that alley. I was two steps away from the elevator to do just that when I heard the smash of a glass. Santo had thrown a bottle of whiskey against the wall. I turned around, walked into the living room, and found my brother staring at the wall with an empty look in his eyes. And immediately I knew I had to stay and help him.

Although I don't think I helped much, at least he wasn't alone. I spent the night drinking with him and listening to him talk about Shelli. I feel his heartache. I just wish there was something I could do about it. The old saying *time heals all wounds* comes to mind. I really fucking hope that's true right now. More than that, I hope we can hold him together long enough to get there.

I asked him to go to Cinque today with Gabe, praying that having something to do—anything to do—would keep his mind busy enough to stop him from drowning in his grief. I've been checking in with Gabe all day, asking for updates. According to him, Santo's grouchy but fine.

It wasn't until around midday that I received an email from Ellie with a list of properties she'd found. I emailed her back, telling her I'd meet her at the first one at six p.m. It's now five thirty and I'm wishing I had mentioned an earlier time.

I let James and Dan have the night off—well, they're going to check in with a few of our bars in the city, so that's not entirely true. I wanted to be alone with Ellie, take my time with her this go-around.

I feel like a kid on their way to a candy store. I remember the taste of her, the sweetness. I can't wait to run my tongue through the lips of her pussy. I need to see her face, hear her moans when I make her fall apart beneath me.

The gates to the estate are already open, so I drive up and park behind her Audi. She really should have a safer car. I wonder if she knows how little protection a vehicle like that would give her in an accident.

I'm early, but seeing as she's here, I get out of the car and make my way up to the door. I don't take my time to look at the property's exterior. Yeah, I might need a house but right now what I need more is *her*.

The front door is open. I walk inside and look up. There's only one staircase off the foyer. It has that old school charm, dark wooden floors, and grey-and-white walls. Wrought-iron railings wind around the staircase that leads to the second floor.

I have to hand it to her. The first impression is *homey*.

I continue my way through the house, passing a large library to my right. I should make myself known, warn her that I'm here. I don't do that, though. Instead, I look for her while taking in every little detail. I eventually find Ellie in the kitchen. Her back is to me and it's clear that she has no idea I'm here. Which fucking pisses me off. I could be anyone walking in behind her and she would be none the wiser.

I close the distance and lean in to her ear. "Miss me?" I ask.

Ellie jumps a mile high and spins around with a hand on her chest. "Oh my f—" She stops midthought and straightens her shoulders. "Mr De Bellis, I'm sorry. I didn't hear you come in," she says, taking a step back.

My eyes trail up her body, starting at her feet. Red toenails shine against a pair of tan-coloured heels. I move up the length of her legs. Her skirt is a respectable length, ending just above the knee. But it's tight as fuck, clinging to her body like a glove. She's wearing a black blouse with a huge bow at the top. Absolutely no cleavage on display, but I can still see the outline of her lace bra beneath the thin fabric. Her breasts, full and perky, have my hands itching to fill my palms with the tender flesh. My gaze lands on her lips. I desperately want to lean in and claim them. Then I meet her eyes. That's where I pause. There is something there, something different.

Whatever it is she's thinking, I already know I don't fucking like it.

"It's Gio," I tell her.

"I'm sorry about the other day. That, well, I shouldn't have done that. I think we should stick to pure professionalism here, Mr De Bellis. Let me show you around the property," she says, her eyes shifting around the room as if she's trying to look anywhere but at me.

"Professional? Sure, whatever you want. Lead the way, Ellie." I smirk. I'll let her think I'll go along with her request. For now.

“It’s Eloise,” she grits out between clenched teeth before her lips curl up into a forced smile. “This is the kitchen. It has updated appliances, plenty of storage... There’s a butler’s pantry through here.” She gestures to her left, then turns and walks in that direction.

I follow her into what’s practically a second kitchen. I take a quick look around before my eyes focus back on her. She glances behind me towards the only exit from the enclosed space. She has no idea she just trapped herself in here with a monster.

I could show her, let her know just how fucking reckless she’s being with her own safety. I don’t though. Why? Because I don’t like the fear I spot in her eyes.

“It’s nice,” I say, before turning around and walking out of the pantry through to what looks like a formal dining area.

“This dining room can comfortably fit a table for twenty. I don’t know how many... uh, occupants you, um...” She clears her throat. “But this space is great for entertaining.”

“Occupants?” I question her.

“Who you intend to have living here, with you, in such a huge house,” she clarifies.

“I have four brothers. They’ll all be living with me,” I tell her.

“Oh, okay.” She pivots on her heel. “The formal living area is this way.”

I follow her through the entire house. By the time we make it to the last room, my cock is harder than a fucking rock. “Show me the kitchen again,” I instruct her. Ever since I saw it, I’ve wanted to bend her over that fucking counter.

“Ah, sure.” She guides me back downstairs and over to the kitchen. “So what do you think?” she asks.

“Fucking gorgeous,” I say.

Ellie turns her head, catching me staring right at her ass. “So you like it?”

“I like it a lot,” I admit while knowing full well we are not talking about the same thing.

“Great. The listing price is 9.4 million.”

“Would you live here?” I ask her.

“What?”

“Would you live here?” I repeat, even though I know she heard me the first time.

“If I could afford to buy a house like this, I’d live here. It really does have everything,” she says, her voice almost wistful.

“Great. I’ll take it.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll take it. I’ll have my solicitor contact you,” I tell her once we’re back in the kitchen.

“Ah... okay. That’s... good. Thank you.”

“Now that, that’s out of the way. This whole being professional bullshit? Yeah, I don’t agree with it. I want you.”

Ellie’s eyes bulge out of her head and her cheeks turn a shade of pink, but her heart picks up speed. Her breathing gets heavier, and that little shake in her legs does not escape me. “Ah, I don’t... I’m sorry but I can’t,” she says.

I tilt my head. It takes two steps forward for me to have her right where I want her. Pushed up against the white marble counter. One of my hands fisting her ponytail, pulling slightly to bring her face up so she has no choice but to look at me. Ellie’s gasps echo through the room.

“You can’t? That doesn’t sound anything like *you don’t want to*, Ellie. Tell me... Do you want me to make you come so hard you see stars? Right here, on this counter?” I ask her. My lips are a breath away from hers. “I can show you the kind of pleasure you’ve only dreamt of.” I let my lips skim along her jaw until I reach her ear. “Tell me to stop and I’ll stop. Tell me that you don’t want to, not that you can’t.” I look at her.

Her eyes are glossy, her cheeks redder than before, and her chest is heaving.

“I...”

“Don’t even think about lying to me, Ellie, because I’ll know and I’ll have to make a point of proving you a liar,” I tell her.

Her lips clamp shut. I can see the turmoil on her face. She wants this. She just doesn’t want to admit it.

“I’m going to take your silence as permission to touch you, to lick you, to fuck you until my name is embedded in the walls of this house.”

Her mouth opens, and I take the invitation, slamming my own onto hers and pushing my tongue inside. She tastes like strawberries again. Fucking strawberries.

My fist pulls harder at her hair as I bring her face to the perfect angle, one that allows me to go deeper. Fuck, how am I so worked up just from kissing this woman?

Letting go of her hair, I tug at the hem of her skirt, lifting it so it bunches at her waist. I bend down to drag her panties over her legs. Legs that open wider. Then I press her against the cabinet, my tongue gliding through the centre of her pussy. I groan as her taste explodes in my mouth.

“Fuck, you taste good, so fucking sweet,” I grunt before diving back in.

“Oh god. Fuck. Shit,” Ellie hisses, but it’s not loud enough. I want her screaming. I want to hear my name fall from those lips of hers.

I circle my tongue around her clit while pushing two fingers inside her soaking-wet cunt. “You’re so fucking wet for me, Ellie, so fucking ready. Tell me again how you can’t do this.” I look up at her.

“What are you doing? Don’t stop. Oh shit.” Her head falls back when my mouth covers her mound again. I suck on her clit while flattening my tongue. Ellie’s hips start moving, grinding into my face harder. I slide my fingers in and out,

drawing out her pleasure. “Gio!” she screams as her body violently shakes.

I continue licking until she comes down. As her body relaxes, I climb to my feet, picking her up by the hips and sitting her on the edge of the counter. My lips find her mouth. I can't get enough of kissing her. When her hands curl into the back of my head, pulling me closer, I feel like I've just won a war.

Using one hand, I undo my pants and free my cock. I reach into my back pocket and retrieve the condom I put in there for this exact purpose. Then I break the kiss, pull away, and rip the foil packet open with my teeth. I don't break eye contact with her as I roll the protection down my shaft. I line up my cock with her entrance, and Ellie's eyes flicker closed.

“Open your eyes. Look at me. I want you to see who's claiming you. Who's taking ownership of this hot little cunt of yours,” I tell her while slowly sliding my cock into her tight hole. Her eyes snap open and her mouth forms an O-shape as I sink all the way inside. She's so fucking tight I'm afraid I'm hurting her. I don't move. “You okay?” I ask.

Ellie nods her head. “Uh-huh, it's just... ah... been a while,” she says, looking away from me.

I grip her chin and force those eyes back to mine. “Good.”

I claim her mouth again, my hand moving to her blouse and ripping it open. The buttons fall to the floor as I palm her breasts in one hand while my other wraps around her waist to grip her ass. I slide out and then slam back in. Her breath catches, and a moan fills my ears. I repeat the motion, over and over, slowly increasing the speed.

“Fuck, you feel so fucking good. So fucking perfect,” I grunt.

“Gio, I'm going to...” Her head lulls back. My mouth clamps onto her neck, biting, leaving as many marks as I possibly can.

“I know. Give it to me, Ellie. I want everything you have,” I tell her. Reaching between us, I press a thumb against her

clit, and the contact sends her over that cliff of bliss. Her pussy clenches around my cock.

I feel my balls tighten, and my own release comes right after hers. I push her backwards so she's lying flat against the counter. Then I pull out of her, toe off my shoes, let my pants fall to the floor, and climb on behind her. I straddle her body as I remove the condom. I shuffle forward on my knees until my cock is at her lips.

"Lick it clean," I instruct her.

Ellie wets her lips before her fist wraps around my cock, and she guides it into her mouth. But she doesn't just lick it clean. Fuck me. No, she goes about sucking me until I'm rock-hard again and coming down her throat.

Chapter Six



I should feel awkward as Gio picks me up and places my feet back on the ground. He grips the edge of my skirt and smooths it into place. He then proceeds to bend over and tug on his pants. I watch in horror as he snatches up my panties and shoves them into his pocket.

I should ask for them back—I mean, what does he even want with them? The words just won't leave my mouth. I pull at my blouse, trying to cover my chest, but it's useless. The fabric is completely ruined.

Gio glances at me. Then he unbuttons his shirt and slides it off his arms. Reaching out a hand, he removes what's left of my shredded blouse from my body and offers me his shirt instead. I slide my arms through the sleeves and stand motionless as Gio silently does up the buttons for me.

It's weird. Neither of us has said a word. Yet it's not awkward. It should be awkward. I just let a client fuck me on

the counter of a house I'm supposed to be selling. This is going to ruin me. The cold reality of what I've done sets in, quickly followed by the panic.

"Stop," Gio barks, his tone demanding.

"Stop what?" I ask, taking a step back from him.

"Stop thinking about whatever it is you were just thinking about," he tells me.

"You don't know what I was thinking."

"No, but I do know it wasn't anything good. What was it?" he asks.

"I've just completely fucked up," I admit while throwing my hands in the air. I snag my bag from the counter, along with the flyers for this property. "I've ruined everything and I only have myself to blame. Well, myself and you. And Keith," I ramble on.

"Keith? What the fuck does he have to do with anything?" Gio grunts.

"If he hadn't asked me to show you that house last week, I never would have met you and *this*..." I point between the two of us. "...would never have happened."

"I should send Keith a thank you basket then." Gio smirks.

"It's okay for you. Your reputation isn't at stake. Your career—*your livelihood*—isn't on the chopping block. Do you have any idea what will happen to me if word got out I did this?" I ask, though I don't expect an answer. Men in positions of power don't get it. They don't understand how easily things can come tumbling down around us women.

"Nothing is going to happen to you, and nobody but you and me knows what went on here."

"Oh yeah? How do you know the owners of this house don't have cameras? You can't know that this won't get out."

"They do have cameras. I had them disabled before I arrived," he says calmly, like messing with someone's security system is a totally normal thing to do.

“Well, I’m glad I lived up to your forgone conclusions about me being a sure thing.” I stomp down the hall. “Since you managed to shut down those cameras, I’m assuming you can lock the front door behind you too.”

I can hear him, feel him, as he follows me to my car. Just as I reach for the door handle, I’m jerked around, and once again I find myself pressed up against my client’s body.

“I understand your worries. I do.” Gio sighs while brushing loose strands of hair out of my face. “But I mean what I say, Ellie. Nothing will happen to you. I will make sure of that.”

He seems so sincere, and I want to believe that he can follow through on his promise. But that’s the thing. I don’t trust easily and this is a man I don’t know. My body might react to his in ways it never has before, but I don’t *know* him. And the little I read up on Google didn’t exactly paint Gio De Bellis in a good light.

“I have to go,” I tell him.

“Where?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” I say, straightening my shoulders. I push against his chest. I need space. I need to get away from him before I do something stupid, like jump his body and beg him to fuck me again.

Gio steps back. “I’ll see you soon, Ellie,” he says. And then he leans in, kisses my forehead, and walks towards his car. His bright-orange Lambo.

I roll my eyes. I would suggest that he’s compensating for something with that car, but I know firsthand that he’s not. I can still feel him between my legs.



Rushing into the restaurant, I do my best to ignore the fact that I have no panties on. I sprayed like half a bottle of perfume on

me in the car, trying to make sure I didn't have that sex smell lingering on my body. No one wants to smell like sex when they're meeting their mum and sister for dinner.

I know as soon as I sit down at the table that Jenni has not forgiven me for standing her up last week. I was supposed to meet her boyfriend. I had planned to be there. And then Gio happened.

I need to remove all thoughts of that man from my mind. "I'm sorry I'm late," I say.

"It's okay, sweetheart." My mum smiles at me. "Are you feeling okay? You look a little flushed?" she asks, raising a hand to my forehead.

"Fine, just tired," I mumble.

"You're working too much, El. You really should create a better balance," Mum says.

"It's fine. I'm still just settling in. Tell me what's happening in your worlds? How's school?" I direct the last question to my sister.

"It's going well. I've been getting really good grades." Jenni grins. It's her first year at university. I had no doubt she'd be acing her studies. She was valedictorian of her senior year. My sister has always been an academic.

"Obviously, you're a brainiac," I tell her.

"And you're a top-selling real estate agent wearing a man's shirt to dinner." She smirks.

I look down at myself. She's right. I *am* still wearing Gio's shirt. I didn't have time to go home, and I honestly forgot I was wearing it until I pulled up into the car park. I did my best to try to make it look intentional, rolling the sleeves up to my elbows and tying the shirt at the front. I think I was kidding myself though. There is nothing that can hide the fact that I'm wearing someone else's clothes.

"I spilled juice on my blouse at work and didn't have anything to change into. So a colleague lent me one of his

spares.” The lie spills from my lips easily. It’s not like I can tell them the truth.

“Uh-huh, sure, if that’s what you say.” Jenni laughs.

“Well, that was nice of your colleague,” Mum adds. Although I’m sure she doesn’t believe a word I said, judging by the way her lips twitch. She looks like she’s trying not to laugh.

After dinner, I walk out of the restaurant with my mum and sister in tow. I look up and down the street. That feeling like I’m being watched hits me as soon as I step onto the pavement. I don’t see anyone, though. Shaking it off, I say my goodbyes and head to my car.

I think it’s my conscience playing havoc on me. I know what I did with Gio was good. It was great, the best orgasm I’ve ever had. But a good orgasm or two does not make it *right*.

As soon as I get back to my apartment, I head straight for the bathroom, where I turn on the hot water and let the room steam up before I strip out of my clothes. Well, half of them are mine at least. I bring the collar of Gio’s shirt to my nose. It smells like him, a mixture of citrus and whiskey. His scent shouldn’t be giving me a sense of peace.

I quickly remove the shirt and toss it into the wash basket. Then I step into the shower and allow the hot water to flow over my body as I lean back and close my eyes. The problem with that is... I see him. As clearly as if he were in this room. Hovering over me, with his cock in his hand, telling me to lick him clean. He doesn’t know he didn’t need to say the words, because as soon as I saw it, I wanted to suck him down.

I’ve never done anything like that before. It felt so dirty, so depraved, but oh so freaking good and somehow freeing at the same time. This man is confusing me. I don’t even know him.

But you want to. The little voice in my head taunts me.

I cut my shower short, wash all the important bits, and dry off. Then I slip into a pair of sleep shorts and a tank and climb

into bed. Picking up my phone, I scroll through my message feed until I find the group chat with the girls.

Dani discovered that the one-night stand from the sex club and her new boss were one and the same. She's been struggling with the fact that she slept with her boss ever since. I've encouraged her to do it again. Going off what she says, the guy has some skills and she deserves to enjoy herself. Besides, I'm hardly one to judge. I just had sex with a client.

ME:

How's everyone's week going?

DAISY:

Could be better. I could be Dani, getting hot boss sex.

CLAIRE:

Great. I think I've made a breakthrough with that one girl I told you all about.

ME:

That's amazing, Claire. Daisy, maybe hot boss has friends for us???

I ignore the pit that forms in my stomach the moment I type that message and send it through. I don't want to be in anyone's bed—well, not anyone who isn't Giovanni De Bellis. No, actually, I do not want to be in his bed either.

Okay, that's a lie. I do, but I'll keep on denying it for as long as I can.

DANI:

NOT sleeping with hot boss. And can we not call him HOT BOSS? How about ASSHOLE BOSS?

ME:

Nope, hot boss has a better ring to it. And I Googled him. He is hot!

DAISY:

What she said.

Another message pops up on my phone. It's not from the chat app though; it's an SMS from an unknown number.

UNKNOWN:

I've changed my mind. I don't want that house anymore. I'm going to need you to show me more listings as soon as possible.

ME:

I'm sorry. Who is this?

UNKNOWN:

Gio. How soon can you show me another property?

My heart starts to race. I click on his number and add it to my contacts.

ME:

What was wrong with the house today? I thought you liked it?

GIOVANNI DE BELLIS:

Nothing. It just didn't have the right feel.

His answer surprises me. What does he even mean by *the right feel*?

ME:

I think it would be best if I arranged for another agent to show you some more properties.

I close my eyes when I hit send. I rack my brain, trying to come up with someone from the office I can pawn Gio off on. All the female agents get skipped right off the bat, which is something I'm not going to analyse any further right now.

GIOVANNI DE BELLIS:

No.

No, just no. Who the hell does he think he is? Before I can message him back, my phone starts ringing in my hand. It's him.

"Hello," I answer, because the customer service part of me wants to perform.

"Ellie, how soon can you show me another property?" he asks me again.

"Ah... I really don't think it's a good idea. There are plenty of agents..."

"I don't want anyone else, Ellie. It's you or no one."

Shit, if we lose him as a client altogether, I'll have my head chewed off at work. He's an important asset to the agency.

"Okay, I'll put together a new list and email it to you."

"Perfect. Now tell me about your dinner. Who'd you meet?" he says.

My eyes bug out of my head. "How do you know I went out to dinner?"

"I have ways of knowing everything I need to know," he tells me.

"Are you following me?"

"As much as I'd love to spend my days following you around, no, I'm not. I have businesses that don't run themselves," he says.

I don't even know how to respond to that.

"Ellie, who'd you meet for dinner?" Gio asks again.

"My mum and sister. Who'd you have dinner with?" I counter.

"My brother, Santo."

"Are you close to your brothers?"

"Yes. Are you close with your sister?" he fires back.

"Um, sort of. She's younger, just started uni this year. But she's a brainiac, real smart. She's going to go far. I can tell." I'm proud of Jenni. I need to work on being around for her more.

"You don't think you're smart?" Gio says.

"I do, just not like Jenni. Everyone is good at something, right? I'm good at selling houses. My sister? She's book smart, but she's not always good at socialising. Although she did just get her first boyfriend, so maybe uni is bringing her out of her shell. What would you say you're good at?" I question him, because I'm curious as to what he actually does.

"Giving you orgasms," he replies without missing a beat.

“What is it that you do, Gio?” I try again.

“Business. Family business. I don’t want to bore you with all the details,” he says.

“Uh-huh. Look, it’s late. I have to go.”

“Ellie?”

“Yeah?”

“Get up and lock your door,” he says before cutting the call. I jump out of bed and run from the room, over to my front door. It’s shut but the deadlock isn’t in place.

How the hell did he know that?

Chapter Seven



Sitting in my office at De Bellis headquarters, which is where all the senior managers of our legitimate businesses are based out of, I look across my desk and throw down my pen. “Any intel on who the old bastard left that money to?” I ask.

“No. It’s been syphoned into an untraceable account,” Gabe tells me.

“Nothing is untraceable. We just have to look harder,” I say.

“We’ve been a little busy making sure Santo doesn’t spiral any more than he has.” Marcel shakes his head.

“He just buried his fiancée, the same fiancée who was killed by our father. I think he’s allowed time to grieve. He’s not going to recover overnight,” I grind out.

“We know that, but he’s losing it. You know what he was doing last night?” Gabe asks me.

“What?”

“He was in his room talking to her. Shelli. He was staring at the wall, but it was almost as if he could actually see her.” Gabe sighs.

“Like I said, he’s grieving. We just need to keep vigilant. I don’t give a fuck if he’s talking to ghosts, as long as he doesn’t become one himself.” I slam a fist onto the desk in front of me.

“Do you think he’d do something like that? Just give up?”

“I think he’s depressed, and depressed people don’t think rationally,” I say.

“I don’t know. I get it’s rough. But to end it all?” Marcel shrugs.

“He might not be thinking like that, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t worry. Just don’t leave him alone.”

“Vin is with him now.”

“Vin should be at school,” I grunt. That kid really needs to finish out his senior year.

“Yeah, well, since the old man’s gone, no one is making him go.” Marcel gives me a pointed glare.

I understand. Vin is my responsibility. I need to do better with him. Be around more.

I pick up my phone, but the screen is blank. She hasn’t messaged me yet. Why the fuck hasn’t she messaged me yet?

I sent her a good morning text when I woke up, and I’ve got nothing but the little *read* notification. I’ve had James send me updates on her movements. She’s at her office. But surely she can take two fucking minutes to shoot me a quick reply.

“Are we boring you?” Gabe lifts a brow in question.

“Yes.” I narrow my eyes on him.

“Who are you waiting for?” Marcel asks me.

“No one.” I drop my phone back down to the desk.

“No one? You’ve been checking your phone more than a lovesick preteen. Who is she?” Gabe chimes in.

“There is no *she*,” I say. I don’t usually keep shit from my siblings, but Ellie is someone I want to keep to myself for a bit longer. I need to figure out what the hell is going on with me before I consider bringing her into my world.

I thought fucking her the other day would get her out of my system. One and done. It’s always worked for me before. But she’s different. Why? I have no fucking idea. I just know that I want her again. No, that’s not right. I fucking *need* her again.

“Right, well, whoever she is, don’t forget the curse,” Marcel grumbles under his breath.

I roll my eyes. He’s convinced our family is cursed when it comes to love. “There is no such thing as a curse, Marcel. You watch too much TV,” I tell him.

“I’ve yet to be proven wrong.” He shrugs.

My phone rings on the table and I’m quick to swipe it up. It’s not her though. “Vin, is there a reason you’re not in school?” I ask my brother.

“Yeah, you need to come down to warehouse seven. Someone has cleared it out and Santo is losing his goddamn mind,” Vin tells me.

My body goes rigid. Warehouse seven is our weapons storage facility. There are millions of dollars’ worth of stock in that warehouse, which is monitored 24/7. How can it be cleared out? And who the fuck would be stupid enough to steal from us?

“On my way,” I tell him before cutting the call and turning to Gabe and Marcel. “Come on, we need to go down to the docks.” I push to my feet, open the top drawer to my desk, and retrieve the spare pistol I have there. I’m already strapped, but anything and everything could fucking happen at the docks.

“What’s going on?” Gabe asks me.

“Someone cleared out warehouse seven,” I say while making my way to the door, throwing it open, and storming over to the bank of elevators. By the time I get to the car, I’m fucking livid and ready to let some heads roll.

“Boss.” James nods and opens the back door of the SUV.

“Warehouse seven, and be alert. Someone fucking cleared it out,” I say once we’re all situated inside the car.

“What the fuck?” James hisses.

Gabe and Marcel are seated next to me but they remain tight-lipped. They know that I’m hanging on by a thread and ready to go off any second now. I’d never hurt my brothers, but I do need to fucking hurt *someone*.

James stops the car in front of the warehouse, and we all pile out, only to stop short the moment we step through the doors. Laid out in the middle of an empty room are ten of our men. The ten tasked with guarding this facility. I step closer to the bodies, which appear to be placed in a neat line. They’ve all been shot execution-style.

“I want to know who the fuck did this. I want to know the names and addresses of their families. We are going to set an example here, show the fucking world that we are not to be fucked with. They think we’re weak without the old man,” I say to my brothers, who are watching my every move. “We’re not weak. We are stronger with the bastard dead and buried. And it’s time everyone got the message.”

“Boss. You might want to see this.” Dan holds up a tablet.

It’s the CCTV feed. There are twenty guys in balaclavas, loading up trucks with our fucking stock. Not a single recognisable thing about them.

“They wanted us to see. Otherwise, they would have cut it,” I grind out while gesturing to the video. I pace up and down the empty space. “Gabe, order some more stock. We cannot have our clients thinking we can’t deliver on time.” Then I turn to Marcel. “Scour the remaining footage. See if there is anything we can run with.” Finally, I point from Vin to Santo. “You, go to fucking school. And you’re coming with

me. Let's go." I don't wait for any of them to respond. They'll all do as they're told. Except for Vin, who I'll deal with later.

Santo follows me out to the car and climbs in after me. "Where are we going?" he asks.

"I want to show you something," I say. I had a memorial made for Shelli. I was going to tell him about it over the weekend, take all the boys there to pay our respects. But Santo needs this now.

She already has a gravesite, but this is something more *her*. More *them* as a couple. There was a spot at the park they used to frequent together. That's where I want Santo to remember her. I want him to focus on what they shared, the good. You know all that bullshit they say about how *it's better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all?* I don't know if any of it's true, but I'm hoping like fuck it is.

I need my brother back. I need to figure out a way to get through to him, remind him that he's young. Still has a full life ahead of him. What hurts the most is seeing him morph into someone bitter. Santo was always the *cup is half full* kind of guy. These last few weeks, he's been very much the opposite.

It isn't long before we are pulling up to the park. I turn and look at my brother. "You know that I'm here. I will do anything for you, Santo. Anything. What I won't do is sit around and let you drown in your sorrows. She wouldn't want that," I tell him.

"You don't know what the fuck she'd want," he grits out between clenched teeth.

"You're wrong. I might not have known her like you did, but I loved her like a fucking sister. She has been a part of our lives forever. You lost your best friend, your soul mate. And we all lost our sister," I remind him.

He stares out the windshield, not saying anything. His jaw clenched tight and his fists rolled up and ready to launch at anything that looks at him the wrong way.

"Come on, I want to show you something." I get out of the car and walk around to the front.

Santo takes a minute but he does eventually follow me. “What are we doing here?”

“I want to show you something,” I tell him again. “Come on.”

“I’d prefer not to walk through the fucking park right now,” he says.

“Too fucking bad. You need to see this.”

We walk in silence. I know my brother’s head is full of memories, his chest tight with emotion at the thought of every time he brought her here. She loved this park.

I stop in front of the statue I had commissioned. It’s a stone angel with huge silver wings—the figure is holding a gold heart with Shelli’s name engraved in the centre. I turn to look at Santo. “I wanted you to have a space to come and remember the good,” I tell him.

Santo stares at the statue. Unmoving. He doesn’t say anything. I wait. He needs time to process this. Then he drops to his knees and buries his head in his hands. I fall next to him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders, and let him cry. He can’t hold himself up right now, but he doesn’t have to. Because I’ll be here to do it for him, until he can do it for himself again.

“I don’t know how to go on without her,” he says.

“I know.”

“She was meant to be here. We said forever.”

“I know,” I repeat.

“How am I meant to just keep living?”

“One hour at a time, Santo. Because you have to,” I tell him. Then I grab his face in my hands. “I know it hurts, but you will get through this.”

“How can I? I don’t know how.” He shakes his head. “I keep seeing her. She’s everywhere I look. I can’t fucking close my eyes without seeing her body covered in blood.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s hard. But we’re going to do this, together, one day at a time.”

Santo looks up at the angel. “She would have loved this,” he says.

“I know.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” I tell him.

We sit there for another fifteen minutes, just staring at the angel. “If she were looking down on us, she’d tell us to toughen up and get back to work.” Santo finally breaks the silence.

I chuckle. “She would.”

“Why do you think he did it?” he asks me.

“That’s the million-dollar question.”

“I need to find out. I need answers. None of it makes sense.”

“Then we will find the answers,” I promise him. I don’t know how you get answers out of a dead man, but there has to be a way to do something. Find something. I’ll search through all the old man’s properties until I do. There has to be some clue he left behind, and I won’t stop looking until I find it.

Chapter Eight



My phone is glaring at me from where I moved it to the other side of my desk. I thought having it out of reach would curb the craving I have to reply to his message. I don't want to encourage the man. I don't want him to think I'm interested in anything more than selling him a house, then quickly forgetting about him. It might be an outright lie, but it's for the best. I can't let my libido control my actions.

I look around my office. My really nice freaking office. Sure, it's no corner spot in a skyscraper building. But it is mine, and I've earned it.

There's also the creepy fact that Gio is either following me or having me followed. I haven't forgotten that he knew my door wasn't locked last night. What the hell was that about?

I move my gaze from the phone. No matter how much I want to reply to him, I'm not going to. My fingers scroll through the listings pulled up on my computer screen. I'm

going to find the perfect house for him. One he won't be able to resist. And then I can go on with my life.

A tap on my open door has my head swivelling towards the sound. "Come in," I say to Keith who is standing on the threshold.

"How are you going with Gio De Bellis?" he asks.

My blood goes cold. He doesn't know, does he? How could he know? My life is going to be ruined. I'm going to be the laughingstock of the industry. I'm going to be the one who puts women in my field back ten steps. All because of those freaking orgasms.

"Ah, good," I say.

"If it were good, you would have closed him. Why hasn't he made an offer yet?" Keith asks, while I continue scrolling.

"He's picky."

"I don't care how picky he is. It's your job to convince him that whatever property you're showing him is exactly the one he wants."

This guy is seriously an ass. I imagine my fist swinging out and wiping that smug look off his damn face. Of course I keep all of that in my head, though. I would never actually do it.

"I have a few more properties to show him. I will close," I reply instead.

"Good. Get it done." Keith pivots on his heel and walks out of my office, and I imagine picking up my stapler and hurling it right into his back.

I did him a favour that night when I first met up with Gio. And now I'm stuck with the stupidly good-looking mob boss who can work my body like he has the freaking manual.

Argh. I look at the clock on my screen. It's lunchtime. I need to eat. I'm not calling Gio on an empty stomach. I reach over, pick up my phone, and dial Dani.

"Hey," she answers, sounding out of breath.

“Are you free for lunch?” I ask her.

“Ah, lunch, I, ah, would love to. But I’m kinda working through lunch today,” she says.

“Oh my god, Danielle, are you doing hot boss right now?” I whisper into the phone.

“What? No, don’t be ridiculous, El. I gotta go.” She cuts the call and I shake my head. She was totally in the middle of something I should not have been hearing.

I guess I’m not getting lunch with her today. I grab my purse and head out of the office. On my way to the deli that’s one block over from my building, I call Jenni.

“Hello,” she whispers.

“Hello? Why are we whispering?” I ask her.

“I’m in a lecture.”

“Then why are you answering your phone?”

“Because you don’t call much lately and I was worried something might be wrong,” she tells me.

“I’m sorry. Nothing’s wrong. I’ll let you get back to the lecture.”

“I’ll call you after class,” Jenni says.

“Okay.”

A few minutes later, I walk into the deli and order a coffee and a ham and salad sandwich. Finding a seat by the window, I set down my purse and people watch. That’s when I spot him. A guy in a black-on-black suit staring right back at me. I don’t know how I know, but I’m certain this is one of Gio’s friends. And I use the term *friend* loosely. I pick up my phone and snap a picture of the guy before opening up the message thread I have with Gio and sending the image through.

ME:

Why are you having me followed?

I wait for a response. When it doesn't come right away, I throw my phone into my purse. The girl at the counter brings over my order. The whole time I sit and eat my sandwich, I feel that sensation of being watched. Although, when I look out the window again, the man is gone. Or he's just hidden himself better. It's not until I'm on my way back to the office that my phone pings with an incoming text. I pull it out of my purse and read the message from Gio.

GIOVANNI DE BELLIS:

I look after my interests.

That's his reasoning for having me followed? *I look after my interests?*

ME:

I'm of interest to you?

I know the minute I hit send that I should not have typed that.

GIOVANNI DE BELLIS:

Very much so. How was your lunch?

ME:

Why don't you ask your friend? He watched me eat the whole time. I'm sure he can give you all the specifics.

GIOVANNI DE BELLIS:

I would much rather hear them from you.

ME:

I gotta go. I'm searching for properties for some overly picky clients.

Once I'm back in the office, I do my best to forget about Gio. I was going to call him and send him the list of properties I've found. But now I'm thinking he can wait until tomorrow.

I spend the rest of the afternoon working on my less demanding clients' requests. By the time I leave for the day, it's late. I consider ringing one of the girls and seeing if they want to meet up for dinner but decide to drive back to my apartment instead. I park the car and turn towards the street. There is a little bar two blocks down that has the best wings, and right now, I really want some chicken wings.

I find a tall bar table in the corner of the room and sit down. Taking out my phone, I scan the QR code in front of me and place my order via the bar's app.

I'm scrolling through social media, filling the time as I wait for my food and wine, when a body steps right up to me. I don't even have to look up to know who it is. I can tell by the way my every nerve ending lights up.

Taking my time, I lift my head, shifting my gaze from my phone to the man who doesn't seem to understand the meaning of personal space.

"Ellie, how are you?" Gio says. One of his hands reaches behind me to cup my head, and his lips—those full, warm lips—press against the centre of my forehead. My body just melts right into him.

Gio moves around to the other side of the table and claims the empty bar stool. I stare at him. "Ah, did we have a meeting I wasn't aware of?" I ask.

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"I wanted to have dinner with you."

“Why?” I press him.

He lifts one of his shoulders into a half shrug. “Why not?”

“Ah, we’re not friends. You are a client.”

He places a palm over his chest, feigning injury. “Ouch, and here I was, thinking we were really great fucking friends, Ellie.”

“It’s Eloise. And I’m sure your ego can handle learning that we are not in fact friends.”

“Do you let all your clients eat you out? Fuck you? Feed you their dicks?” He lifts a single brow in question.

I look around the bar to see if anyone’s within earshot. There are so many eyes staring at us. “Oh my god. What happened to not telling people? I think everyone in a five-kilometre radius heard you,” I hiss at him.

“Nobody heard,” Gio says without taking his eyes off me.

“Yes, they did. They’re all staring.”

“They’re staring because your beauty is worth appreciating.” He smiles, and I shake my head.

“Smooth. But I doubt that’s why they’re staring.”

“You should really have more faith in your appeal. They were all staring at you before I even walked up. You have no idea how much I want to gouge the eyes out of every fucking guy in here.”

My jaw drops. *He’s not serious. Is he?*

“I was actually just leaving, so enjoy your dinner,” I tell him before reaching out a hand to grab my purse.

“Sit down. Your order will be out soon,” he tells me.

“What are you really doing here, Gio?” I ask, dropping my arm.

“I told you. I wanted to have dinner. I want to get to know you.”

“You want to get to know me?”

“Yes, tell me something that no one else knows,” he says while leaning forward on the table.

“Well, I would tell you about the time I let a client fuck me on a kitchen counter in a property I was supposed to be selling, but it seems everyone in this bar knows about that now.” I glare back at him.

Gio smirks. “Sounds like a good fucking time.”

“I’ve had better,” I deadpan.

“No, you haven’t.”

“You really are an egotistical...” I don’t have a word to finish that sentence.

“No, I just know when a woman is experiencing real pleasure, and you... you’ve never come like that before. I saw it written all over your face.”

“Are you always this sure of yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Right.” Since it appears he’s not going anywhere, and I really do want those wings, I play along with his whole *getting to know each other* thing. “Okay, well, tell me something about you that no one else knows.”

Gio appears to consider the question. “I met someone I can’t stop thinking about, and I’m torn between dragging her kicking and screaming into my world... and letting her go.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. Do I want to be dragged into his world? Assuming that the someone he’s talking about is me, that is.

I’m saved from replying when a waiter stops at our table. “Boss, a burger and fries, onion rings, wings, whiskey, and a white wine.” The man places everything in front of us. “Is there anything else I can get you?” he asks.

“No, thank you.” Gio dismisses him.

“Why did he call you *boss*?”

“Because I own this place,” Gio says, picking up the whiskey glass.

“How many businesses do you own?”

“A lot.” He shrugs. “What about you? Why did you become a real estate agent?”

“I like houses. I love seeing people fall in love with the properties they’re going to spend their lives enjoying, raise families inside, create homes out of empty rooms...”

“And you get that from the types of properties you sell?” he asks me.

“Not really. But I used to, when I wasn’t dealing with the higher-end market. I’ve only been with this agency for a few months.”

“You don’t like it,” Gio states.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. Why do it if you don’t like it?”

“Because it’s my career. And the commissions are really great in the high-end market.”

“Not everything is about money. Money won’t make you happy.”

“Says the man who clearly has more of it than most people ever see in a lifetime.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t important. Just that it won’t make you happy. And you should be happy.”

“I’m not *not* happy. I’m just... unsettled.” I shake my head. “I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a client and I’m selling you a house.”

“We’re friends first.”

“We’re not...”

Gio holds up a hand. “I swear to God, Ellie, finish that thought and I’m going to come over there and show you along

with everyone else in this bar just how fucking friendly we are,” he grunts.

“Fine,” I huff and look down at the wings, wondering how I’m going to eat them without making a mess. I wasn’t planning on having company.

“Is something wrong with the food?”

“No, I’m just not as hungry as I thought I was,” I lie, picking up my glass of wine.

“Yes, you are. Just eat the wings, Ellie.”

“They’re messy,” I tell him.

“So?”

“So, I don’t want to make a fool of myself,” I admit.

“I doubt you could make a fool of yourself. Want me to order you something else?” Gio offers.

It’s a sweet gesture and, honestly, it takes me by surprise. “No, it’s okay.”

“If you’re not going to eat the wings, then I will order you something else. You need to eat.”

“I’m really not that hungry. I’ll just have them boxed up and take them home.”

Gio looks around, sticks a hand up in the air, and waves a waiter over. The poor kid practically runs up to us. “Yes, boss?”

“Move all this to the office,” Gio says. Then he pushes to his feet and walks around the table. Picks up my purse that I had sitting on the spare seat and takes hold of my hand. “Come on.”

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

“Moving. We’re going to eat in the back office,” he says, tugging me behind him.

Chapter Nine



I lead Ellie into the manager's office. Once the waiter places our plates on the desk, I lock the door. "Okay, now eat. No one can see whatever mess you're afraid you'll make," I tell her.

"You can't be serious." She gapes at me.

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No, which just makes this situation even more insane," Ellie says.

"What's insane is you ordering food you don't want to eat in case you make a mess. Come on, it's just you and me in here. Be as messy as you'd like," I tell her.

"I..." She looks longingly at the plate of wings. "Fine, but turn around. Don't watch me."

I laugh. “Seriously? I’ve had my tongue deep in your cunt. You can’t seriously be too embarrassed to eat wings in front of me.”

“Do you want me to eat them or not?”

“I want you to eat, yes,” I admit.

“Then turn around,” she says while motioning for me to do just that.

I walk over to the desk, pick up our plates, and place them on the floor. “Sit with your back against mine.” I demonstrate, gesturing a hand for her to follow suit, as I lift my now cold burger. It works, though, because she does as she’s told. I take a bite and listen as I finally hear her chew. “This is the strangest date I’ve ever been on,” I say, breaking the silence.

“This is not a date,” she tells me.

“Sure, it is. You’re here. I’m here. We’re eating dinner together. That’s a date.”

“No, a date is when you ask me out to dinner and I accept the invitation. You show up at my apartment to pick me up with a bunch of pink roses, because they’re my favourite flower, and then you take me out. Somewhere fun, not overly fancy, and quiet,” she says.

“Well, shit, Ellie, guess I need to step up my game.” I laugh.

“You do.”

“So, how about Friday?”

“What about Friday?”

I thought the question was obvious but I explain anyway. “For this date.”

“Sorry, can’t. I’m busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Laundry,” she tells me.

Is she seriously choosing to stay in and do laundry rather than go out on a date with me? That’s a first.

“Tell me about your childhood?” I ask her instead of arguing.

“There’s not much to tell. I grew up with one sister and a single mother who worked two jobs.”

“What happened to your father?”

“Good question. If you ever meet him, be sure to ask him for me. He left us when Jenni was one month old. I don’t really remember him.”

“How old were you?”

“Six.”

“My mum died when I was eight.”

“I’m sorry. What happened to her?” she asks me.

“I’m not sure,” I say, because I’m not about to tell her what I really think happened.

“Did you get along with your dad?” Ellie continues her line of questioning.

“No.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. What about your brothers? You mentioned you were close. You must be. If you’re all living together.”

“We’re very close. I’d do anything for them.”

“That’s nice. What about girlfriends?”

“What about them?”

“Do you have one?”

“That depends.” I chuckle.

“On what?” she asks, and I feel her head shift towards me. I don’t turn around.

“On you. Wanna be my girlfriend, Ellie?” I say, feeling really fucking insecure all of a sudden. Ellie starts choking on her food. I spin around and slap her back. “Fuck, you okay?” I ask when she finally stops coughing.

“Fine,” she says before I pick up a napkin and wipe her mouth. She quickly snatches the napkin out of my grip. “You

were meant to stay turned around.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have choked on your food,” I tell her as I snatch it back.

“Oh my god, will you stop that?”

“Stop looking after you? No.”

“Do I really have that much sauce on my face?” she asks me.

“Not anymore, you don’t.” I drop the napkin on the floor, and Ellie buries her head in her hands.

“Oh my god.”

“You know, the fact you’re embarrassed by this just tells me that you care what I think. And that sounds an awful lot like a girlfriend—I’m taking your nonresponse as a yes by the way.”

“A yes?” she parrots.

“Yes, you want to be my girlfriend.”

“How do you know I don’t already have a boyfriend?”

“You don’t. And if you did, I wouldn’t care because the fucker wouldn’t be an issue for long. I’d find a way to get rid of him.”

“You are insane.”

“I’ve been called worse.” I shrug. She hasn’t said no, so I’m taking that as a small win. “You know you’re the hottest fucking girlfriend I’ve ever had,” I tell her.

“I seriously doubt that, and I’m not your girlfriend.”

“You’re the first. So, yes, you’re also the hottest.”

“You’ve never been in a relationship?”

“Never wanted to be... before now,” I admit.

“What’s changed?”

“I like you, and when I think about you being with anyone else, I want to rip heads off. I don’t want to share you, which means you and I are exclusive.” It’s simple as that.

“You do realise that both parties usually have a say in things like this, right?”

“You have a say. You said yes.”

“No, I didn’t,” she huffs.

“You didn’t say no. That’s a yes to me.” I shrug. Ellie blinks at me. I think she’s trying to decipher if I’m being serious or not. I am. I’ve never been more serious about making a woman mine. “Come on, I’ll take you home,” I tell her.

“I only live a few blocks away. I can walk.”

“I’ll walk with you.” I take hold of her hand and don’t let go until we stop out front of her apartment building. Then I lean in and capture her lips in a quick kiss. “See you later, Ellie, and make sure you lock your door.”

A look of shock creeps across her face. I’m sure she thought I was going to want to go up with her. And I do. Fuck, do I want to go up there with her. But I want her to know I’m not just in this for the sex. I actually want to get to know her.

“Okay.”

I wait until she’s in the building before I turn around and make my way back to the bar where I left my car parked.



This is not how I thought my day would play out.

It’s the first thought that pops into my head as I stand in a tin shed, watching Santo take out his rage on a piece of shit the boys caught hanging around warehouse seven.

I woke up on fucking cloud nine and sent Ellie a good morning message—one she didn’t fucking reply to again. Then I went and ate breakfast with my brothers before driving Vin to school myself while he groaned and complained the

whole damn way. In his words, he doesn't need school when he has street smarts.

I know our father fucked this kid up beyond repair, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to fucking try. And that starts with him getting a good education.

But right this second, I'm worried about the well-being of another brother. Santo. I'm not going to stop or interrupt him. He needs an outlet for his anger, and if this is how he gets it, then so be it.

"I didn't..." The fucker presently tied to a wooden chair cries out through bloodied lips.

"You didn't? You were just taking a morning stroll around a warehouse that belongs to us?"

"I didn't know it was yours. I swear I didn't know," he says.

My brother brings his fist back and connects it with the fucker's jaw, and the guy's head swings to the side. "Bullshit. You know what I do with lying cunts?" Santo asks. "I remove their tongues from their mouths. Do you want me to remove your tongue?"

The guy shakes his head.

"No, well, I suggest you tell me what the fuck you were doing and who the fuck you work for," Santo yells.

"I... I can't..."

"You won't. There's a difference." Santo turns, walks over to the bench, and picks up a small paring knife.

Fuck, that's going to hurt like a bitch.

"No, they'll kill me," the fucker says. Like he has a better chance of surviving this.

"You think I won't?" Santo asks him before turning to me. "G, you hearing this? This fucking cocksucker thinks I'm a joke."

"I guess you better show him how serious you are, then." I shrug and watch as Santo uses a pair of pliers to pull the guy's

tongue out of his head. This is not the first time my brother's done something like this.

The guy's screams echo off the tin walls and he starts to choke on the blood that's pooling down his throat. I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I pull out and see Ellie's name flash across the screen. She's never called me before.

Why is she calling me now?

"Santo, shut him the fuck up. I have to take this," I say. Santo shoves a cloth into the guy's mouth, muffling his sounds, while I click answer on the phone. "Are you okay?"

"Ah, yeah, why wouldn't I be?" Her voice is sweet, innocent. It belongs nowhere near this fucking torture room.

"You've never called me before."

"Pretty sure this is what girlfriends do, Gio. You should have thought about that before you labelled me one," she says.

"So you're admitting it then? Good to know," I tell her as I try to suppress my grin.

"No, I'm not. I'm just saying if you want a title, then expect random phone calls."

"I don't mind random phone calls," I say and turn my back to Santo, who is glaring daggers at me.

"Well, this isn't actually random. I've found you a house."

"Okay, when can I see it?"

"Meet me there in an hour. I'm sending you the address and details now."

I look at my watch. "Okay, I'll see you there."

"Great," Ellie says and cuts the call.

I turn back to Santo. "Who the fuck was that?" He scowls at me.

"No one. Hurry this up. I have to go."

"No one makes you smile like that?" He raises an eyebrow and then looks at Dan and James, who are both standing at the door. Neither of them will say a word. Their loyalty is to me

first. It's the way of our world. "Fine," Santo says. "You go ahead. I'll finish up here."

"I'll wait," I tell him and lean against the wall. I won't leave him alone. While I'm waiting, I text Gabe and order him to get his ass here.

It isn't until Santo pulls the gag out of the fucker's mouth that we all realise the guy's already dead. "Well, there goes my afternoon of fun," Santo grunts.

"Let's go," I say.

I call Gabe and tell him to meet us at the apartment instead. As soon as we step through the door, Santo goes straight for the whiskey bottle and I head to the bathroom. I need to shower before I see Ellie. I refuse to let her see me with blood splatters on my clothes. I won't let her innocence touch the filth of the world I run.

Chapter Ten



He's late. I'm ready to lock up and leave by the time I hear his car pull up in front of the house. I open the door as Gio steps out and the SUV drives away, leaving him standing in the entryway.

"You're late," I tell him.

"I'm sorry. Something came up," he says, walking farther into the house.

"You might not think that my time is as valuable as yours, but I assure you it is. You are not my only client, Mr De Bellis. And believe it or not, the world does not in fact revolve around you."

"Well, that depends on the world you're living in. In my world, everything very much revolves around me." He smirks, leaning in and kissing my forehead as soon as he's within reach.

I narrow my eyes at him. “What the hell are you doing? Stop doing that.”

“I’m kissing my girlfriend’s forehead. You can’t tell me not to do that,” he says.

“I’m going to need a number for one of your brothers,” I tell him, then watch his posture stiffen.

“Why?” he grunts.

“Because one of them really needs to take you to a shrink,” I grumble under my breath.

He smiles. “How was your day?”

“Let’s get this over with.”

“Lead the way.” Gio holds out an arm, gesturing for me to go first.

“This house has everything you wanted,” I say while running my palms down the front of my pants—a deliberate clothing choice. The last two times I didn’t exactly make the best decisions. So I figured wearing pants would at least provide a better barrier between my vagina and his dick.

“Everything, huh?” Gio asks as he eyes the foyer.

“Everything. It has eight bedrooms, ten bathrooms, four living rooms, a theatre, a gym, two dining rooms. An indoor sauna and a heated pool. There’s even a bowling alley with a bar in the games area,” I list off every amenity, hoping they’ll entice him.

“Does it have warmth? Charm?” He lifts an eyebrow in question.

“This property has heaps of charm. Wait till you see the original features. Come through this way to the living room. The fireplace is gorgeous,” I tell him. The moment we enter the room in question, I spin around to look at him. But my client isn’t looking at the crown moulding or the refurbished architraves. No, he’s staring right back at me. “What do you think?”

“Fucking beautiful,” he says without taking his eyes off me.

“Okay, come on then—just wait until you see the kitchen.” I lead him through the hallways, skipping over some of the other rooms to get to the kitchen. The cabinets are a deep olive-green with white stone benchtops and brass fittings. “It’s not as big as the other listings I’ve shown you, but there’s still plenty of square footage. And heaps of storage space.”

“Could you see yourself living in this house?” Gio says, taking in the room before his gaze settles back on me.

“If I won the lottery or something one day, sure, I would live here. The house is gorgeous—though my favourite feature has to be the clawfoot tub in the primary bathroom.”

“Why this house, Ellie? What makes it so different from the others?” Gio questions me as we traverse the elegant staircase to the second floor.

“It’s homey, and it’s just... I don’t know. I think it’s the old charm. It’s huge and fancy and shit but not obnoxiously so. I think if you invited friends here, they’d know you were well off, but not feel like you’re throwing your money in their faces. But then again, some people like that. I don’t know,” I repeat before clamping my mouth shut when I realise I’m rambling.

“Okay, I’ll take it.” Gio says, though we’ve yet to see half the house.

“Don’t you want to see the rest of the property?” I ask him.

“Sure, but it won’t matter. If you love it, I’m sure I will too. Tell the buyers I’ll pay five hundred grand above asking price if they can settle this week. I’m a cash buyer.” Gio shrugs as if the money means nothing to him, and maybe it does. It’s easy to dismiss your wealth when it’s all you’ve ever known. It’s much harder for the rest of us.

“This house is listed at 8.4 million,” I attempt to clarify.

“Great. Call them now and tell them my offer is 8.9. But they have to settle within the week and have the place emptied out by then.”

“Ah, okay.” I take my phone out of my pocket and call the sellers. It’s no surprise that they accept the ridiculous offer. They’d be mad not to. “Well, I guess you’ve finally chosen your new home,” I tell Gio after cutting the call.

“Great. Now, can I take you out for dinner?” he says.

“Ah, I can’t. I... um... have plans.” I can feel my cheeks reddening the longer he stares at me.

“What plans?”

“That really isn’t any of your business,” I tell him.

“You see, that’s where you’re wrong. You’re my girlfriend, which makes everything you do my business.”

“Again, I’m not your girlfriend, and you really need to get on some meds or something.” I walk out of the room.

He’s buying this place, so I’m not going to bother showing him the rest of it. He can discover the layout all on his own when he picks up the keys on Friday. Gio quietly follows me as I head to the back of the house and lock the doors. Picking up my purse from the dining table, I make my way to the front door.

“Shit, I forgot James had an errand. Can you give me a lift?” Gio asks as I’m about to offer him a polite good night.

“Ah, sure. Where are you going?” I say instead.

“Wherever you are.” He smirks.

“No, you’re not. I’ll drop you at your house, wherever that is. Then I’m going home. Alone.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Gio says. Then stops at my car. “Do you have keys for this thing?”

“Um, yes.”

“Can I see them?” He holds out a palm.

“Why?” I ask before digging my keys out of my purse and dangling them in front of him.

Like a freaking ninja, Gio moves so damn fast, snatching the keys out of my hand. He walks to the passenger side of the

car and holds the door open. “Get in. I’ll drive.”

I consider arguing with him, but then an idea comes to mind. I smile. “Sure, thanks.” I slide past him and hop into the passenger seat.

“That was too easy.” Gio grins. “I thought for sure you’d put up more of a fight.”

“Why would I do that?” I say a little too sweetly.

“No idea.” He shuts the door, jogs around the front of my car, and then jumps behind the wheel.

It’s not until he’s out on the road, in traffic, that I turn my face to look at him. “You know, it’s only fair that I get to drive your car since you drove mine.”

Gio laughs. “I fucking knew you had something up your sleeve. You’re not driving my car.”

“Why not? I let you drive mine,” I repeat.

“That’s different,” he says.

“How?”

“Because... it just is.”

“It’s a money thing, isn’t it? Because your car is worth more than mine? And you think I’ll scratch it or something?”

“It’s not a money thing, babe. It’s a *you* thing. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“That’s the stupidest *thing* I’ve ever heard. Come on, Gio, let me drive the Lambo, please?” I use the most innocent voice I can muster.

Gio looks over at me. “Fine, but if you get a single scratch on your pretty little head, I’m going to assign you a fucking driver.”

I snort. “You could try.”

Gio pulls into the underground garage of a skyscraper. He parks my car before walking around and opening my door. But this isn’t just some ordinary garage. This is obviously a

building for the wealthy—really expensive cars as far as the eye can see.

“Come on.” Gio takes my hand and walks me over to his bright-orange Lambo. He opens the driver’s side door and waits for me to get in.

I can’t believe he’s actually going to let me drive this thing. I was totally joking with him, assuming there was no freaking way he’d agree to my madness. But here I am, sitting behind the wheel of a car worth more than my yearly salary.

Gio climbs in on the passenger side. “Where do you want to go?” he asks me.

“Um... I don’t know.” My eyebrows scrunch together as I take in the interior, only to realise we have a problem. “I can’t actually drive this...”

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I mean I physically can’t. I can’t drive a manual.”

Gio gets out of the car and walks around to my door. “Come on, switch sides with me.”

I do as I’m told and jump into the passenger seat. As soon as I’ve secured my seat belt, Gio starts the car and manoeuvres out of the garage. He weaves in and out of traffic effortlessly, like it’s as easy as breathing to him.

“Where are we going?” I ask after a few minutes of silence.

“You’ll see.” He smirks at me.

I can feel the vibrations of the engine run through my body. This is a really nice freaking car. Gio navigates the city streets, and I must zone out at some point. Because when the car comes to a stop again, I see that we’re in what looks like a huge car park with shed-type buildings surrounding us.

“If this is where you bring me to cut my body to pieces, I have one last request,” I tell him.

His lips tip up into a half smile. “I have no intention of cutting your body into pieces, Ellie. I am curious though. What

would your final request be?”

“Orgasms. I want at least five more of those orgasms you’re so talented at giving me before I die,” I say honestly, and Gio’s face turns to stone. I was joking. Clearly he missed the punchline.

Without saying a word, he gets out of the car, walks around, and opens my door. “Swap seats.”

“What? Why?”

“You’re going to learn to drive a stick. Come on.”

“Are you serious? I cannot learn to drive manual in this car,” I tell him, though I’m already stepping out.

“Yes, you can. I’ll teach you. You should know how to drive everything,” he says. Taking my hand in his, Gio guides me around to the driver’s side, picks me up, and places me in front of the wheel. He then proceeds to reclaim the passenger seat. “Okay, press the start button.”

“Gio, this is insane. I can’t do this,” I grumble. “What if I break your car? And then we get stranded out here in this dodgy-looking place? We’re probably going to get rolled for the car anyway.”

“Babe, no one is going to roll me. And I wouldn’t let anything happen to you. As for the car, you can’t break it. Press the start button, Ellie.”

I sigh, my finger cautiously reaching forward as I grip the steering wheel.

“Relax, I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” Gio says, placing a hand over mine. “Now, push the clutch down with your foot—it’s the pedal on the left.”

I follow his instructions, feeling out of sorts during this entire process.

“Good girl. Now shift into first gear. Like this.” Gio guides my palm over the gear stick behind the steering wheel. “This is up. That’s down. Now, use your right foot to lightly press on the accelerator.”

I do what he says, and the car revs to life.

“Good. Next, using your left foot, slowly release the clutch.”

Once again, I follow his instructions and, holy shit, the car starts moving.

“Good. Just keep it in first, and go slow.”

“Okay.”

“Now, lift your foot off the accelerator, press down on the clutch, and move the gear into second.”

Somehow, I manage to do it all without stalling the car. I can't believe I'm driving a Lamborghini. More than that, I can't believe Gio is letting me do it. I glance over at him. “You must really like me.” I smile.

“Have I not made that clear?” he says before pointing to the windscreen. “Eyes on the road.”

Chapter Eleven



Things have been chaotic around here for the last several days. I haven't been able to see Ellie since our impromptu driving lesson last week. Today, I have a reason to see her though. I need to collect the keys for the house I bought.

I really couldn't tell you much about the property. All I know is the way her face lit up when she talked about it. Which was why I put an offer in. Well, that and because this apartment is really getting too fucking cramped with five grown men living inside it.

After getting dressed, I walk out to the kitchen, where Vin is seated at the benchtop in his school uniform. "Where is everyone?" I ask him.

"Marcel didn't come home last night, and Gabe and Santo were up drinking until at least four," Vin replies around a mouthful of cereal.

“Don’t talk while you’re chewing. It’s disgusting,” I tell him before heading straight for the coffeepot. “How’s school going?” When I don’t get a response, I turn around right as he shoves another spoonful of cereal into his mouth. I lift one eyebrow at him in question.

“You told me not to talk while chewing,” he says as he does just that.

I shake my head and return my gaze to the coffeepot. “What’s going on at school?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs.

“Vin, what’s going on?”

“*Fine*. There’s this girl...” he says, and I try to hide my smile. It’s always a fucking girl.

“What girl?”

“It doesn’t matter because she doesn’t want anything to do with me.” He sulks.

“You’re just going to give up? Have you thought about changing her mind?” I suggest.

“The thing is I don’t even like her. It’s fucking frustrating. I can’t stand her, but whenever I see her, I want her.”

“So you just want to bang her. Is that what your sayin’?”

“No, but how can you want someone but also not at the same time? It makes no sense,” he huffs.

“Just make sure you wrap it before you use it, Vin. We don’t need any De Bellis babies popping out anytime soon,” I tell him. “And if you want her that bad, do something about it. Moping around like some sook isn’t going to get her to want you back.”

“I’ve tried. I think she hates me more than I hate her,” he grumbles while twirling his spoon around his cereal bowl.

“Come on, I’ll drive you to school.” I clamp a hand over his shoulder and quickly down the rest of my coffee.

“I can drive myself. I have to swing by and pick up Damien,” Vin says. Damien has been one of my brother’s mates since they were in primary school together. I don’t really like the kid, but then again, I don’t really like anyone. Besides my brothers.

And Ellie.

I fucking like that girl a whole lot. And that worries me. This week has been torture, not being able to see her, touch her. I have spoken to her, but not because she’s called me. It’s always me calling or messaging her.

“Okay. Well, we’re moving into the new place tomorrow. Don’t forget,” I tell Vin.

“I haven’t.”

“I’ll see you later.”

I exit the elevator into the garage, where James and Dan are already waiting for me. “Morning, boss,” they both say at the same time.

“Morning.”

“Where to?” James asks.

“I have to swing by the real estate agency and pick up the keys to the new house,” I tell them. It’s not until I’m sitting in the car, on the way to Ellie’s office, that a better idea comes to mind. “James, head straight over to the new place instead.”

“Sure thing, boss.” James nods.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I call Ellie. It’s early, but I know she’ll already be at the office—I’ve studied her work habits.

“Hello.”

“Ellie, how are you?”

“Good, you?”

“I’ll be better soon. I need you to meet me at the property with the keys. I can’t stop by the office.”

“Ah, okay. Why? Is something wrong?”

“I just can’t. I’m on my way to the house now. Meet me there.”

“I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. I won’t be able to get there until at least ten thirty,” she says.

“Okay, I’ll be there.” I cut the call. Looks like I have a few hours to kill. I’ve already signed all the documents, and the money has been transferred. The house is mine. When James pulls into the driveway, I take my time looking over the property I just paid a hefty price to own.

It is nice, and it really does have an old school charm to it. A huge veranda wraps around both levels of the house. There are red shutters on all the windows, which stand out against the white timber cladding.

“Walk around and start a security plan. We need to get this shit locked down tight,” I tell James and Dan, who go off in opposite directions as I walk up to the front door to test the handle. It’s locked. I take out the pick from my back pocket, kneel down in front of the keyhole, and have the door open in under a minute.

I walk into the house, really seeing it for the first time. I was far too busy looking at Ellie to actually notice too much about this place. I’m scanning every crevice, searching for all of the possible entry, hiding, and advantage points. I take my time walking through each room, cataloguing every square inch. I need to make this place a fucking fortress.

It’s not just my life I need to consider here. It’s the lives of my brothers too. And theirs are more important to me than mine will ever be.

When I get to the primary bedroom, I head straight into the huge closet. I wonder what it would be like to fill it with things for Ellie, to have her living here with me. I enter the primary bath next and can already envision her sitting in that clawfoot tub, filled to the brim with bubbles. Her hair piled up on top of her head.

Am I seriously considering having her live here with me?

Yes, I fucking am. Why else would I buy a house she loves? If not because it might just help to convince her to live with me when I ask her. I'll give it a few more weeks, though. I need my brothers to settle in first. I need us to come together, and I need to focus on Santo. Which means I can't have Ellie distracting me twenty-four hours a day.

Not that she doesn't already. She's always there in the back of my mind. I can never get her out of my head completely.

"Hello." Like I conjured her up, Ellie's voice echoes through the house.

"Upstairs," I call out. I lean against the doorframe of the bedroom and wait for her. I swear every time I see this woman, she takes my breath away.

"How did you get in here without keys?" she asks.

"I picked the lock."

"You picked the lock?" she parrots.

"It's my lock to pick." I shrug.

"I guess it is."

I walk up to her, bend down, and scoop her up bridal-style.

"Oh my god, what are you doing?" she squeals.

"I'm carrying you over the threshold."

"That's supposed to happen at the front door. And it's supposed to happen after you're married and living together or something like that."

"Well, you'll live here eventually," I declare while carrying her through the bedroom. I lay her down on the carpet and hover over her. Cupping her chin in a palm, I force her eyes to mine. "I fucking missed you," I tell her before slamming my lips down onto hers.

"Mmm, it seems that way," Ellie mumbles when I move my mouth to trail kisses along her neck. Her fingers twirl in my hair.

I drag the material of her skirt up her thighs. “Did you miss me, Ellie?” I ask her.

“Maybe a little,” she says, opening her legs wider for me as my fingers glide north.

Pushing her panties aside, I slide my fingers up through her wet folds. “It seems like you did.” I smile against her neck.

“I can’t control the way my body reacts to you any more than I can control the way it reacts to Channing Tatum,” she hums, and I still.

Lifting my head, I can’t stop the glare I send her way. “Who the fuck is Channing Tatum?” I grit out.

“An actor. You know, *Magic Mike*?” She laughs.

“I refuse to share you, Ellie, even with an actor—especially one I plan to do everything in my power to make sure you never fucking meet,” I grunt. My fingers push inside her and her cunt clamps down around them. She always feels so fucking good. Ellie’s back arches up as her legs wrap around me.

“I need you, Gio,” she says, sounding breathless.

I lift my head and look down at her. “Say it again.”

“I need you, Gio,” she repeats.

Sitting up on my knees, I pull a condom out of my pocket and lay it on Ellie’s stomach. I undo my belt and then my pants while staring at her glistening pussy. “You are so fucking beautiful,” I tell her.

“Mmm, you’re not so bad yourself, although you’d be better if you moved a bit quicker,” she huffs. I free my cock, pick up the condom, and tear it open. Ellie snatches the foil packet from my hands. “Let me.”

I watch as she rolls the protection down my shaft. I’ve never trusted a woman to do something like this before. I’ve had many pull condoms out and offer them to me. I’m not stupid though. I always use my own. At least I know mine haven’t been tampered with. Like I said, we don’t need any De

Bellis babies turning up. And that goes for all five of us. Me included.

Although, as I look into Ellie's eyes, I can see myself having babies with her.

I shake my head of those ridiculous thoughts—I can't be thinking like that—and take my cock, line it up with her entrance, and slam into her. She gasps as I bottom out.

“Sorry,” I apologise for being so rough.

“Don't be. You're just... I mean, other than you, it's been a while,” she mumbles as her cheeks flush.

I smile. I know she said it before. But I fucking like hearing it.

Pulling out, I slam back into her. Then I lift her ankles and rest them on my shoulders as I start to fuck her harder and faster. The carpet burns the skin of my knees, but no way am I stopping now.

“Fuck, you feel so fucking good, Ellie,” I tell her.

Ellie's eyes roll back in her head. I feel her thighs shake and her body goes rigid. Her pussy clamps down hard on my cock. So fucking tight. So fucking good. My orgasm hits me hard. I jerk into her one, two, three times, before I lower her legs and collapse on top of her, catching my weight on my elbows when I fall.

Her hands run up and down my chest, underneath my shirt. “You know, one of these days, I'd like to do this with you naked. Get the full Gio De Bellis experience and all.” Ellie smiles.

“Mmm, if you weren't so fucking addictive and I wasn't in such a rush to get inside you, I'd take my time worshiping this body of yours.”

“Sounds to me like you have a time management issue.” She lifts her hands and shoves at my chest, rolling me to the side and off her body. “I, however, do not. And I need to go,” she says, standing up and pulling down her skirt.

“Why do I feel so used right now?” I laugh as I push to my knees, then stand to my full height. I remove the condom and pull up my pants.

“Because you were?” She smirks as she disappears into the bathroom. She closes the door behind her. I make my way over, open the door, and walk inside, turning on the tap and washing my hands. “Gio, get out!” Ellie screams.

I glance over my shoulder and look at her. She’s on the toilet. “Why?”

“Because I’m peeing!” she hisses.

“And?”

“This is not something you need to see. Like ever.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

I walk over to her, grab her face in my hands, lean down, and kiss her forehead. “You are fucking adorable when you’re embarrassed,” I tell her before I pivot on my heel and walk out the door.



“What made you choose this place?” Gabe asks, staring up at our new home.

We’ve all just arrived. The movers have been here for a few hours, mostly bringing in bedroom furniture and kitchen shit. I’ve hired an interior designer who should be here any minute now, to help furnish the rest of the house.

“I like it,” I say.

“This isn’t exactly your style,” Marcel comments.

“It is now. Come on. Let’s go in.”

As soon as we walk through the door, I’m greeted by a woman I’m assuming to be the interior designer. She steps up

to me and holds out a hand. “Gio, I’m Hannah.” She smiles as her eyes travel up and down my body.

“It’s Mr De Bellis. You’re the designer?” I ask, just to be sure.

“Ah, yes,” she says with a look of dejection on her face, which I proceed to ignore.

“I take it you’ve seen the place?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Great. I’m going to send you a phone number. I want you to run any and all details through this person.” I pull my phone out and share Ellie’s direct line. I don’t want to deal with this shit. And, honestly, this is going to be Ellie’s home eventually. She might as well choose the furniture now. It’ll save us having to redecorate later.

Chapter Twelve



“Congrats on closing on the De Bellis buy,” Laura, one of the senior agents, says as we walk out of the office.

“Thank you.”

“Honestly, I’m happy it wasn’t Keith,” she whispers.

“Oh, okay.” I’d love to say *me too*, but I’m not about to bitch talk another senior agent.

“You are going to go far here, Eloise. You have exactly what it takes.” She gives me a knowing smile, as if to imply more than she’s saying.

“Thanks. I’d like to think I do too.” I smile back at her.

Laura searches through her bag while we wait. “Shit, I think I left my keys in the office.” She sighs. “Have a great night, Eloise.”

“You too,” I call back before pushing my way out the doors. I round the corner to the car park and stop short. Because, standing there, casually leaning against my car is none other than Giovanni De Bellis. I look behind me. “What are you doing here?” I hiss at him.

“Picking up my girlfriend after work.” He shrugs as though that much should be obvious.

“One, still not your girlfriend. And, two, you can’t do that. You can’t just show up here. Get in the car before someone sees you,” I tell him, pressing the key fob to unlock my Audi.

To my surprise, Gio slips inside—in the passenger seat at that. I turn on the ignition and reverse out of the spot. “What’s wrong? Why can’t I pick you up?”

“Because people can’t know that we interact outside of the fact that I sold you a house,” I huff.

“So they can’t know that I know what your pussy feels like strangling my cock? Got it,” he says with a grin. “But why?”

“Because I’ve worked really hard to be where I am, and I cannot have my reputation ruined because I have no self-control when it comes to you and your dick.”

“Yeah, you not having any self-control with my dick is not a problem for me.” Gio laughs.

I turn my head and glare at him. “Why are you here? Where am I dropping you off? Where are your drivers?” I launch question after question at his too-smug face.

“That’s a lot of questions, Ellie. I’m here because I want to take you to dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes, dinner. You have to eat, don’t you?”

“I do, but usually when you want to take someone out to dinner, you call and make arrangements with them first. You don’t just show up. What if I had plans tonight?”

“Do you have plans tonight?” he counters.

“No, but that’s not the point.”

“Ellie, it’s just dinner. I got us a table at Westlakes.”

My eyes bug out of my head. “Westlakes? Seriously?” I ask him. That’s a top-tier restaurant, a really hard one to get into.

“Seriously. The booking’s for eight.”

“Eight?” I screech. “Shit.” I slam my foot down harder on the accelerator.

“Woah, what are you doing?”

“I need to get home. I need to change. I cannot wear this to Westlakes,” I tell him.

“You look fucking perfect, Ellie. You don’t need to change,” Gio says. I turn and glare at him again, and he holds up his hands in surrender. “Okay, fine, stop at home and change, but can you try to not kill us both before we get there?”

I park the car in my underground garage and jump out. Gio follows me. It’s not until we’re standing inside my tiny, cramped apartment that it dawns on me that Gio De Bellis is inside my *tiny, cramped* apartment.

“You can, ah, sit over there,” I say, pointing to the little two-seater sofa. “I’ll be really quick.”

I spin around and practically run into my bedroom. Opening my closet, I dig through the contents and pull out a black dress. Then I run into the bathroom, where I take the quickest shower in the history of the world before squeezing into the dress, fluffing out my hair, and reapplying some light makeup.

When I walk out again, Gio is sitting on my bed. “What was wrong with the sofa?” I ask him.

Gio stares at me, unblinking, unmoving. It makes me self-conscious and I start pulling at the fabric of my dress. He gets up off the bed and closes the distance in two steps. His fingers grip my chin and tilt my face towards his.

“You look fucking stunning,” he tells me.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“If I didn’t know how much you wanted to eat at Westlakes, I would order in and stay here all night instead. I would tear this dress off your body, and then I’d take my time enjoying every single inch of you,” he says, his voice growing hoarse the more he speaks.

I want that. So much.

“You made a reservation. Let’s not waste it. Besides, if you play your cards right, I might just invite you back up here for a nightcap,” I tell him before leaning up on my tiptoes to press a kiss to his lips.

This is the first time I’ve initiated contact. It’s always Gio kissing me. I wrap my hands around his neck, pulling his face closer to mine. His hands grip my hips. Before this kiss can lead to anything else, I pull back.

“Mmm, let’s go,” I tell him, stepping out of his embrace. I walk over to my closet and grab a pair of black pumps.

“Fucking hell, I wanna see you in those heels and nothing else,” Gio groans and shifts his cock in his pants.

“Well, let’s see how good this dinner is first. I’m not a sure thing, Giovanni.” I laugh and walk out of my bedroom, knowing he’ll follow me.

“Nobody calls me Giovanni,” he says.

“It’s your name,” I remind him.

“I know, but no one ever calls me that.”

“Do you not like it?” I ask him.

“When you say it, I like it. A lot.” He smiles.

“Okay, well, let’s go, Giovanni. I’m starving.”

Gio takes my hand, and we walk out of my apartment. He leads me to the street, instead of the garage, and over to where a large black SUV is waiting for us. A man, the same one I saw at that first property showing, opens the rear door.

“Boss,” he says, nodding to Gio.

“Thanks, James,” Gio says and waits for me to climb in first.

I’m not stupid. I know what Gio does. I know who his family is. But it’s easy to forget when it’s just me and him. However, when he has goons in suits opening doors for him and calling him *boss*, it all comes crashing down on me.

He’s a mob boss.

Not that he’s confirmed it, or that I’ve asked. But it’s common knowledge—just ask all the media outlets.

I sit in the car, suddenly feeling sick to my stomach. What am I doing? I shouldn’t be entertaining any kind of relationship with him. What am I thinking?

I can see Gio watching me, his palm rubbing against his jaw. I’m trying really hard not to show him that I’m freaking out on the inside. Gio grabs my wrist. I turn my face to look at him as he brings my knuckles to his mouth. He kisses the back of my hand and then rests our joined palms on his leg. He doesn’t say anything. Not a single word, the whole fifteen minutes it takes to get to the restaurant. And because he doesn’t say anything, neither do I.

James, Gio’s... friend or whatever he is, opens the door for us. Gio gets out first. I slide across the seat to follow him, but his body is blocking the freaking doorway. When he finally steps aside, he holds a palm out for me to take.

I accept his offer and climb out of the car before Gio quickly ushers us inside the restaurant. We’re greeted by the hostess—correction, *Gio* is greeted by the hostess, who is doing her best to charm his pants off.

I’m trying to take in as much of this place as I can. The aromas that are assaulting my nostrils are insane in the best way possible. I cannot wait to try the food. The hard part will be deciding what to order. I already know I’m going to want it all.

I can’t help but notice how all the patrons stare at Gio as we walk by. He keeps his head straight and either doesn’t

realise or doesn't care that everyone is looking at him. The hostess opens the door and we step into a private dining room.

Gio pulls out a chair for me, and I sit down. We still haven't said a word to each other since leaving my apartment. It's weird. I don't know what he's thinking. I don't know if he can tell how much I'm freaking out.

The hostess fusses over pouring the wine before she leaves us to our continued silence. The click of the door closing echoes in the otherwise soundless room. Gio picks up his glass, his eyes fixated on me. "You're scared," he tells me more than asks.

"No, I'm not." I shake my head.

"What are you afraid of, Ellie?" he presses.

"Nothing."

"Bullshit. I can't fix it if you don't tell me what the problem is," he says.

"There is no problem."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"What? No."

"Then why do you have that fear in your eyes?"

"What are your plans with me, Gio? I mean, look at me. And then look at you. We're not exactly cut from the same cloth."

"No, because the cloth you're cut from is pure and fucking rare, while mine is stained." He takes a sip of his wine. "And I haven't stopped looking at you since I first met you. So I'm asking again. What are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of you, if that's what you think," I tell him. When he doesn't say anything, I open my mouth and try my best to explain. "I know who you are. I have Google. I know what you do, Gio. I'm not judging you for it, but our lives are worlds apart."

Gio smirks. "You Googled me, huh?"

“Of course I did.”

“Okay, so what is it that you think you know?”

I look around the room. “That you’re a mob boss,” I whisper so that only he can hear me.

“And that’s a problem for you?”

“Ah, yeah, it kinda is.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean *why*?” I ask him.

“Why is it a problem?”

“Because it is—it should be, right?”

“It’s only a problem if you let it be. I mean what I said, Ellie. I will never let anything happen to you.” The door opens and the waiter brings in heaps of things we didn’t even order. I look at Gio. “I ordered samples of everything,” he says as if reading my mind.

My eyes are glued to all the food the waiter is setting on the table, and I swear I could jump up and kiss Gio right now. My mouth is watering at the sight, the smells. It’s a sensory overload.

When the waiter leaves, Gio gestures to the table. “Eat,” he tells me.

I don’t need to be told twice. I load up my plate with one of everything. “This is amazing.”

“It is,” he says. “So, I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that you’re afraid of what people will think. You assume your friends, your family, won’t accept the fact that you’re dating a man like me.”

I stare at him. How the hell does he know that? It’s like he’s digging around in my head. It’s bloody freaky.

“It’s not that—well, sort of. It’s just... Tell me, what does the life of the girlfriend of Giovanni De Bellis look like to you?”

“It looks like how ever we want it to look. There are no rules, Ellie. We make the rules. Whatever anyone else thinks shouldn’t matter. What should is what we think. And I think you are fucking perfect.”

“Nobody is perfect, Gio.”

“I am.” He shrugs.

I shake my head. “Your friend keeps calling me by the way,” I tell him.

“What friend?”

“Some chick named Hannah. Says she needs to run things by me, that you told her as much.”

“She’s the interior designer I hired. And she’s right. I told her to go through you. I want to know that you like how the place is furnished.”

“Gio, it’s your house. I don’t live there. I don’t care how you furnish it. And, besides, it sounds to me like Hannah would very much prefer to be consulting with you.”

“Probably, but I really do not want to deal with her. And you might not live there yet, but you will one day.”

I take a huge breath in. I need to centre myself. This man is... a lot. It’s crazy, the way he talks about a future with me. And how he seems so certain of it. His confidence has me wanting to throw caution to the wind, say *to hell with it*, and run off into the sunset with him... leaving all my worries behind.

Chapter Thirteen



I could see it the minute I sat next to her in the car. She was ready to bolt. She wanted to put distance between us. I'm not going to allow that to happen, though. I've only just found her and I'm not nearly done with her yet. I'm honestly not sure if I ever will be.

I understand her fear. It's not like I haven't thought about the risk of bringing her into my world. But to me, the reward far outweighs the risk. Having her far outweighs the risk. Besides, I've already put safety measures into place. She's being followed 24/7. Watched at all times. If anything were to happen to her, or if anyone tried to do anything, my guys would intervene.

But it's not her safety she's worried about. No, she's worried about what people will think. And I get it. In her job, appearances matter. And she cares about what her friends and family will think—there's nothing wrong with that either. I'm

just not going to let other people's opinions affect our relationship.

“Do you want more?” I ask Ellie, my gaze bouncing over the almost-empty plates in front of us.

“I do, but I couldn't fit more if I tried.” She laughs.

She's finally relaxing and isn't as tense as she was when we first arrived. “We can come back whenever you want,” I tell her.

“Thank you for bringing me here. It was great. But I'd be just as happy if you took me to KFC.” She smiles.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “I'll keep that in mind for next time.”

“Okay, let's not get too carried away. I mean, I love fried chicken and all. But this, wow... This food is better than sex, Gio.”

“Nothing is better than sex with you, Ellie,” I admit.

“Agree to disagree,” she says.

“Come on, let's go.” I push to my feet, my cock already hard and waiting to prove my point. Food is not fucking better than sex. “When we make it back to your place, I'm going to show you how wrong you are. I'm going to fuck the life out of you, Ellie, and I'm not going to stop until you admit this food ain't nearly as good as the orgasms I can give you,” I tell her.



Eloise pulls her dress over her head, revealing every inch of her skin. Every naked inch. “You've had no underwear on all fucking night?” I growl.

“This dress does not like underwear,” she says as she climbs onto the bed.

“You were sitting across from me, all night, with no underwear,” I repeat as I remove my suit jacket. When Ellie's

eyes widen, I follow her line of sight. I forgot I was strapped.

I shrug out of my shoulder holsters and gently place my guns on her dresser table. I then remove the spare nine from behind my back. I don't take my eyes off her the entire time, cataloguing her reaction to this part of me. A part I've hidden from her until now. Bending down, I lift the hem of my pants and remove the knife I've concealed at my ankle.

"You didn't deny it," Ellie says.

"Deny what?" I ask her while undoing my buttons.

"That you're a mob boss."

"I'm not going to start out our relationship with lies. I will never lie to you, Ellie, even if the truth isn't pretty," I say as I let the fabric of my shirt hit the floor.

"Are you... are you in danger?" she asks.

"Life is dangerous," I remind her. I toe off my shoes, followed by my socks, before standing to my full height and undoing my belt.

"But are you going to get hurt? I mean, are people actively trying to hurt you?"

"I don't think so."

"*You don't think so?* So you don't know?"

"We have enemies. We'll always have enemies. But if those enemies are plotting against us at this very moment? I have no idea."

"How did your father die?" She continues her line of questioning.

I stop moving, my hands on my zipper, and look away from her. I just told her I wouldn't lie to her, and I won't. But I also don't think this answer is something she's ready to hear.

"Gio? How did he die?" she presses.

"I need you to not ask me that, Ellie," I tell her.

She looks at me and wraps the blanket around herself, covering her body. Shielding herself. That's not going to work

for me. She glares at me in a way that tells me the wheels in her head are spinning. She's ready to run. Again.

I walk over to the bed, bend at the waist, and pick her up. "Ah, what are you doing?" she squeals.

"Shh." I walk into the bathroom and shut the door behind us. Standing Ellie on her feet, I reach inside the stall and turn on the shower. I do the same with the tap on the sink. "What I tell you can't leave this room, Ellie. You can't ever mention it out loud to anyone. If you need to talk to me about it again, after this, you must agree to do it in private only. Never in front of anyone else."

Ellie's eyes widen all over again. There's a little fear in their depths, but she nods anyway. "Okay."

I lean forward, stopping when my lips reach her ear. "I killed him," I whisper before pulling back to gauge her reaction. She gasps, one hand reaching up to cover her mouth. "My brother, Santo, was engaged. His wedding was planned, the date set for a few weeks ago. Until he found his fiancée, Shelli, brutally murdered. And our father was the one who did it. I didn't have a choice. I couldn't let him hurt my brothers anymore."

Ellie just stands there, staring back at me. She doesn't say a word, doesn't make a sound.

"Say something," I plead with her.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Am I okay?" My brows scrunch down in confusion.

"That's a lot, Gio. So, yes, are you okay? Like, are you going to be in trouble with the police? Is your conscience okay? I don't know. Just... are you okay?" she repeats.

"Ellie, I'm fine. Our father was not a good man. Trust me, no one misses him. My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner. I could have saved Shelli. I could have prevented Santo from having his heart ripped out of his chest."

"I'm sorry..."

"For what?"

“That you are dealing with all this. Alone.”

“I’m not alone. I have my brothers.”

“And me.” Ellie smiles.

“And you,” I agree. I wrap my arms around her waist and press her up against me. “I meant what I said. I won’t ever let anything hurt you, Ellie. I will never hurt you either.”

“I believe you,” she whispers before melting into my embrace.



An insistent buzzing draws me out of my sleep. Then something hits me in the chest. My eyes spring open, and I take hold of the hand that’s currently swatting me.

“Turn it off,” Ellie mumbles.

I reach over and pick up my phone, which appears to be the cause of the buzzing sound. “Yeah.” I put the phone to my ear.

“Gio, where are you?” Marcel asks.

“Out, why?”

“It’s Santo. You need to come home.”

I jump out of bed and immediately look around the room for my discarded clothes. “What happened?” I ask Marcel.

“He was fighting, except he wasn’t. He’s fucking black and blue, Gio. Get home.”

“I’m on my way.” I hang up and start getting dressed.

“What’s wrong?” Ellie asks. She sits up, being mindful to tug the sheet over her chest.

“I have to go—sorry.”

“Okay,” she says.

I secure my holster in place and punch my arms through my jacket. Then I lean down and kiss Ellie on the forehead. “I’m sorry. I wanted to cook you breakfast,” I tell her.

“That would have been hard to do with an empty pantry. I haven’t had a chance to pick up groceries this week.” She laughs.

“Still. I wouldn’t be leaving you this early if it weren’t important.”

“It’s okay, Gio. Go do what you have to do.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say those three little words. My heart picks up speed at the thought. But I can’t say them. This is not the time, and I don’t think Ellie is completely ready to hear what it is I want to tell her.



“What the fuck, Santo?” I growl the moment I walk into my brother’s bedroom. He’s laid out on the bed as the doc packs up his equipment.

“Ouch, my head hurts, Gio. No yelling,” Santo grumbles.

“Too fucking bad. What the fuck happened?”

“I got into a bit of a tumble with someone.” He offers a sort of one-shouldered shrug.

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it fucking does. Who, Santo?”

“It was a fight club, Gio, perfectly consensual. You know how they work.”

“I don’t fucking care how they work. Why the fuck would you let yourself get this banged up?” I ask him, and he doesn’t answer me. I walk out of the room, the doc only a few steps behind me. “How bad is he?”

“A couple of broken ribs. Other than that, just some cuts and bruises.”

“Thank you.” I rake a hand through my hair and go in search of my other brothers.

I find Gabe, Marcel, and Vin in one of the living rooms.

“What happened?” I ask them.

“He went into the ring—fucker didn’t even try to fight back. Didn’t throw one single punch,” Gabe says.

“And you what? Just let him stand there while some asshole kept beating on him?”

“No, I went in and put a stop to it, as soon as I realised what he was doing. He’d probably be dead if I hadn’t.”

“Who was he fighting? I want a name.”

“Ryan Dwyer.”

“Right. Gabe, come with me.” Then I turn to Marcel and Vin. “You two stay back and try to make sure he doesn’t move from that bed. Tie him down if you have to.”



I throw another punch, hitting the fucker dead in the temple. “Did you really think you could just beat the shit out of my brother and not have to deal with me?” I yell in his bloodied face. Then I hold out a palm, and Gabe hands me a baseball bat.

“No. I didn’t mean anything by it...” Ryan says.

I swing the bat. It connects with Ryan’s ribs and he falls to the ground. I don’t stop. I bring the bat back and swing it again, hitting his leg this time, then return my focus to his ribs. I leave his head for last. By the time I’m finished, I’m heaving in lungfuls of air. Covered in blood. While Ryan’s body lies lifeless on the floor beneath me.

“I think he’s been dead for the last five minutes, boss,” Gabe says.

I glance at my brother from over my shoulder. “Grab a leg.”

“Where are you taking him?” Gabe asks, bending down and heaving up the closest limb.

“We’re going to string him up in the middle of that fucking fight club,” I tell him. “No one will fight Santo again once they see this.”

We toss the body into the boot before I jump behind the wheel and we head over to the building where these fights are held. We drag Ryan in through the back door, only to find the place empty. Gabe and I dump the body right in the middle of the ring.

I kick at the fucker one last time, turn on my heel, and walk the fuck out. No one—and I mean no one—messes with my family and lives to tell the fucking story. Fucking asshole.

“So... where were you last night?” Gabe asks once we’re back in the car.

“None of your fucking business,” I grunt in response.

The rest of the drive home goes by in a blur. And as soon as we walk through the front door, I head straight for my bathroom. I pull my phone out of my pocket, and just as I’m setting it on the counter, I see a notification flash across the screen.

ELLIE:

I had a great time last night. Have a great day. XX

It’s such a simple message, and I might be reading way more into it than I should, but this tells me she’s in this with me. She’s not running. Well, not right now anyway. I quickly type out a reply.

ME:

I always have a great time with you.

I send Dan a text, remembering what Ellie said about not having groceries. I don't know why but it bothers me that she doesn't have time to do something as normal as filling her pantry.

ME:

Dan, arrange to have groceries delivered to Ellie's apartment.

DAN:

What sort of groceries?

ME:

The sort people eat.

Chapter Fourteen



The knocking at the door is loud, and whoever it is doesn't bloody stop.

"I'm coming," I yell out while jogging towards the sound. I unlock the chain and swing open the door to find Gio's friends on the other side. "Ah, can I help you?"

"Boss wanted us to deliver these," one of them says, gesturing to his armful of groceries.

"What?"

"There're more in the car. Can we put these in the kitchen for you?" he asks.

"Um, no, you can take them back to wherever you got them from." I shut the door in the guy's face. Not even one minute later, my phone is ringing. I swipe it off the counter. "Gio, why are your friends standing at my front door with their arms full of groceries?"

“You said you didn’t have time to go shopping.”

“So? I can buy my own groceries.”

“Ellie, just let them put the bags in your kitchen for you. It’s not a big deal. It’s just a few things. I want to be able to cook you breakfast next time I’m there.”

“It’s weird that you’re buying me food.”

“It’s only weird if you make it weird. I look after what’s mine, Ellie, and you are mine. So let them in.”

“Say please,” I tell him.

“Please.”

“Huh, you can say that word. Fine, I’ll let them in. But this is a onetime thing, and I’m paying you back.”

“Sure, I’ll see you later.” He hangs up.

I open the front door and the two men deposit the bags on the counter. It takes them five more trips to carry everything inside.

“You have to be kidding me. What am I meant to do with all of this?” I ask them while staring at my tiny kitchen that has grocery bags on every bit of counter space and square inch of flooring.

“Ah, I’m not sure,” Gio’s guy says.

“I didn’t catch your names.”

“James, and that’s Dan. Do you want a hand putting this stuff away?” *James* asks.

“No, it’s fine. I’m really sorry you had to do this. I’ll make sure Gio doesn’t have you do stupid shit like this for me again,” I tell them.

“Yeah, good luck with that. And it’s fine. We don’t mind helping out,” Dan chimes in, and then they both turn to leave. “Lock the door behind us,” Dan adds before shutting the door.

I pick up my phone, snap a picture of my kitchen, and send it to Gio.

ME:

This is insane. What am I meant to do with all this food, Giovanni?

GIOVANNI DE BELLIS:

Eat it?

I roll my eyes and drop my phone on a grocery bag. An hour later, I've managed to squeeze all the cold and frozen items into the fridge and freezer. Everything else I leave in the bags to deal with later. I have to meet the girls in twenty minutes for brunch, and that's far higher on my priority list.



“Okay, spill. I want to know everything that’s happening with hot boss,” I tell Dani as I lift my mimosa to my lips.

“I actually would love to hear about all the fancy-pants houses you’ve sold this week,” she counters.

“I’m voting hot boss first,” Daisy pipes up.

“Me too,” Claire adds.

“Looks like hot boss wins again.” I point at Dani.

“Again? When did he win the first time?” Dani asks.

“Ah, the night he scored you, obviously,” I say with an eye roll.

“Right, well, there really isn’t anything to say. He’s hot, he’s my boss, and he’s an asshole,” Dani huffs. “He’s also really freaking good at sex, like the best I’ve ever had and I think I might have a slight addiction to his dick,” she adds really quickly.

I laugh. “I’m failing to see the problem.”

“Argh, I hate being single. I want to find someone who can give me addictive sex,” Daisy pouts.

“I went home with a guy last weekend, and let’s just say the dude couldn’t find the clit if he had a map with verbal directions. Which wasn’t far from the truth. Because I literally stopped him, drew a diagram on a piece of paper, and then tried to direct him while he hunted around like he was looking for buried treasure.” Claire sighs.

I can actually see her doing that. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell my friends about Gio. Something is holding me back though. It’s partly because I don’t want to take away from Dani’s moment. She deserves this. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her happy, and as much as she claims her hot boss is an asshole, it’s obvious that she likes him.

“Maybe we should just go back to Fire & Ice and find our own hot bosses with addictive dicks,” Daisy says.

“You two go ahead. I’ll pass.”

All three of my friends look at me. Shit, what did I say? Why are they looking at me like I’ve either gone mad or have food on my face or... like they know I’m hiding something?

“*You’ll pass?* On addictive dicks?” Daisy questions me. “Why? Who are you sleeping with, El?”

“No one. I’m too busy to worry about getting laid,” I lie—well, not about the being busy part, but about the whole *getting laid* thing because that is not an issue.

“I call BS.” Claire narrows her eyes at me.

“Come on. If El was getting laid, she’d be the first to brag about it,” Dani says, coming to my defence.

Guilt eats at me. She’s right. Usually I wouldn’t think twice about telling them all the dirty details, describing every single inch. But Gio? I’m not ready to share that. *Him*.

My phone keeps pinging with incoming messages. I pull it out, only to find a heap of texts from Gio’s interior designer. I don’t bother reading them. I’ve been declining her calls every

time she tries to contact me. Hopefully she'll get the message that I am not picking out furniture for a house I don't live in.

Just as I'm putting my phone back into my purse, the screen lights up with *Giovanni De Bellis* written across the top. I hit the decline button. I'll call him back later.

"Okay, so what are we doing tonight?" I ask the girls.

"Ah, I have to... work," Dani says.

All four of us break out into laughter, knowing exactly what she means by *work*. She'll be busy doing her hot boss.

"Claire? Daisy?" I prompt.

"I have to go to my parents," Daisy says.

"I plan on spending the night in my pjs, eating a shit load of ice cream while watching Hallmark movies." Claire shrugs.

"Okay, so I'll just... I don't know... find some other friends who actually want to hang out with me." I pout.

"It's not that I don't want to. I can call in sick from work?" Dani offers.

"Dani, you work at a law firm—a place I know for a fact isn't open on a Saturday night, mind you," I tell her.

"Okay, well, I'll cancel my plans with Alistair."

"Oh, he has a name now. *Alistair*," Claire hums.

We're on our third round of mimosas when I feel that prickly sensation of being watched. I turn my head, searching the café, and notice him right away.

Shit. He's just walked in and is heading right for me.

"I have to pee. I'll be right back," I tell my friends, pushing up from the table and hightailing it to the bathrooms. Just as I'm entering the ladies, I'm jolted backwards against a hard chest. Gio's arm wraps around my waist and he lifts my feet from the floor. "What the fuck are you doing?" I yell as quietly as I can while trying not to draw attention to us.

Gio takes a few steps forward and enters a single bathroom. Then he sets me on the floor and shuts and locks the

door. When he turns around again, his face is contorted with rage. His eyes take their time as they slowly peruse my entire body.

“Are you okay?” he asks me.

“I’d be better if I wasn’t just manhandled and locked in a bathroom.” I fold my arms over my chest.

“You didn’t answer my call. I was worried.”

“Bullshit.” My voice rises.

“Excuse me?” Gio asks with a smile on his face. A smile I really want to freaking slap off. Except I don’t, because the thought of him being hurt does not sit well with me either.

“I said *bullshit*. You were not worried about me. You knew exactly where I was. You knew I was fine and enjoying brunch with my girlfriends. Why are you here, Gio?”

“I *was* worried about you,” he repeats. “Why didn’t you answer my call?”

“I was busy.”

“Drinking champagne?”

“Yes.”

“I need you to answer my calls, Ellie,” he says.

“You know, everyone else might jump and ask how high at your every command, but I’m not ever going to do that, no matter how good your dick might be.”

Gio smirks. “I don’t expect you to. What I expect is the same courtesy I give to you. I will never be too busy to answer a call from you. Ever.”

“I was going to call you back later,” I tell him.

“It’s really fucking important to me that you answer my calls.”

“I need to get back out there before they send a search party. Can we argue about this later?”

“Introduce me to your friends,” he says, one hand reaching out to unlock the door.

“Ah, no. I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Are you ashamed of me, Ellie?”

I laugh. “I know that house of yours has mirrors, Gio. I’m not ashamed of you. I’m just not ready to tell them about you yet. Dani recently started dating someone, and she needs this moment to bask in her new happiness. She’s been sad for a really long time. I can’t go out there, brag about you, and steal her limelight,” I try to explain.

“Okay.”

“I’ll call you when I’m home later,” I tell him.

Gio wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his chest. His lips brush against mine. “I’m not used to this.”

“This?”

“Having a girlfriend. Not being able to *not* think about someone 24/7.”

“Me either. But you can’t just barge in and interrupt girl brunch, Gio.”

“I will do my best.” His lips twitch as they press into my forehead.

“I’ll see you later. Wait... will I see you later? What are your plans tonight?” I ask him.

“My plan for tonight is to spend it in bed, naked, with you. Inside you,” he says.

“Mmm, that does sound like a great Saturday night.”

“I’ll see you later.” Gio opens the door.

When I get back to the table, all the girls give me curious looks. “You okay, El?” Dani asks.

“Ah, yeah, I think I just ate something bad. I’m going to head home. Sorry,” I tell them before picking up my bag.

“Want me to come with?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m just going to lie down for a bit and hope it passes.”

“Okay, I’ll call you later to check on you,” Dani says.

“I’ll see you later. Brunch was great.” I offer the girls a tight smile.

When I arrive at my apartment a few minutes later, I head straight to my bed. I wasn’t lying. I am freaking tired. I didn’t get a whole lot of sleep last night.

Chapter Fifteen



When I walk into the house, I find my brothers sitting down, eating breakfast together. Most days I get in early, before any of them notice that I didn't wake up in my own bed.

I've been spending just about every night at Ellie's place. When I'm with her, it's like we're in our own little bubble. Just the two of us. I really fucking like our bubble. But I also think it's time to break it, to introduce her to the rest of my family.

Santo has been doing better, or at least he appears to be doing better. He's spending a heap of time at Cinque, developing a new blend.

"Walk of shame?" Marcel asks.

"There is no shame," I grunt, sitting down and reaching for the coffeepot. My brothers stare at me expectantly. "I have a

girlfriend.”

“You what?” Gabe scrunches up his face in disgust.

“Why?” Marcel asks.

“Does she know that she’s your girlfriend, or is this your way of telling us you finally lost your mind? Are you sure she’s real?” Vin laughs.

Santo, though? He doesn’t say anything. He just sits there, staring back at me.

“She’s real and, yes, she knows. Her name is Eloise.”

“She hot?” Vin lifts a brow with a stupid grin on his face.

I roll my eyes. “I’m not answering that.”

“So she’s one of those personality types then?” Vin says.

“She’s the whole fucking package is what she is,” I tell him.

“Save yourself the trouble and let her go. The life we live isn’t meant for women. Have you forgotten what happened to Shelli? Why would you want to bring some poor, innocent girl into this shit?” Santo finally hisses in my direction.

“Of course, I haven’t forgotten. And I have thought about it. A lot. I’ve decided I don’t want to let her go. I know the risk, but to not have something you want because of fear of what *might be* isn’t living. I’m not letting her go,” I repeat.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Santo grunts. His chair drags across the tile floor as he gets up and storms out of the room.

“How did the only one of us who was all for this *forever and marriage* shit turn into the most cynical fucker in the bunch?” Marcel shakes his head.

“He found his fiancée dead—that’s how,” I remind him.

“I know that,” Marcel says. “So, what’s this chick do?”

“She’s a real estate agent.”

“Holy shit, you’re banging the chick who sold you this house. That’s why it took so damn long to pick one out, isn’t it?” Gabe grins.

“One, don’t be disrespectful. And, two, I took my time to ensure it was the perfect home for us.” I scowl at my brother. Then quickly change the topic. “Find anything on where that money went yet?” It’s been almost two months since the reading of my father’s will, and we don’t have so much as a crumb.

“Nothing. Whoever it is has done a great job at not being traced,” Marcel says.

“I’ve gone through every single property the old man had to his name. Haven’t found shit,” Gabe adds.

“There’s actually one other place you can look.” Vin takes a piece of paper out of his schoolbag and scribbles something down. “Go to this address. It’s one of Dad’s lesser-known properties—well, I guess ours now. Or yours. I don’t want anything to do with the shithole,” he adds before dropping the paper onto the table and swiftly exiting the room.

“What the fuck was that about?” I glance from Gabe to Marcel.

“No idea.” Marcel picks up the paper and scans the address. “You recognise it?”

I look over and shake my head. Nothing comes to mind. So I return my attention to Gabe. “You two, go check it out,” I tell him. “I have to head out to Cinque. I have a meeting with Mancini.” I shove a now-cold strip of bacon into my mouth before I head up to my room to shower and change.



I walk into the rackhouse, where most of our barrels are kept. I don’t know where the fuck Santo is. He was supposed to be here, and he’s not answering my calls. I stopped having the boys follow him about a week ago. Now, I’m wondering if I cut off his tail a little too soon.

My announcement this morning about Ellie didn’t go over well with him. Although I didn’t expect it to. Just as I’m about

to try to call him again, he comes walking around the corner.

“Where the fuck have you been?” I growl at him.

“Here. Where else would I be?” he fires back.

“Why weren’t you answering my calls? I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“Left my phone at home.” He shrugs. Like it’s no big deal.

“Are you okay?”

“Gio, stop trying to analyse me. I’m fine. What’d you need?” He pins me with a glare.

“I have a meetup with Mancini in an hour. I need you to be there.”

“Where?”

“Here. Come on, show me this new blend of yours. Got a name for it yet?”

My question has him scratching his head and looking away. “Ah... kind of,” he tells me.

I look over to my brother. “What is it?”

“Cinque Dolore,” he says.

Dolore. The word translates to pain, grief, sorrow. I’m not convinced that it’s the best label for our brand of liquor.

“Just taste it before you decide to veto the idea,” Santo says.

I nod my head in agreement. This new blend is the only thing that has been keeping his mind occupied lately. He’s still drinking himself to sleep every night, but he hasn’t gotten into any more fights. Not that anyone is going to go up against him after the message I left.

I follow Santo into the office, and he pours two glasses of a light golden whiskey. He hands one to me. “Cheers.” He clinks his glass with mine.

The flavour explodes on my tongue the minute I take my first sip. It’s good, really fucking good. It goes down smooth too. “It’s... excellent,” I tell Santo.

“I know.”

“So Dolore,” I repeat. “Let’s give it a go. Bring a bottle to this meetup with Mancini.”

I’ve set up a few glasses and bottles in the rackhouse and made sure none of the usual distillery workers are milling around.

A few minutes later, James and Dan walk in with Alex and three of his guys in tow. One of them is his brother-in-law, Leo—I’ve met him a few times over the years. The other two I’ve never seen before.

“Alex Mancini, it’s been a while.” I shake his hand.

“Well, when I heard you guys were coming out with a new label, I wanted to make sure I was the first to try it.” Alex laughs.

“The new label is all Santo. I had nothing to do with this one. Come, sit.” I motion to the high-top table that has every one of our blends lined up down the middle.

“Are you trying to get me drunk, Gio?” Alex says, eyeing the bottles.

“I don’t think this rackhouse holds enough liquor for that, Mancini,” I deadpan. I’ve gone out drinking with this fucker before, and I’ve honestly never seen anyone who can hold his liquor like he can. I observe the two men he’s brought with him—I don’t recognise either of them. “Who are your friends?”

Alex grins. “They’re not my friends. They’re my wife’s cousins. I wanted to shoot them. Lily wouldn’t let me. But, now that I think about it, there’s nothing stopping you.”

I’ve heard of Alex’s in-laws. He married a cousin of the Valentinos. One of the five families from New York.

The younger of the two scoffs. “Matteo Valentino. And this is my brother, Theo. Just so you know, as much as Alex would like to think he wants us dead, he’d miss us way too fucking much.” Then he holds out a hand to me.

“Gio De Bellis. This is my brother, Santo.” I nod. “And James and Dan.” I point over to where my men are positioned just within earshot.

Matteo smiles one of those relaxed smiles, the kind that’s meant to set you at ease. It does nothing for me though. I’ve heard far too many stories about the Valentinos to trust the fuckers.

I take a seat at the table, noticing the older Valentino brother hasn’t said a single word yet. “This is the latest label Santo’s developed.” I pick up the decanter and pour two fingers into each glass.

“Does it have a name?” Alex asks.

“Dolore,” Santo says.

“Sorrow?” Theo finally speaks up.

“Pain, grief, whatever you want it to mean,” I tell them.

Alex’s eyes jump from me to my brother, then back to the Valentinos. He knows what went down with Shelli. He also knows what went down with my father. We’ve been doing business for a while now.

“Fuck, this is good,” Theo says. “Okay, here’s the deal. I don’t care what sort of business you have with Mancini today. I’m here to get you to agree to send me a crate of this shit every month.” He holds up his empty glass to emphasise his point.

“Every month?” I ask. “To New York?”

“Yep. Every month,” Matteo chimes in. “This is the best whiskey I’ve ever had, and Alex here keeps his under lock and key.”

“I’m not sharing the good shit with you assholes,” Alex huffs.

I glance to Santo, who is sitting next to me, appearing bored as fuck. “I’m sure we can work out a deal that benefits both of us,” I tell Theo.

“Great. Now that that’s sorted, I’m out. Thanks for the taster. Matteo, let’s go.” Theo pushes to his feet. “Oh, and, Giovanni, if you feel like taking care of Alex when our backs are turned, you’ll be doing us a favour.” He smirks. The fact that he used my full name does not escape me. He’s letting me know he’s looked into me. I’m sure it’s supposed to be intimidating. It’s not.

“Tell me again why we had to bring them?” Alex’s sidekick asks.

“Because Lily made me promise to play nice, Leo,” Alex groans.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and send Ellie a text.

ME:

Do you have cousins?

She doesn’t respond right away but I know she’s at work. Shoving my phone back into my pocket, I look up at Alex. “So, three hundred units for 100K.”

A lucrative arms deal for both parties, if I say so myself. He needs guns. I sell guns. It’s the only reason we’re all in the same room together. My father wasn’t concerned about who he sold to. Me? I refuse to sell to anyone involved in what I deem immoral business. Like human trafficking. I don’t engage with anyone who does that shit. Everyone has lines they don’t cross—well, most people anyway—and human trafficking is one of mine.

“Throw in a few cases of this when it’s bottled,” Alex says, holding up the glass Santo just refilled.

“Deal.”

“Come on, let’s get this shit done.” I gesture to the back of the rackhouse.

“In a hurry, Gio?” Alex asks.

“Yes,” I tell him.

“Huh, I never thought you’d fall on that sword.” Alex steps up next to me when I don’t wait for him to follow.

“What sword?”

“The relationship sword. Who is she?” he asks.

My body stiffens at his line of questioning. Don’t get me wrong, I trust Alex to pay me what he owes. I trust him to be a repeat customer. But I do not trust anyone in this world with Ellie—other than my brothers.

“She’s none of your fucking business. That’s who she is,” I grunt.

“Oh, touchy. I expect an invite to the wedding.” He laughs.

I walk into a shed where we have crates stacked up with Mancini’s order. Opening the lids, one at a time, I wait for Alex to inspect the weapons before he nods his approval.

“Let’s load ’em up,” Alex tells Leo, who takes out his phone and taps a few buttons. “Money is in your account. Pleasure doing business with you, Gio.” Alex holds out a hand.

I return the gesture and offer my goodbyes, while Santo stays behind with James and Dan to supervise Alex’s guys as they load up their truck.

The moment I walk out, I check my phone and find a message from Ellie.

ELLIE:

None that I know of. Why?

ME:

Just curious. How’s your day going?

Chapter Sixteen



I hit the call button on Gio's name. I need to drive to my next appointment, and I hate text-to-speech.

He answers on the first ring. "Hey, you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" I ask him.

"You don't usually call me," he says.

I consider his words. He's right. I try really hard to not be that clingy girlfriend. Gio has never been in a relationship before, and I don't want to scare him away by being needy and shit. Over the last few weeks, I've grown really attached, which means it's gonna hurt like a bitch if this whole thing blows up in my face.

"Oh, sorry, I don't like bothering you when you're working. But I figured if you're texting me, you're not that busy. I'm driving to my next appointment, so it's easier to call than it is to message," I explain.

“Ellie, you can call me anytime. You are never a fucking bother.”

“I know, but still,” I say, then quickly change the subject before I put my foot in my mouth. “How’s your day going?”

“Better now that I’m talking to someone I actually like.” I can hear the smile in his voice.

“So, good day then?”

“It’s not bad. Tried the new blend Santo has been working on. It’s really smooth.”

“Well, I’ll be your first customer when the new bottles hit the shelves.”

“You’re not buying our whiskey, Ellie. I’ll bring a bottle home tonight,” Gio says.

Home. It’s just a word, but it feels like it means so much more.

“Okay, I gotta go. Rich assholes await.” I sigh.

“What rich assholes?”

“Ah, no idea. Never met this client before, but she’s demanding as hell. Why are rich people always such entitled brats?”

“Why are you asking me?” Gio says.

“Because you’re rich. They’re your kind of people,” I remind him.

“Yeah, your clients are most certainly not my kind of people, Ellie. You know, if you don’t like the job, you don’t have to do it. You’re smart. You could do anything you wanted.”

I love his confidence in me—though I’m not as smart as he seems to think I am. I’m not stupid, but I barely scraped by in uni. “I like the job, just not always the people.”

“If anyone gives you trouble, let me know.”

“Why? So you can have cement shoes made for them?” I laugh.

“That’s not really a thing, Ellie, but something like that,” he grumbles under his breath.

“Okay, chat later. I...” What I do is stop myself from saying the words that were on the tip of my tongue. “I’ll cook tonight,” I tell him instead.

“See you later, Ellie,” Gio says and hangs up.

I slap myself in the forehead. What the hell is wrong with me? I was about to say *I love you*. Over the freaking phone, when we haven’t even said those words in person. It wouldn’t be a lie. The last couple of months have been amazing. Gio really is the perfect boyfriend even if he isn’t experienced in that department.

Sometimes I find myself asking *why me?* A man like him could have anyone he wants, but he’s in my bed just about every night. And he’s made it very clear that we’re monogamous. But then I remember who he is. Gio De Bellis does not do anything he doesn’t want to do.

He’s with me because he wants to be. It’s that simple. And who am I to question the man’s decision? You know the saying *don’t look a gift horse in the mouth* and all.

I press my key fob to lock my car and turn on my heel, only to see a black SUV parked across the street. I wonder if it’s James or Dan today. I wave, even though I can’t see who’s behind the tinted glass.

It takes me three go-arounds before I get the right key to unlock the front door to this property. I’ve only been here twice before—it’s one of those uber modern homes with no colour whatsoever. Everything is white on white. It’s not my thing, but the woman who insisted on seeing the listing today seems to love it.

Just as I step inside the house, my phone rings. I glance at the screen and see my mum’s name. I have at least fifteen minutes before my client is due to arrive, so I swipe the green arrow to answer her call.

“Hey, Mum.”

“El, I... um... can you come to the hospital? It’s Jenni,” Mum says, her voice shaky.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” I ask, already walking back out of the house and locking the door.

“I don’t know. She’s not feeling well. One of her friends called me and said she was bringing her to the hospital. I just got here. The doctors are running some tests. They don’t seem to know what’s wrong.”

I hear my sister groaning in the background. “I’m on my way. I’ll be there soon.”

“Thank you, El. I don’t know what to do...” Mum says.

“It’s okay. She’s going to be okay,” I tell her while starting my car. I reverse out of the driveway. “Mum, I gotta go, but I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay, sweetie. Don’t drive too fast. Take your time.”

“I will.” It’s a lie, but my mother doesn’t need to know that.

It only takes a few minutes for me to break every road rule and arrive at the hospital, where I quickly park the car and run into the emergency ward. “My sister is here, Jennifer Harrington,” I say, out of breath by the time I reach reception.

“You can go back through those doors. She’s in bay twelve.” The woman gestures to her left.

I rush to the doors, a buzzing sound rings out, and I push through. I look at the numbers on the curtained rooms until I find twelve and tug the material aside.

My mum jumps up out of the chair she has pulled up to an empty hospital bed. “Oh, thank God you’re here,” she says before wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug.

“Mum, where is Jenni?” I ask.

“They just took her for surgery. It’s her appendix.”

I can see the tears welling in my mother’s eyes. “Oh, well, that’s good then, right? They know what’s wrong and can fix it.”

“It is,” she says.

“How long will the surgery take?” I press her for more details.

“I’m not sure.”

“Okay.” I lower myself onto the bed. There isn’t really anywhere else to sit.



Mum and I chitchat for what feels like forever. “Surely it can’t be taking this long to remove an appendix?” I sigh. “I should go find the doctor.”

My mum opens her mouth to respond and then shuts it again when the curtain is ripped open, and I do mean *ripped*. My heart stops when I see Gio standing on the other side.

“Ellie, what the fuck? What’s wrong? What happened? Why isn’t there a fucking doctor in here?” He fires off question after question while stepping up to the bed.

“Gio, relax. I’m fine.” I cup his face in my palms.

“Fine? You’re in the fucking hospital, Ellie. That is not fine. What happened?” he asks as his hands run down my arms.

“Nothing. It’s my sister. She’s in surgery.”

A relieved look washes over his face, before his forehead falls against mine. “Fuck, I thought... I don’t know what I thought,” he whispers. “But you’re okay?” He lifts his head, his eyes boring into mine.

“I’m okay. How’d you know I was here?” I ask him.

“You weren’t answering your phone,” he says.

“Oh, I silenced it... sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

My mum clears her throat behind me and my back stiffens. Shit, this is not how I wanted to introduce Gio to my family...

“Ah, Gio, this is my mum, Sheryl. Mum, Gio... my, ah, boyfriend,” I say, looking between the two of them.

“Boyfriend?” Mum questions.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs Harrington. Ellie has told me a lot about you,” Gio says.

“You can call me Sheryl, and I wish I could say the same. How long have you two been dating?” Mum asks.

“A couple of months,” Gio answers for me. “It’s my fault. When we first met, I wanted to keep us to just *us*. You know, so we could get to know each other without anyone else intervening. And then, I guess, we got a little comfortable in our bubble.”

“You don’t need to lie for me, Gio,” I tell him before turning to my mother. “I didn’t tell you, Mum, because I was waiting for the right time. That’s all.” I shrug. “Don’t make a big deal out of it. Please.”

“Me? Make a big deal? Never.” Mum smiles.

“What’s wrong with your sister?” Gio asks me.

“Apparently, her appendix didn’t like her body. She’s in surgery.”

“Appendicitis? Ouch. Is there anything I can do?” he asks me.

“Find out what the hell is taking them so long?” I joke. “I’m sure she’s going to be okay. Right? Appendicitis is common. People get it all the time.”

Gio leans in and kisses my forehead. “She’s going to be fine. I’ll go find out what’s going on,” he says and walks away.

I look over to mum and already know what’s coming. “What on earth, El?”

“What happened to not making a big deal out of it?”

“You have a boyfriend—a boyfriend, mind you, who just barged in here because he thought you were ill or injured,” she says. “A boyfriend who just lied to my face to take the fall for you. I’m sure he assumed if I blamed him for your secrecy, I wouldn’t blame you.”

“He meant well,” I tell her.

“Oh, I know *he* did. But you, miss? Why haven’t I heard about this Gio from you?”

“Because I really like him, Mum, and I don’t know... I didn’t want you to tell me you didn’t like him.”

“Why wouldn’t I like him? He cares a great deal for you, El. I could see it the minute he stepped in.”

“I don’t know,” I repeat. “I just... I don’t want to mess this up. I really, really like him.”

“Oh my god, my baby is in love. Finally,” Mum gushes while bringing her hands to her chest. “I can’t wait for your sister to hear about this.”

Gio clears his throat, causing my head to swing in his direction. How long has he been standing there? Shit, did he hear all of that?

“They’re finishing up now. The doctors said the surgery went great and you’ll be able to see her once she’s in recovery. Come on, I had them give her a private room,” Gio says.

“What do you mean you had them give her a private room?” Mum asks.

“I asked them nicely.” Gio smiles at my mum while holding out a hand to me.

It never occurred to me before how quick he is on his feet, how smooth. Within minutes, he has my mum practically eating out of his palm. Then again, it didn’t take much longer for him to have me dropping my panties.

“Thank you.” I take his hand, and as soon as I’m standing upright, Gio pulls me into his arms.

“Let’s go see your sister,” Gio whispers.

I don't know why, but I'm fighting tears right now. How is he so damn perfect all the bloody time?

We get to Jenni's new room, and when I see my little sister on that hospital bed with tubes and machines all around her, I can't keep the waterworks at bay anymore.

"Oh my god." I rush over to Jenni's bed.

She blinks her eyes at me. "El, why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying. You're crying," I say, wiping at my cheeks. "I'm so glad you're okay. You really bloody scared me, Jenni."

"Sorry, next time my appendix decides it wants to evacuate my body, I'll give you a few days' notice." She grins before looking past me. "Ah, El."

"Yeah?"

"How many drugs have they given me?" Jenni asks.

"I don't know. Why?" I look from my sister to our mum, who's standing on the other side of the hospital bed.

"There's a god standing behind you, El. But don't turn around. He might disappear."

I hear Gio chuckle. "He's not a god, Jenni. That's Gio. My boyfriend," I tell her.

"You have a boyfriend who looks like that? And you didn't tell me? What the hell?"

"How are you feeling, baby?" Mum asks, drawing Jenni's attention back to her.

"Mum, you're here. Do you see him too?" my sister whispers.

"Yes, honey, I see him," Mum says, trying to hide her laughter.

"Do you want me to stay?" I ask Jenni. "I can crash on the chair tonight."

"Will your god stay too?" She grins.

"No," I tell her.

“Well, then, no. You go home. I’ll be okay.”

“All right, I’ll come back first thing in the morning. Do you need me to bring anything?” I ask her.

“Yeah, my textbooks.”

“Are they in your dorm?”

“Yep. I can’t fall behind. How long will I be here?” Jenni looks from me to our mum again.

“I don’t know,” I tell her.

“Okay.” Jenni yawns and her eyes flicker closed.

I manoeuvre around the hospital bed and pull my mum in for a hug. “Are you staying?” I ask her.

“Just a bit longer.”

“Want me to stay with you?”

“No, you go home. You look tired, El. Try to get some sleep.”

“Gee, thanks. Just what every girl wants to hear,” I huff. “I’ll see you later. Text me when you get home.”

“I will,” she says, then turns to Gio. “It was nice to meet you. Let’s arrange dinner, once Jenni is feeling better.”

“Absolutely. It was a pleasure meeting you, Sheryl.” Gio gives my mum that smile of his. The one that makes him look like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

As soon as we exit through the emergency room doors, I head in the direction of where I parked. “I had James drive your car home,” Gio says. “Come on, I’m over here.”

“What do you mean you had James drive my car home? How? You don’t even have the keys.”

Gio smirks at me. “You underestimate my abilities, Ellie.”

Chapter Seventeen



When Ellie wasn't answering the phone and then I found out she was in the ER, I fucking panicked. My heart stopped. Literally, I think it stopped beating in my chest for a few seconds. I couldn't feel it. Couldn't breathe. I've endured a lot of high-stakes situations in my life. But nothing I've ever done compares to how I felt when I didn't know what was wrong with her. Why she was at the hospital...

I dropped everything I was doing and hunted her down. Thankfully my family donated a wing to this particular facility. All I had to do was flash a smile and tell the nurse my name. The relief I felt when I found Ellie and discovered it was her sister who wasn't feeling well and she wasn't there because something had happened to her... Fuck, I don't ever want to feel like that again.

I reach beside me and grab Ellie's hand. "I didn't like thinking you were hurt," I tell her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer your call. I honestly switched my phone to silent after I messaged the office to tell them I needed the afternoon off,” she says.

“It’s okay.” I don’t want to scare her by letting her know the thoughts that went through my head. We come from very different lifestyles. In my world, when someone isn’t answering their phone or you discover that they’re in the hospital, it’s usually because they’re injured. Or worse, already dead.

“Why are we here?” Ellie asks, looking out the window.

I’ve just pulled onto my street. “We’re going home?” I’m not sure why it comes out like a question. I must still be in shock.

“I thought you were taking me to my place,” she says, chewing on her bottom lip.

“What’s wrong with my house?”

“Nothing. It’s just... Will all your brothers be there?”

“I’m not sure. Is that a problem?”

“What if they are and they don’t like me?” I can hear the worry in her voice.

“Even if they didn’t like you, Ellie, they wouldn’t say it and they sure as fuck wouldn’t show it.”

“Why?”

“Because they know I’d shoot them myself if they were rude to you.” I smile.

“That’s not funny. You would not shoot your own brothers.”

“Well, not anywhere lethal. But the shoulder, arm, somewhere that’ll hurt but not kill ‘em? You bet your sweet ass I would.”

“That’s... don’t do that,” Ellie says, sounding more worried than she was before.

“I won’t have to. I know my brothers, and they are going to love you. Trust me.” I pick up her hand and bring it to my lips.

“Okay.”

A few moments later, I’m pulling into the garage and switching off the car. “I need you to trust me, Ellie. Don’t look at or pay attention to anyone else here. Whatever you see, pretend you don’t and focus on me.”

“Gio, you’re scaring me. What am I going to see?”

“Nothing, but this is our home. I want you to remember that. I have a lot of... people who work for me hanging around. A lot. Always.”

“Okay?”

Remembering how it wasn’t all that long ago that Ellie looked like she was ready to run as far away from me as she could get has me pausing in my seat for a moment. I can’t let those fears or thoughts seep into her head again. So I take a deep breath, step out of the car, walk to her side, and open the door for her. I take Ellie’s hand in mine as I guide her through the house. I can hear my brothers the moment we enter, and my grip tightens. I’m not going to let her flee, no matter how much she’s going to want to.

We walk past two soldiers standing by the back door that leads out to the veranda. They each acknowledge me with a nod but don’t say anything. I watch Ellie as she takes it all in.

“I... ah... like what you’ve done with the place,” she says.

The house is practically empty. I can hear the sarcasm in her voice and smile. “Hannah is having a hard time getting answers from you, and I’ve told her I won’t sign off on anything until you have. Meaning this house will remain empty until you stop being stubborn.”

“I’m not your personal stylist, Gio. I’m not picking out your furniture,” she says.

“No, you’re my girlfriend. And I’m pretty sure picking out furniture is something girlfriends can do.”

“You know what else girlfriends can do?”

“What?”

“Not put out,” she hums a little too sweetly. “For weeks at a time.”

I laugh. “Ellie, you can try but I know one touch of my fingers, one flick of my tongue on that cunt of yours and you’ll be begging me for more.”

Her face turns a bright red. “Your ego really is concerning.”

“I agree. I’ve been telling him that since I could talk.” This comes from Gabe. Who is currently looking at Ellie with way more interest than I’d like to see on my brother’s face.

“Gabrielle,” I grunt at him.

“Oh, he full-named me. You know he’s pissed when he full-names you.” Gabe winks at Ellie. “I’m Gabe, the brother you’re going to like the most,” he says while offering her a hand.

“Ah, I’m Eloise—El,” she tells him.

I don’t let go of her, even when Gabe grabs her and pulls her in for a hug. I shove at his shoulder with my free hand to separate them. “Get the fuck off her,” I growl at my brother before walking farther into the games room.

It’s one of the few furnished spaces. The room is decked out with a pool table, pinball machines that line one wall, and a black leather sectional with a huge 120-inch television mounted across from it. There’s also a fully stocked bar in one of the corners.

And all four of my brothers are in here at the same time, which is unusual. “Why are you all here?” I ask them aloud.

“Uh, last I checked, I live here,” Vin says, walking over and introducing himself to Ellie. “I’m Vin.”

“El.” She takes his offered hand.

“Nice to finally meet you, El. Our big bro hasn’t shut up about you.” He smirks.

Ellie looks at me with a raised brow. “Don’t listen to anything these idiots tell you,” I caution her. “Okay, let’s get the introductions over with. That one is Marcel.” I point to where Marcel is standing by the pool table with a cue in his hand. “That’s Santo.” I gesture to the bar where Santo is pouring six glasses of whiskey.

“Hi.” Ellie waves her free hand while the other clenches mine tighter.

“Hey.” Marcel nods to Ellie and then proceeds to line up and take his shot.

Santo picks up two glasses of whiskey and walks over to us. “It’s nice to meet you,” he says, handing one to Ellie. “Welcome to the family. Though if you were smart, you’d run like your life depended on it. Because it probably does.”

I glare at my brother. I’m ready to fucking strangle him. Ellie lifts her glass, clinking it with his. “Thanks for the warning. I’ll... ah... take it under consideration.” I watch as she brings the whiskey to her lips and downs it in one go. Her face scrunches up as she swallows. “Shit, that’s really good.”

I lean in and meld my lips with hers. Sliding my tongue through her mouth, I taste the whiskey on her. “It’s Dolore, the new blend Santo created.” I reach out to take the empty glass from her hands. Then I walk over to the bar, open the freezer, and fill two glasses with my favourite gold whiskey stones. “I’m taking this,” I tell Santo, before shuffling the decanter and two glasses into one arm and grabbing Ellie’s hand with the other. “Let’s go.”

“It was really nice to meet you all,” Ellie calls out as I tug her from the room.

I guide her upstairs, straight to my bedroom. We pass a few more of my soldiers along the way, and Ellie doesn’t say anything. Not until we’re behind closed doors.

“I don’t think Santo likes me.”

“He doesn’t know you,” I tell her.

“Still.” She shrugs, tugging free from my grip to walk around the bedroom. “You know, for a minute, I was thinking

you were sleeping on the floor. Good to see you at least have a bed.”

“I would never bring you somewhere to sleep on the fucking floor, Ellie,” I tell her. Walking over to the bedside table, I set the glasses down and pour us each a small amount of whiskey. “Here.”

“What are we drinking to?” Ellie asks.

“To finally having you in my bed.” I smirk, and she rolls her eyes.

“You’ve had me in bed plenty of times.” She laughs.

“Yeah, but not *my* bed.”

“Okay, then, to finally being in your bed.” She taps her glass with mine. “It’s better cold,” she comments while sipping the whiskey.

I take the glass out of her hand and place it next to mine on the bedside table. Then I grab the hem of her blouse, untuck it from her waist, and pull it up over her head. Throwing the blouse on the floor, I reach behind her and undo the zipper on the back of her skirt, letting the fabric pool around her heeled feet. Neither of us says a word as I offer her a hand so she can step out. I flick the clasp on her bra and drag the straps down her arms. Her breasts fall free.

Fuck, I love her tits. My hands palm them, gently rolling her nipples through my fingers. Ellie lets out a little moan. Kneeling in front of her, I slide her panties down her legs, lifting each foot one at a time so she can step out. I bury my face in her mound, inhaling her scent.

“I fucking love this pussy,” I whisper.

“I’m pretty sure it loves you back,” Ellie says.

I push to my feet and slide a finger through her wet folds. Her knees buckle before she regains her balance. I need her on the bed. I plan to take my time with her. I have the entire night and I’m going to make it fucking last. I scoop her up, lay her across the middle of the bed, position myself between her thighs, and lift her left foot. My lips trail kisses along her

ankle as I unbuckle her shoe and remove it. I repeat the process with her right foot.

“Fucking hell, you are so beautiful,” I tell her while staring down at her naked body.

“Thank you.” Ellie smiles.

One of the things that makes this woman even more stunning is her confidence. She doesn't need me to tell her she's beautiful. And she never fishes for compliments, even though I plan on giving them to her anyway.

“I'm going to take my time with this body tonight. I'm going to make you scream my name, over and over and over again,” I tell her as I run my fingers up and down her calf. “I want every single person in this house to hear you scream for me. To hear that you're mine.”

“That's a lot of bloody people, Gio.”

“Ellie, I want the whole fucking world to know that you are mine.”

She blinks up at me. “Well, then, what are you waiting for?” she asks, spreading her legs wider. “This is your open invitation, Giovanni. Do your best and see just how loud I can scream.”

Chapter Eighteen



Gio's stare burns through my skin. He watches me as he ever so bloody slowly takes his jacket off. He then removes the gun belt thingy he has around his shoulders. When I first saw that he carried weapons on him, it freaked me out. Not because I'm scared of him—although common sense says I should be.

No, I'm afraid of the reasons he has to carry them. The reasons he would have to use them. I don't know if I could handle seeing him hurt. Or worse... losing him after I only just found him.

He places the guns on the floor by the bed, then straightens to his full height and loosens his tie. He undoes the knot before tugging the silk material from his neck. "Put your arms above your head," he says.

"Why?" I ask. Though I'm following his instructions anyway.

“Because this is my bed, Ellie. I make the rules here,” he says as he leans over me.

I feel him wrap the tie around my wrists. I get lost in his scent and pay little attention to what is actually happening here. When he straightens again, I go to move my arms and find that they don't budge. I tilt my chin backwards to see that the tie is now secured to the headboard.

I look back to Gio and smile. “Okay, now what?” I'm honestly intrigued as to where this is going.

“You know, most people don't smile when I tie them down.” He smirks.

“Well, I'm not most people, and I'd like to keep on believing that you don't tie other people down to your bed, Giovanni.” I scowl at him.

“I've never had another woman in this bed, Ellie.” He seems to choose his words carefully. Which I appreciate at the moment. I don't like being jealous.

Gio removes his shirt, and my mouth waters at the sight of his bare chest and those abs that I love running my tongue over. My fingers twitch, just itching to reach out and touch him.

“I want to touch you,” I repeat exactly what I'm thinking.

“Do you, now? Good things come to those who wait.” He laughs.

I watch as Gio reaches over and picks up one of the whiskey glasses. He takes a sip before holding the glass over my bare chest. He tips the cold liquid onto each of my breasts; then his mouth latches on and sucks my nipple. He moves to the other side and lavishes it with the same attention. My back arches off the bed, bolts of pleasure running straight to my core.

“Mmm, it tastes even better on you,” he says.

“Mmhmm,” I mumble in response.

Gio pours some of the whiskey onto my stomach, his lips and tongue following the path it creates. His mouth latches on

to spots all over my lower abdomen this time, biting and sucking, and I know I'm going to be left with a trail of love bites all over me. I close my eyes as pleasure builds in my every nerve ending. I hear him set the glass on the bedside table. But when I feel the coldness hit my nipples, my eyes spring open. Gio smirks down at me as he rubs one of those gold whiskey stones over my chest.

“Oh shit,” I hiss. He reaches over, retrieves another stone, and rubs it along my other nipple. My back practically flies off the bed. “Oh my god!”

Gio chuckles and then continues to create an ice-cold path along my body. He rubs the gold stones around my stomach before he dips them lower. He's sitting between my legs on his knees, my thighs spread wide for him as he shifts his attention to my clit, and I scream out.

“Holy freaking god! Gio.”

He doesn't say anything, just watches me as I squirm beneath him. My legs try to close, the sensation almost too much to handle, but Gio holds me firmly in place. He gently circles the stone around my clit. My head lulls back and my eyes shut, while my hands tug at my makeshift bindings.

“I fucking love how responsive you are,” he says.

“Oh god! GIO!” I hiss his name as sensations of pleasure ricochet through me.

I feel the ice move lower. Gio rubs it around my opening, not pushing it inside, even though my core is pulsing, seeking something. I need something. Then the second stone hits my clit, and Gio presses the cube hard against me.

“I want to see you fucking come, Ellie,” he says. “Rub yourself against the stone.”

My hips start to gyrate, barely waiting to be told. The coldness, the pressure... It's a lot and I feel my orgasm rising to the surface.

“Shit, Gio, fuck,” I cry out, my fingers curling around the tie. My feet flatten on the mattress as my hips rise upwards and pleasure rips through me.

Just as I'm coming down from my orgasm, Gio removes the ice stones and covers my clit with his mouth. The change in temperature from cold to warm has me rolling right into another orgasm as he sucks on my hardened bud.

"Jesus, Gio!" I scream.

He continues to suck and lick at me, until my body completely sinks into the mattress, motionless. He's used me up. I don't think I have anything else to give. Gio makes his way up my body, laying kisses and bites as he goes.

"I'm never going to get enough of you," he says.

"Untie me," I tell him. He looks at my wrists and then back to me. "*Please.*"

Gio pulls at the tie and my arms drop to my sides. Once the feeling has returned, I wrap my legs around his waist, push at his chest, and roll us over. He falls onto his back, his hands on my hips as I straddle him.

"Do you have any idea how torturous it is to not be able to touch you?" I ask him while running my fingertips over his bare chest.

Gio trails a hand up my waist, along my side, and then cups my breast. "I can imagine," he says while rolling my nipple through his thumb and index finger.

"Mmm, I don't think you can," I hum. "It wasn't nice."

"I'm pretty sure the two orgasms you just had suggest otherwise."

"Nope, I didn't like it." I lower my hands and make quick work of undoing his belt and then his pants. Reaching in, I wrap a palm around his cock and pull it free. "I like touching you," I say, as I slowly pump his shaft.

"I like you touching me too," Gio groans.

I position myself above him and sink down, his cock stretching me. "Oh god!" I moan as I bottom out, stilling to allow myself time to adjust to his size. After a few seconds, I slide back up before slamming down again.

Gio's fingers dig into the flesh of my hips. "Fuck, Ellie. Shit. Stop."

"What's wrong?" I freeze. I can feel his cock twitching inside me as my pussy clenches around him.

"No condom," he grunts. "I don't have a condom on."

"Oh..." I start to move. To get off him. But Gio's hands tighten on my hips and push me down.

"Wait," he says. "This is too fucking good not to keep going. Your cunt feels fucking fantastic," he grits out while pushing his hips upwards. "Fuck me."

"Are you sure?" I ask him. He's always used protection, not that it's a problem for me. But it does feel ten times better without it.

"I'm sure. Are you sure this is okay?" He pauses to look up at my face, as if trying to gauge my reaction.

"I'm sure," I tell him.

"Okay, so we're doing this now. No more condoms."

I look down at him. "Don't you at least want to know if I'm on the pill or something? Maybe see some medical records? Make sure I don't have diseases?"

"Right now, I want you to fuck me, Ellie. We can deal with whatever else happens later."

"Okay, but just so you know... I get the shot. Religiously, and I don't have any diseases," I tell him.

"I've never fucked anyone without a condom before. I'm clean as a fucking whistle, Ellie. Now, please, can we continue on with the fucking part now?"

I can hear the strain in his voice as he slams me back down onto his cock, and I cry out, "Yes!"



I wake up hot, sweaty, and trapped under a big, muscled, tattooed arm. I open my eyes, take a quick look around the dark room, and remember I'm at Gio's place. Moving as gently as I can, I slide out from under his arm and slip off the bed. I tiptoe my way into his closet, pull out the first t-shirt I find, and tug it over my head. Locating my discarded skirt on the floor, I pick it up and tug it on. I'm thinking, if I can get out of here early enough, I won't have the embarrassment of facing anyone who might have heard my screams all night.

I grab my shoes and bag next and carry them out of the room, taking a moment to look back at a still-sleeping Gio. Damn it. I shouldn't have looked. Because now I want to jump right back into bed with him. He's rolled over onto his back. The sheet stops low on his waist. All that golden skin on display...

I force myself to turn around and keep walking. If I don't leave now, I'll get back in that bed. And if I get back in that bed, I won't have enough time to go home and shower. I need to stop by Jenni's dorm room and grab her books and some clothes before I head into the office today.

Surprisingly, Gio's house is very quiet, and I make it all the way downstairs without seeing anyone. Which is odd, considering how many people were here when we arrived last night.

"Fuck, you must have worn him out if you were able to slink out without waking him... Although the walk of shame does look good on you, El."

I jump at the voice. Spinning on my heel, I see Gabe smirking up at me from where he's standing in the foyer. "I'm not... I... ah..." I don't know what to say.

"Come on, at least let me make you coffee before you sneak off," Gabe says.

I follow him into the kitchen. "You really don't need to do that."

"I want to." He shrugs.

There's an ease about him that I can't quite figure out. Is he just a laid-back guy, or is this an act to get me to let my guard down? Or am I reading too much into it because I want Gio's brothers to like me?

He respects them a lot, and I know how much they all mean to him. If any of them don't approve of me, well, I wouldn't expect him to pick me over his brothers. And I wouldn't want him to either.

"I really do need to go. I have to get home, then stop by my sister's dorm, pick up her stuff, swing by the hospital, and finally get to work," I say.

"You really think you can do all of that without a decent coffee?" Gabe lifts a brow in question.

"No, but I'm sure I can get one along the way somewhere."

"That's an insult. You do know we're Italian. No one can make you a better coffee than I can. Sit down." Gabe points to the bar stools along the benchtop. I sit and watch as he goes about making coffee. "So, tell me, El. What are your intentions with my brother?"

"I... ah... intentions? Well, I..."

Shit! Think, El. Think!

"Relax. I'm kidding," Gabe says, then adds, "Mostly... Just know that if you hurt him, it won't matter that you're a girl. I'll find a way to ruin your life."

I blink at him. He isn't kidding.

"I'm not going to hurt him," I say.

"Good, then we are going to be the best of friends." He smiles like he didn't just threaten me.

"I already have best friends. How about we just start with *friends* in general, and then work our way from there," I suggest.

Gabe laughs. "I like you. I can see why my brother has his balls in a twist."

“Thank you?” My words come out as a question. Because, honestly, I’m not sure if that’s meant to be a compliment or not.



It’s the sort of morning that never ends. Gio rang while I was at Jenni’s dorm getting her stuff. He was pissed off that I sneaked out on him. I told him to deal with it, that I’m busy and don’t have twenty-four hours a day to cater to his needs. Although that doesn’t sound like a bad day. Spending 24/7 with Giovanni De Bellis. I’m not sure my body would survive it, but I’d like to find out.

I’ve just sat down at my desk after dropping Jenni’s things off to her at the hospital. Mum was there already and said she would be keeping my sister company for a bit. I fire up my computer, ready to reschedule all the meetings I’ve missed and sift through my ever-growing inbox. As I scroll through the list of emails, one in particular sticks out.

Giovanni De Bellis. I click on his name to open it.

Sender: Giovanni De Bellis

Subject: Looking for a penthouse

Dear Miss Harrington,

I am currently in the market for a penthouse. Please find me appropriate listings to view at your earliest convenience.

Kind Regards,

Giovanni De Bellis

I pick up my phone, find his number, and click the call button.

“Ellie, how are you?” he answers on the first ring.

“Good. How are you?” I reply.

“I’d be better... if my day started with my girlfriend still in my bed when I woke up,” he grumbles.

“Yeah, I’m not getting into that again. Why are you looking for a penthouse? And what amenities are on your must-have list?” I ask him.

“I need a new place in the city, somewhere I can take you where no one else is around. I’ve decided I don’t want to share your screams with anyone else,” he tells me.

“So you’re looking for a fuck pad?” I huff.

“No, I’m looking for a second home.”

“Okay, what’s your budget?”

“There is no budget, Ellie. As for the amenities, the only must-have is that my girlfriend *must* approve of the place. I’m sure you can work something out with her,” he says.

“I’ll see what I can do. I gotta go. I have heaps of work to catch up on.”

“How’s your sister?” he asks before I can hang up, and my heart melts a little more.

“She seems good. She should be going home today,” I tell him.

“That’s good. I’ll talk to you later,” he says and cuts the call.

“Yep, later,” I say to myself. Now, time to move on to clients who aren’t as easy or pleasant to deal with.

Chapter Nineteen



“We have a name,” Gabe says, walking into my office. My other brothers are right behind him.

“A name for what?” I ask. “And why the fuck aren’t you at school?” I point to Vin.

“Gabe told me to come home.” He shrugs. I look to Gabe for an answer.

“A name for the person—or the organisation, I should say—who cleared out warehouse seven.”

“Who?” I jump to my feet, ready to go to war with these assholes.

“Some startup gang, going by the name Davinci,” Gabe says.

I try to recall the name. I’ve never heard of them, and I’ve heard of everyone working in Melbourne’s criminal

underworld... or at least I thought I had.

“Who the fuck are they?” I ask.

“No idea, but I got an address of the place they like to frequent. We need to check it out,” Gabe says.

“Not without more intel and a fucking plan. I want these assholes to pay. I want their heads rolling down the fucking street. Fuck it... get me a 9-iron, and I’ll hit a fucking hole in one,” I growl.

“In time. You said it yourself. We need intel and a solid plan. We’re not trying to get people killed here,” Santo says.

I look over to him, strangely weirded out that he’s being the voice of reason right now. Don’t get me wrong, he used to be the smart one. But since Shelli died, he’s been the most reckless of us all—to the point I had to have the boys watch him around the clock for weeks.

“You’re right. Smart, that’s how we beat these fuckers and teach them a lesson everyone else can fucking learn from,” I say before stepping around my desk. Then I gesture to each of my brothers. “Santo, Marcel, you’re with me. Gabe, I need you to find Eloise. Watch her from a distance and, for the love of God, do not let her see you.”

“What about me?” Vin asks.

“Go to fucking school,” I tell him.

“Why do I always miss the good shit?” he whines, picking up the backpack he dropped on the ground.

“Don’t worry, Vin, you only have a few months left,” Santo says.

“*Years*. He’s going to university,” I remind them.

“What he said.” Santo shrugs, pointing at me.

I walk out to the front of the house, texting James and Dan to meet me with a car. James pulls up a few minutes later.

“Where are we going?” Marcel asks.

“To get some information.” I give James the address Gabe sent through.

Surprisingly, we drive past a really nice fucking house, big iron gates and fences all the way around. “These fuckers have money,” Santo grunts.

“Probably from selling our fucking weapons,” Marcel adds.

“Pull over around the block,” I tell James. He stops a short distance away and I get out of the car.

“What are you doing?” Santo asks, following me out with Marcel behind him.

“Going to check things out. Wait in the car. It’s harder to go unnoticed when there’s three of us,” I tell them.

“Gio, stop. I’ll go. You’re the fucking boss. You’re not supposed to put yourself in unnecessary danger,” Santo hisses.

“I’ll be fine. I’m just having a look,” I tell him.

“I really do not want to be fucking boss, Gio, and if you die, I’m it. So don’t fucking die,” he grumbles.

“I have no plans on dying anytime soon, so don’t you worry. Now, wait in the car. I’ll be back.” I jog off in the direction of the house.

I get up as close to the fence as I can. I’m surprised they don’t have guards at the gate. In fact, the whole yard looks empty. That is until about ten dogs come barreling up, barking in my direction with drool hanging off their mouths. I turn on my heel and walk back towards the car.

Fucking dogs. They’re going to be easy to get past.

As soon as I slide into the back seat, I text Gabe to check on Ellie. “I want a few guys surveilling this place over the next couple of days,” I tell James and Dan, knowing and trusting them to see to that task. Then I pivot to Marcel. “Hack into the house’s security system. I want to see what’s inside.” When he nods, I gesture to Santo. “I want you to follow them. Find out where they go, who they’re doing business with. Whoever the fuck is buying from them has to know they’re our stolen

weapons. That makes them just as high on our fucking shit list.”

Gabe messages me back and says that Ellie is at her apartment and hasn't left. I check the time. It's only five. She's never home this early.

When we arrive at the house, I jump out of the car and head straight for the garage. Jumping into the Lambo, I fire it up and quickly reverse, hitting dial on Ellie's number the moment I pull onto the road.

“Hey,” she answers.

“Hey. What's happening?” I ask her.

“Not much. What are you doing?”

“Where are you?”

“As if you don't already know the answer to that, Giovanni.” She huffs before adding, “I'm home.”

“Why are you home so early? Did something happen?”

“No, I just... needed to rest,” she says.

“Are you okay?” Now, I'm concerned. Ellie is one of the hardest workers I know. She never stops.

“I'm fine, just tired,” she tells me. “Can I call you back in a bit? I'm about to jump in the shower.”

“Yeah, sure.” I cut the call.

It isn't long before I'm parking in her garage and heading up to her apartment, where I let myself in. I convinced her to give me a key a few weeks ago—although I would have just had one cut myself if she hadn't. I can hear the shower running. So I walk into her bedroom and sit on her unmade bed, which looks recently slept on. I scroll through my phone, reading emails while I wait for her to come out of the bathroom.

“Jesus Christ, Gio. What the hell?” she squeals when she sees me on her bed. “You scared the crap out of me. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here because you are,” I tell her simply. “I was trying not to scare you. That’s why I didn’t walk into the bathroom, as hard as that fucking was. Especially knowing that you were naked and soapy in there. Without me. Fuck, maybe we can go back in there together?”

“Does your dick ever stop?” she asks.

“Not when it concerns you,” I tell her. Then take the time to look at her, really look at her. She appears tired. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she says, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

“Bullshit. I know you and I know something is wrong.”

Ellie comes and sits next to me on the bed. “It’s women’s issues, Gio.” She sighs.

“If it’s a *you* issue, it’s a *me* issue, Ellie. What’s going on?” I ask again, getting really fucking frustrated that she’s not just giving me the answers I want.

“Gio, I have my period, okay? Stomach cramps are a bitch and my mood is shit. So, no, it’s a *me* issue, not a *you* issue, and not anything you can snap your hot little fingers about and make everything better,” she says, her tone sounding very on edge.

I turn my head. I try to think back over the last few months we’ve been together. I’ve never seen her like this. And there hasn’t been a month where she’s bled. *That* I would know for sure. I’m basically a permanent resident of her vagina.

“Okay, so how often does this happen? Because we’ve been together for months and this hasn’t happened before,” I ask her.

“Usually once a month, but I get the shot so I don’t normally get them at all. I was due a few days ago and missed my appointment. But don’t worry, I’m going in next week to get it taken care of,” she explains.

“I’m not worried if you get a shot or not, Ellie,” I tell her. “Come here.” I wrap an arm around her and pull her against

me.

“I’m sorry I was bitchy,” she says.

“You were not bitchy.” I kiss the top of her head. I know there isn’t anything I can do. But, fuck, do I want to make her feel better...

I sit on the bed, holding her in my arms until she falls asleep. Gently laying her down, I cover Ellie with the blanket and walk out to her living room, where I open Google on my phone and fall down the rabbit hole. Once I’m satisfied I’ve read enough on the female anatomy, I send James a list of items to pick up for me.

He knocks on the door thirty minutes later with two armfuls of grocery bags. “Boss.”

“You get everything?” I ask him.

“Sure did,” he says.

“Thanks.” I reach out and take the bags from his arms. “I’ll be staying here tonight. You can head home,” I tell him.

“Sure. See you tomorrow,” he says.

Closing the door, I set the bags on the kitchen benchtop. Her cabinets are still really full from the last time. But I manage to find a spot for everything.

Ellie wakes up and comes out to the kitchen just as I’ve finished. “I fell asleep,” she says. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You were tired,” I tell her.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes are bouncing around the kitchen, likely noticing the now-empty bags.

“I bought you some things I thought you might need.” I shrug.

“Gio, I thought we agreed no more groceries.”

“These aren’t groceries. Well, technically, they are but they also aren’t,” I say. “I Googled what things could help you with your period, and a list of food items and teas came up. I got you cookies and cream, chocolate, and vanilla ice cream

cartons—I wasn't sure what you'd prefer. And then some peppermint and camomile teas, biscuits, and a bunch of other shit."

Ellie immediately starts crying. I'm in front of her within seconds, holding her in my arms.

"What's wrong?" I ask, wiping the tears from under her eyes.

"You. You're just too perfect," she sobs. "It's going to break my heart when this all blows up in my face, because I think I'm in love with you, Giovanni De Bellis. No, I don't *think*. I *know* I am."

"Okay, first, this isn't ever going to blow up in your face. I love you, Ellie, and I look after things I love. People I love. I will not allow anything to come between us. Ever," I admit before leaning down to kiss the middle of her forehead.

"See? Perfect," she whispers. "You are perfect."

"I'm far from perfect, and I'll never be good enough to deserve you, but I will always try to be," I say as Ellie's arms cling tight around my waist. "So... I read something else interesting on Google."

"What?" she asks me.

"I read that sex can help with period pain, that orgasms speed up the whole ordeal or some shit like that. It's definitely worth trying," I suggest with a smirk.

"You can't seriously want to have sex with me like this. I'm a mess, and it will be messier—*bloody*." Ellie screws up her face.

"A little bit of blood will not stop me from having your pussy, Ellie." I laugh and pick her up off her feet. "I think we should try the sex, then the ice cream, then the tea," I say, walking into her bedroom.

"Shower! If we're going to do this, let's do it in the shower so it's not as messy, and I need to use the toilet first," she says.

I set her down on her feet and she scurries off into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. I wait until I hear the

toilet flush before I open the door. She has this thing about me not watching her on the toilet. I couldn't care less to be honest, but she hates it.

I turn on the shower and let the bathroom steam up. Then I remove my shirt and kick off my shoes. I'm naked with my cock standing at attention within a minute. Stepping over to Ellie, I lift her shirt and pull her sleep shorts down her legs.

Once we're under the water, my mouth latches on to her breast. Fuck, I really love her tits. "Mmm, I love you," I murmur against her skin, moving my lips upwards and along her neck.

"I love you," she moans.

I want to hear it again. I want to say it again. Now that those words have been spoken, I want them again. And again.

I pick her up and Ellie wraps her legs around my waist. "Tell me if it's too much... or if it hurts." I've never fucked a girl on her period, so I honestly don't know what to expect.

"It's okay. I'm not broken, Gio," she says.

I slowly slide my dick into her opening. She's wet, so fucking wet. I push her back against the tiles harder as I pump in and out of her at an even pace. It's torture. But fucking good at the same time.

"I love you. So fucking much," I tell her, then capture her screams as she comes around my cock.

Chapter Twenty

Cloise



GIO:

I love you.

ME:

I love you more.

GIO:

Not possible.

ME:

Wasn't it you who, just last night, told me that nothing was impossible?

GIO:

That was in reference to making you come again...

My face hurts from smiling so much. Two weeks ago, Gio and I first exchanged those three little words. Ones that a lot of people throw around with little thought to the weight they carry. But I feel every bit of this man's love when he says them to me, even through a text message.

I drop my phone back into my bag. I only just left him at my apartment thirty minutes ago. I'm meeting Daisy for lunch—if Gio had his way, he would have invited himself to come along. The problem with that is I haven't exactly told my friends that I'm dating anyone.

At first, I genuinely didn't want to take away from Dani's limelight with her hot boss boyfriend. But now, I think the fear of their judgement is what's really holding me back. Or, worse yet, their disapproval of Gio. I love my friends, and I love Gio. I don't want to hear my friends try to talk me out of continuing a relationship, or highlight all the reasons I shouldn't be dating him.

Walking into the restaurant, I find Daisy in a booth already waiting for me. I slide in, opposite her. "Hey, sorry I'm late," I say.

"Five minutes doesn't really count as being late." Daisy grins.

"To me, it does. You know how much I hate being late to anything."

"I do." She nods.

"Have you ordered already?"

“No, I was waiting for you.”

“Okay, I’m starving.” I pluck the menu from the table and open it.

“Sooo... is it just work that’s been keeping you occupied, or is it something or *someone* far more interesting than prancing around rich people’s houses that’s been taking up all your free time?” Daisy asks.

“It’s work, and I’ve been spending more time with Jenni since her surgery.”

“Oh, have you met that boyfriend of hers yet?”

“No, which is odd, right? I should make that happen.”

“Yeah, we don’t want little Jenni dating a Ted Bundy or something.”

I shrug. “Ted Bundy was hot. I would have gotten in his car.”

“Please do me a favour and do not get into random hot guys’ cars,” Daisy pleads.

“I’ll try my best. But you know how partial I am to hot guys... and their cars.” I grin.

“Well, don’t look now, but you have one fine-as-hell man staring at you as we speak.” Daisy’s eyes flick over my shoulder as she covers her mouth with the menu. I turn around and spot none other than Gabe De Bellis. He glances away and stares up at the menu on the board, like he just so happened to be at the same café as me and my friend. “I said not to look,” Daisy hisses.

“You do know that when someone says not to look, the other person is going to do the exact opposite, right?” I point out the obvious.

“Well, people need to listen and follow instructions better,” Daisy says.

“I have to make a call. Can you order me the chicken burger, with some waffle fries and a Coke?” I ask her.

“Sure.” She nods and walks up to the counter, while I step outside.

It’s no surprise that Gabe is quick to follow. Ignoring the fact that I have a shadow standing two feet behind me, I dial Gio. I’m about to hang up by the time he answers the call.

“Babe, everything okay?”

I’m immediately thrown by the pet name. Gio usually calls me Ellie. “Babe? What are you doing right now, Gio?”

“I’m working. Why? What’s up?” he asks me.

I turn and glance over at Gabe. “What’s up is the fact that your brother is following me around like a lost puppy. Tell him to stop.”

“Yeah, sorry, babe, but I can’t do that. I will, however, tell him to hide better,” Gio says.

“What you can tell him is to fuck right off and, while you’re at it, tell yourself the same thing. I don’t need or want a babysitter, Gio.”

“Babe, you need to relax. It’s really not that big of a deal.” He sighs into the phone.

“Fuck off, Gio,” I yell down the line, then press the red button to disconnect the call.

I glare at Gabe, but catch Daisy watching me through the window. Without saying a word, I storm past him as he’s answering his phone. I can only imagine who’s on the other line.

I slide back into the booth. “Sorry about that. I have an asshole client who thinks the world revolves around him and that I should just drop everything and do as he says,” I huff.

“You sell real estate, El, not your body.” Daisy smirks.

“There are some days when I don’t see much of a difference. I think I may just be selling my dignity, having to deal with all these entitled asshats,” I groan.

“Why don’t you go back to selling to everyday people, like you and me?” she suggests.

“Because that would be admitting I failed.”

“You haven’t failed though. You’ve sold properties. You’ve done it. You just don’t like it. That’s not failing.”

“Taking a step backwards is like admitting I can’t cut it with the top-tier agents.”

“Who cares what other people think if you’re miserable?”

I roll her words around in my head. She’s right. But before I can tell her as much, our order gets called, and Daisy jumps up to grab it. “Hey, Daisy, care if we take it to go?” I ask her.

“Ah, sure, where do you want to go?”

“Your place?”

“Okay. Let’s do it.” She nods.



I’ve been rejecting Gio’s calls, but I did message him to let him know I’m fine and to stop ringing me. He hasn’t.

I almost don’t want to leave Daisy’s house. I know as soon as I do, I’m going to have to deal with Gio. I’m honestly surprised he hasn’t already barged through her door and scooped me up like a damn caveman.

“So, are we just gonna pretend that your phone isn’t ringing hot while you glare at it like you want to commit murder?”

“Yep,” I reply, popping the P.

“Okay, well, if you need help digging a hole, we can call Claire and Dani. The four of us will be able to get the job done in no time at all.”

Unfortunately, that’s not really a viable option. Because, one, I don’t actually want Gio dead. And, two, if we did kill him, we’d have a whole army of mafia men after us.

“It’s fine. I gotta go though. Thanks for letting me hang out all afternoon,” I say, pushing up from the sofa. I’ve put off leaving long enough.

“You know, I’m always here if you want to talk about it,” Daisy says as she guides me to her front door.

“Thank you, and I promise I will fill you in on the details soon.” I hug her and walk out.

I shouldn’t be surprised to see someone in a form-fitting suit leaning up against a black SUV. He looks directly at me. I thought he’d be angry. He doesn’t seem angry though. He appears... worried. Almost anxious?

Chapter Twenty-One



A few hours earlier

The plan is solid. I go over it in my head. Because I think if I were to verbalise it again, the boys would attempt to shut me up permanently. This isn't the first time we've gone on the attack. Far from it. I'm not sure why it feels different, why I'm so much more amped up trying to make sure the plan is foolproof.

I don't want any surprises. It could be that this is the first time I'm taking everyone with me as boss, or it could be the fact that I have something to go home to now. Well, in a sense anyway. I need to do something about getting Ellie to move in with me. Maybe then I wouldn't worry so much about her when I'm not there.

Although I doubt that. I worry about her when I am with her too. I also know that no one will protect her like I would. There is nothing I wouldn't do to make sure she's safe—and stays that way.

The more I think about her moving in with me, the better the idea seems. How does one get an independent girlfriend to move in?

When the car comes to a stop, I shake those thoughts from my head and look out the window. Game on. We're here. The intel we gathered on this group showed that these guys are amateurs. They were hired to empty our warehouse. We haven't determined who sent them yet. But we will. It's part of today's prerogative.

I glance at my watch. Five minutes. We've timed everything out to the second. In five minutes, everyone will be in place.

"Let's go," I tell Santo and Marcel, who are seated beside me.

I have thirty men scheduled to breach the property through various entry points. There will be nowhere for any of these fuckers to escape to once we're inside. This would usually be done under the cover of darkness—it's the middle of the fucking day. But according to our intel, now is the only time these bastards are all gathered in the same spot.

They obviously didn't get the memo about avoiding habits. Eating at the same place, visiting the same spots on the same days at the same times—that's what gets people killed in this lifestyle. Habits make you predictable and the last thing you want to be is predictable.

"Do it," I tell Santo.

He pulls out the first steak and throws it over the fence, followed by another ten slabs of meat. The dogs come barreling up to the gate, in search of their treat. I look at my watch. Four minutes. It's only going to take three for the dogs to consume enough drugged meat to be sleeping like well-fed babies. It won't hurt them or cause any long-term effects. I am

an animal lover after all. I've even planned for one of the guys to take the mutts to a shelter once this is all said and done, considering their owners won't be able to see to proper pet care once I'm finished with the fuckers.

As soon as the dogs are knocked out, we push through the gates. I jog up to the house, with a pistol in each hand. I'm honestly surprised it's this fucking easy to reach the front door. If someone got to my front door this quickly, without anyone intervening, I'd be knocking off my own fucking soldiers.

After pushing our way in, I step aside. Marcel rolls two smoke bombs through the opening. Then I pull a mask down over my face and stroll inside. The smoke billows around us, and I can hear people running, followed by the distinct sound of shots being fired. I stand in the foyer and wait for them to come to me.

My guys are attacking from every corner. It doesn't take long before I have the fuckers in my sights. Some of them are armed; most are not.

"Keep a few of them alive. You can't get anything from a dead man," I remind Marcel and Santo, who are positioned beside me. The house goes quiet—well, apart from the three men who decided to run into my path. They're currently on the floor holding their blown-out kneecaps. "Head count," I say into my comms and wait for the replies to filter through. When each of my men has checked in, I realise a couple of these fuckers are still unaccounted for. "There are two guys missing. Find them," I order through the mic, then pick up one of the bastards on the floor, gesturing for my brothers to do the same.

I drag the guy into the middle of the living room, being sure to turn and face the only entry point. Santo and Marcel follow suit, and once all three of these fuckers are lined up, I point a pistol at the first one's head and fire. His body hits the ground with a thump as he falls face-first onto the wood flooring. I glance up and aim at the next guy.

"No, don't..." he pleads.

I tilt my head. "Who do you work for?" I ask him, knowing this dipshit is definitely not the one in charge here.

“I...”

I press the trigger. “He took too long to answer,” I tell the last guy in line. “I sure hope you value your life more than he did.”

“I... I do.”

“So you’ll tell me everything I need to know then?” I press him.

“Anything,” he says.

My phone rings. I pull it out from my pocket and glance at the screen. When I see it’s Ellie calling, my heart nearly skips a beat. I step forward and set the barrel of the gun right up against the guy’s forehead. “Make a single sound and I shoot. Move an inch and I shoot. Got it?”

He nods his head before I answer the call.

“Babe, everything okay?” I ask. Santo and Marcel glare at me with an obvious *what the fuck are you doing* look on their faces. Neither of them says a word.

“Babe? What are you doing right now, Gio?” Ellie questions me.

Fuck, I used the endearment because no way was I saying her name out loud in this fucking house. I have no idea who could be listening. There’s still the matter of the two missing men.

“I’m working. Why? What’s up?” I say while doing my best to sound as casual as I can be while holding my finger over the trigger.

“What’s up is the fact that your brother is following me around like a lost puppy. Tell him to stop,” Ellie huffs.

Fucking Gabe. He was meant to stay out of sight, watch her without her knowing he was watching her. No way in hell am I not having someone on her tail, though. That’s not something I’m willing to negotiate about.

“Yeah, sorry, babe, but I can’t do that. I will, however, tell him to hide better,” I say.

“What you can tell him is to fuck right off and, while you’re at it, tell yourself the same thing. I don’t need or want a babysitter, Gio.” Her voice rises in both volume and pitch.

“Babe, you need to relax. It’s really not that big of a deal,” I try to reason with her.

“Fuck off, Gio,” she yells into the phone and then the line goes dead.

“Fuck!” I look at the guy in front of me and pull the trigger. Then I lower my gun and dial Gabe.

“Boss, how’re things?” he answers.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? You were meant to stay hidden,” I hiss at him.

“You didn’t tell me she was meeting up with a hot friend. I got distracted,” he says.

“For once in your fucking life, think with your head and not your dick. Where is she?”

“Ah, she’s at some café, but it looks like they’re getting their food to go.”

“Follow her,” I grunt before cutting the call and yelling out, “Anyone find the last two fuckers?”

“Got ’em, boss. They were hiding out in a shed out back,” James calls over the comms.

“Alive or dead?” I ask.

“One and one.”

“Keep him that way,” I say, then turn to Santo. “Find out who the fuck these assholes were working for. I want to know who took our fucking shit and where the rest of it is being kept.”

“Where are you going?” Marcel calls out from behind me.

“To find my girlfriend and try to make her see some fucking sense,” I grunt in response.

“Well, she’s dating you, so I don’t think the girl has any sense,” Marcel fires back.

I throw up a middle finger and keep on walking. “James, meet me at the car,” I say into my mic before I tug off the earpiece.

As soon as I slide into the car, I send Gabe a text and find out that Ellie went to her friend Daisy’s house. So I instruct James to head that way.

We pull up to the address a few minutes later. I find Gabe waiting by the building’s entrance. “You know, you look like trouble hanging out in front of a locked building,” I tell him.

“Probably because I *am* in trouble.”

“They haven’t left?” I ask.

“No.”

“You can go.” I wave him off while trying to determine my next course of action.

“Are you sure? She seemed really pissed, bro. You might need a bodyguard.” Gabe laughs.

“Fuck off.” I walk back to the car and lean against the side. I don’t care how long I have to wait. I’m not fucking moving until she comes out.

A few hours later—yes, fucking hours—she finally steps out from the building, stopping on the footpath when she sees me. I was tempted to just storm up to her friend’s apartment and drag Ellie out. But if I did that, I’d be in more shit than I already am.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Waiting for you.” I open the back door. “Get in.”

“No, I think I’ll find my own way home.” Ellie folds her arms over her chest.

Closing the car door, I step up next to her. “Fine, have it your way. We’ll walk. But I can only imagine how your feet are going to feel, block after block in those shoes you’re wearing.” My eyes flick down for emphasis.

Ellie pulls out her phone and taps the screen a few times. “Who said I was planning to walk?”

“Ellie, please, just get in the fucking car.”

“No.”

I blink at her. No one ever says *no* to me like this. I’m way out of my element here, because I can’t physically force her to do what I want like I would with anyone else.

“I get that the word is foreign to you and all, but you should get used to hearing it,” she says before stepping around me to head for a car that’s just pulled up next to the kerb.

By the time she opens the back door, I’m right behind her. “You’re not getting in this car,” I tell her. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pick her up, shut the door she’s just opened, and stalk back to the SUV. All while Ellie is kicking and screaming bloody murder. “Go,” I tell James as soon as I have her buckled in next to me. Anyone watching would think I’m fucking kidnapping her.

This isn’t me kidnapping her. This is me...

Okay, it might be a little kidnappy. But, fuck, like I was going to let her just jump in some rando’s car...

Chapter Twenty-Two



“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I yell as I shove at Gio’s chest.

“Taking you home, so we can talk about whatever this is like rational fucking adults,” he grunts.

“Oh, so now I’m irrational? Fuck you. Let me out of this car.” I tug at the handle to no avail. It won’t budge.

“No.”

“You can’t just pick me up and throw me into your car, Giovanni. That’s not how the world works,” I tell him, shuffling as far away from him on the back seat as I can get.

“It appears I just did.” He smirks at me, and I glare at him.

“You’re an ass.”

“I know.” He shrugs.

I turn my face and stare out the window, watching the streets blur by. He's taking me back to his house. Great. When the car stops out front of the familiar property, I go to open the door but it still doesn't budge.

The door on Gio's side of the car opens and he steps out. "Are you coming?" he asks, looking back at me.

Figuring I don't really have too much of a choice, I slide across the seat. Gio holds out a hand to me. I don't take it. Because screw him and his freakishly good hands. I climb out of the car and I storm past him and his *friends*.

I walk into the house, past a few more of Gio's friends, and stomp my way up to his bedroom, hoping that my heels are at least causing a little damage on his pristine floors. I can feel Gio at my back. Following my every move. As soon as I enter his bedroom, I slam the door behind me, except I don't get the satisfaction of hearing it close on his face.

I spin on my heel to face Gio, who gently shuts the door and clicks the lock in place. He takes two steps towards me. I take two steps back. Gio stops and shoves his hands into the pockets of his pants.

"I really don't like fighting with you, Ellie," he says.

"Yeah, you probably should have thought about that before you bloody kidnapped me," I yell at him.

Gio scoffs. "You didn't give me any other choice. In what fucking world did you think I'd let you just jump into the back of a random car?"

"It was an Uber, Giovanni, not random."

He lifts an eyebrow but doesn't say anything.

"And let's not forget the fact you've had your brother following me around. Does he report back to you? Tell you every step I make, if I'm really where I say I'm going? Do you honestly trust me that little that you had to have me followed?"

Gio runs a hand through his hair. "This has nothing to do with trust, Ellie. I trust you."

"No, you don't."

“Yes, I fucking do. I’ve told you shit I’ve never told anyone. The reason my brother was following you was to make sure you were safe and that no one could get to you.”

“Why wouldn’t I be safe?” I ask him, honestly confused.

“I have enemies, Ellie. You know that. We’ve discussed it. I’m not ever going to take your safety lightly.”

I consider his words. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing that you need to worry about.”

“Right, well, since I don’t need to worry about it, I’ll just go home then and you can worry about it all on your own, with your little boys’ club,” I tell him.

“Wait.” Gio reaches out and grabs me around the waist. He pulls me into his chest.

“Why?”

“Because I’m fucking petrified of losing you, Ellie. I’m scared and I’ve never been scared of anything in my fucking life. But you... you scare the shit out of me.”

I lock my arms behind his neck. “You are not going to lose me—well, you might if you keep being an ass. But you have to talk to me, Gio. Tell me what’s going on. Help me understand why you think I’m in danger.”

Gio guides me over to the bed. “Someone stole millions of dollars’ worth of product from one of our warehouses. I found out who they were and paid them a visit today. That’s what I was doing. But they were hired to do the job, which means someone is still out there, actively targeting us. And until I know who that someone is and eliminate them, I need to know you’re safe at all times.”

“Why would they come after me? I don’t know anything. And what kind of product are we talking about?”

“Weapons,” he whispers. “And the reason they would come for you is simple. Ellie, you are my biggest weakness. If anything were to happen to you, I’m not sure I’d survive it.”

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” I assure him.

“I should have walked away. I knew bringing you into my darkness wasn’t right and I went and did it anyway.”

“I don’t think walking away was an option for either of us. Besides, you keep hiring me to find you more properties,” I tell him with a grin.

“How is that apartment search going, by the way?”

“It’s going.” I laugh. “I’m sure the right one will pop up really soon.”

“Can you promise me that you’ll let someone tail you? That you won’t try to lose them, and if you ever feel anything is off, that you’ll trust your gut and call me.”

“Gio, I’m fine. I’m going to be fine.” I sigh.

“Promise me, Ellie.”

“Okay, I promise.”

“Move in with me,” he says, and I blink at him.

“Huh?”

“I need you to move in with me. I need to wake up next to you here, in this bed, in this house. I need to know that, when I come home, I’m coming home to you.”

“Sounds a hell of a lot like a want and not a need, Giovanni.”

“It’s a want, but it’s also a need. I need you here with me, Ellie. Why wait? I bought this house because you loved it. You were always meant to be living here with me.”

“You barely knew me when you bought it.”

“I knew enough. Move in with me,” he repeats, and I see something that resembles desperation in his eyes.

“Okay, but you really need to get some furniture *if* I’m going to live here.”

“You have Hannah’s number. Call her and pick out whatever you want,” Gio says.

“I don’t like Hannah.”

“Neither do I, but she’s one of the best interior designers in town, so use her unless you want me to just give you a card and you can do it all yourself.”

“Nope, I’m good. I’ll call Hannah,” I huff. No way am I taking on the project of decorating this whole house.

“Thank you,” he says before kissing me gently.

I turn around and straddle his lap. “Are you sure your brothers are going to be okay with me living here?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes. They like you, Ellie.”

“Okay, but I’m going to talk to them first, and if any one of them says no or feels uncomfortable, I’m not moving in,” I tell him.

“None of them are going to say no,” Gio insists. “I think we should christen our new room.”

“Gio, we christened this room the day you got the keys,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but that was before you were living here with me. Now it’s *our* room, not just my room,” he says as he kisses his way down my neck and across my collarbone.

“Well, when you put it like that, maybe we should christen it again. Just to make sure we’re doing it properly and all.” I moan when his lips reach the top of my chest.

Gio lifts my shirt over my head, reaching behind me to flick open my bra with one hand. I shrug out of the lace and throw it behind me. Gio’s lips latch on to my right breast while his fingers twist the left nipple.

“Shit.” I lean back as he sucks and flicks his tongue over my sensitive skin. Sensations skyrocket through me. My hips have a mind of their own as they start to gyrate against him, his hardness connecting with my clit. We have too many layers of clothing between us.

I straighten up and push Gio down, watching as his body falls onto the mattress. I start at the top button of his shirt. But by the halfway mark, I get impatient, so I grab the fabric in both hands and tug it apart. Buttons fly and bounce off the ground.

“Sorry... I’ll fix it later,” I tell him.

“You can sew?” Gio lifts an eyebrow in question.

“No, but I can take it to a tailor,” I reply while my hands explore his now-naked chest and abs. “You really are carved to perfection.” Then I lean down and lick a trail from his left pec across to his right. I suck on his nipple briefly before I make my way to his abs. Licking, kissing, and sucking as I go.

Undoing his belt, I flick the clasp of his pants and lower the zipper before shoving my hand inside to fist his cock. I free it from its confines and watch as precum leaks from the tip. My mouth waters at the sight. So I lower my head and take all of him into my mouth. I flatten my tongue along the underside of his shaft. His salty flavour explodes on my tastebuds, making me want more.

When I peer up at his face, Gio is staring right back at me, his eyes lust-filled. Dark. Darker than I remember them being before. His hands tangle in my hair, holding it back from my face as I continue to suck up and down his shaft. I keep one hand wrapped around the base of his dick, pumping it along with the motion of my mouth, while I use my other hand to cup his balls, rolling them around, gently massaging as I press my thumb against his asshole.

“Fuck, Ellie. Fuck!” Gio’s fingers tighten in my hair, pulling at the strands as his hips lift off the bed to push his dick farther into my mouth. He takes over the movements, holding my head still as he fucks my face.

I press my finger into his ass just a little more and I feel him stiffen. Then ropes of cum are squirting down my throat. I swallow, but there’s so bloody much that some of it spills out. Gio reaches down and slides me up his body. Using his index finger, he wipes at my lips and then shoves the tip inside my mouth. I suck him clean before he pulls his hand free.

“I fucking love you,” Gio says.

“I love you more.” I smile.

“Not possible,” he murmurs as he combs his hands through my hair while never breaking eye contact. There is something intoxicating about having this man’s full attention on me.



I wake up to an empty bed. My arm reaches out to the spot where Gio used to be and finds that the sheets are cold. He’s been up for a while. Dragging myself out of bed, I head into his closet and pull out one of his shirts before throwing it over my head. I then take a pair of his sweats and tug them on. I have to roll the waist a few times, so they stay up.

Once I look somewhat decent, I head downstairs in search of Gio. I’m not used to waking up without him; usually he stays in bed with me. I’ve tried really hard to not just wander around the house without him. I don’t want to intrude on his brothers and have tried to be mindful of the fact that they live here too.

I hear their voices coming from the kitchen. So I head in that direction and find Gio and Marcel cooking while Gabe, Santo, and Vin are all sitting at the breakfast bar. Whatever conversation they were having stops the moment they notice me.

Gio walks over, wraps an arm around my shoulders, and pulls me against him. His lips find mine, and he kisses me like no one is watching. By the time he pulls back, I’m left breathless and wanting more. He knows it too, if the smirk on his face is any indication.

“Ellie’s moving in today,” Gio announces to his brothers.

“Ah, what?” I turn my glare on him. I know I agreed to move in, but I don’t recall agreeing to a specific timeframe. Especially not one as soon as today.

“We discussed this last night,” Gio says like he thinks I’ve forgotten.

“We did, but we didn’t set a date, and I did tell you that I wouldn’t move in if any of your brothers didn’t want me here,” I remind him.

“Anyone have any objections to Ellie moving in?” Gio points to each brother.

“Nope,” Vin answers first.

“Not me,” Gabe says. “Does this mean your hot friends are going to be hanging around here too? Sleepovers and shit?”

“No,” I tell him.

“Pity. That would have been fun.” He sighs.

“I’m cool with it,” Marcel chimes in. Then everyone looks to Santo.

“Does that mean you’re gonna finally pick out some furniture so we can stop living in an empty house?” Santo grunts.

“You do realise you’re five grown-ass adults? With the funds to drop into any furniture store and buy whatever you need.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Yeah, but Gio was insistent that you had to pick everything out.” He shrugs.

I look from his brothers to Gio. “Seriously, Gio? You’ve made them live in a house without furniture? And why do you all just listen to everything he says? Go to the store and buy a damn sofa.” I throw an arm up in frustration.

Santo appears taken aback, Marcel’s eyes widen, and Vin just smiles.

“I think I’m going to like having you here, El,” Gabe says.

Chapter Twenty-Three



“You know it’s a mistake,” Santo says.

“What is?” I look up from my computer screen to meet his glare.

“Moving her in here. You might as well start planning her funeral now,” he says, his tone telling me he’s serious.

The thought of Ellie’s lifeless body in a casket makes my blood go cold. “Nothing is going to happen to her,” I tell him. “I get where you’re coming from. I do. But the old man is gone. What happened to Shelli was on him, not our fucking lifestyle.”

“She died because of me. It’s my fault. I should have known something was wrong. I should have known that the old bastard wouldn’t allow me to have one fucking good thing in my life.” Santo closes his eyes, his features distorted by the pain evident on his face.

“It wasn’t your fault. Like I said, it’s on him, not you. You didn’t do it.” I get up from my chair and walk around my desk to stand in front of my brother. I wrap an arm around his shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault,” I repeat, hoping he sees the sincerity in my eyes.

“We don’t even know why he did it. I keep thinking about it. It just doesn’t make sense. Why would he kill her like that?”

“There are just some things we may never have the answers to, Santo. The man was pure fucking evil—a mind like that is hard to dissect. You know that.”

I hate seeing my brother like this. It fucking tears me apart. Especially since he used to be the happy one. The glass was never half empty with Santo; it was always half full.

“You shouldn’t have her move in. We can’t protect her,” he says, as if I didn’t hear him the first time.

“I’m going to do everything I can to protect her, Santo. I can’t refuse to live my life because of what could go wrong.”

“When this blows up in your face and you’re left feeling like your soul has been ripped from your body—because you will. You’ll feel pain in nerve endings you didn’t know existed. When that happens, you’ll hate yourself more than you could possibly hate anyone else. And you’re going to think thoughts that will both scare and give you the promise of peace. All while you’re weighed down by the knowledge that you can’t go through with those thoughts because you’re stuck. Stuck in an endless cycle of pain, regret, and looped memories.” He gets up and walks towards the door before turning back and looking me dead in the eye. “I see her everywhere, Gio. Fucking everywhere and you know what the worse bit is?”

“What?”

“I don’t want to see her anymore. I want her to leave my fucking head. I want to forget she ever existed—fuck, some days I hate her for making me love her. For making me feel this pain.” Santo sighs and slams the door behind him.

Fuck. I really thought he was getting better. Improving. I must have been seeing what I wanted to see, instead of what was really there. He isn't remotely ready to move on from Shelli. Not that I can blame or expect him to be anything different.

I hoped keeping him busy was the answer. Now I'm not so sure. Then again, maybe it just takes time...

My brother's words echo in my head. The risk to Ellie is real, which means I need to ensure I've got everything in place to mitigate it.



Gabe and Vin follow me up to Ellie's apartment. James and Dan are on their way over, with the moving truck and boxes in tow. Letting myself in, I hear her singing over the sound of the shower. She's as off-key as anyone can get, but I fucking love the sound of her voice regardless.

"Make sure the bathrooms are soundproof," Vin says to Gabe.

"I'm on it." Gabe nods while taking his phone out of his pocket.

"You're not touching the fucking bathrooms, idiots," I tell them. "Wait here."

I walk towards the bathroom and slip through the unlocked door. When she finally notices she's no longer alone, she lets out an ear-piercing scream. And stumbles. I watch as her feet lose traction on the shower floor. I quickly jump into the stall and catch her, stopping her ass from hitting the ground.

"Fuck! You all right?" I ask Ellie.

"Am I all right? No, I'm not bloody all right. What the hell, Gio? Are you dead set on giving me a damn heart attack?" she screams, reaching out with both hands to shove at my chest.

I don't move. She's naked, wet, and pressed up against me. As if I'm letting go anytime soon...

"Sorry. I just wanted to let you know we were here," I tell her.

"We?"

"Gabe and Vin are out in the living room."

"Why are your brothers here?" she whispers.

"To help us move you out." I smile.

Ellie blinks water out of her eyes. "I just left your place two hours ago, where we agreed I wasn't moving in today."

"No, *you* agreed. I never agreed to shit. Come on. The quicker we pack, the quicker I can have you in our house. In our bedroom," I tell her with a grin splitting my lips.

"Jesus, what have I gotten myself into?" she asks no one in particular. "You're going to either end up smothered in your sleep or stabbed really violently. I can see it now. The headline on the front page. *Girlfriend gets fed up with boyfriend's over-the-top bossiness and goes nuts*. And then, do you know what'll happen next? I'll end up with a pair of concrete shoes, because I can't imagine many people murder the boss of a mafia empire and live to tell the story."

I laugh. "I did." I shrug. "Also, you will never end up with concrete shoes. That's something they only do in the movies," I remind her as my hands start roaming over her body.

"Comforting to know," she says, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I'm going to get changed and wait for you out there." Because if I stay in here much longer, neither of us will be getting out in a hurry and my brothers will be hearing way more than Ellie's off-key singing.

"Okay. But if you drip water through my apartment, you're cleaning it up," she says as I step out of the shower.

I strip off my wet clothing, leaving them in a pile in the tub. I wrap a towel around my waist, collect the stack of

weapons from the floor, and head into her closet. I've left a few suits here for times like this.

Once I've changed into a clean pair of slacks and a dress shirt, I walk out to the living room. Gabe pops his head up and then goes back to looking at whatever has his attention on his phone. "That's not what you were wearing when you went in there," he says off-handedly.

"So?"

"Just making an observation," he tells me.

I glance over and spot James, Dan, and Vin in the kitchen taping up boxes. "Why aren't you helping them?" I ask Gabe.

"I was waiting. It sounded like she wanted to kill you in there. I figured if you were dead, El probably wouldn't want to move in with us anymore." He shrugs.

"And what? You were just going to let her kill me?" I ask him.

"Well, if she managed to get the jump on you, I'd just make her boss. And you know, I've always been curious how much better a woman would run this shit." Gabe smirks.

"A lot better," Ellie says, walking out in a pair of cutoff shorts and a tank top.

"I don't doubt it. So, if you want to... you know..." Gabe gestures to his throat while making a slicing motion. "Him." He points at me. "I'll turn around and pretend there was nothing I could do to stop you."

"Tempting, but I happen to really like him, so I think I'll keep him around a little longer," Ellie says.

"Urgh, you guys make me sick. It's too fucking cute." Gabe gets up and walks over to where the others are still taping up boxes.

"You're not going to need that many. I really don't have that much stuff, and I'm keeping my apartment so I don't need to take it all."

“What do you mean you’re keeping your apartment?” My head pivots so fast in Ellie’s direction I’m surprised it doesn’t fly off.

“Exactly that. I’m not getting rid of it just because I’m moving in with you. This is the first place I bought by myself. I’m keeping it.” She crosses her arms over her chest and pins me with a glare.

“Fine, keep it,” I tell her, then turn to Gabe. “Find out who her lender is and pay off the mortgage.”

“Gabe, don’t you dare.” Ellie turns her glare on my brother now.

“Sorry, El. As much as I want you to be the boss and all, he’s actually in charge. So if he tells me to pay your mortgage, I gotta do it,” Gabe says.

“No, you don’t. Gio, you cannot pay my damn mortgage,” Ellie hisses at me.

“I can, and I am. Come on, we’re wasting time.” I pick up two of the boxes. “You guys start out here. I’ll do the bedroom.” I don’t wait for a reply as I push through the bedroom door, open Ellie’s dresser drawers, and start piling her lingerie into a box.

Ellie isn’t far behind me. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you pack. You don’t want to forget the important things,” I say, holding up a lacey one-piece bodysuit that I’ve yet to see her wear.

“And that’s the important stuff?” She lifts a brow in question.

“To me it is. Why haven’t I seen you in this?” I ask her.

“There’s a lot of stuff I have that you haven’t seen me wear,” she says, snatching the bodysuit from my hand before tossing it into the box. “I’ll do this. You can go help them. I feel awful that they’re all stuck here packing for me. You know I can do it all myself.”

“Why would you do that? And they don’t mind helping. That’s what family does, Ellie. They help,” I remind her.

“I know that, but they’re your family. Not mine. And... I don’t know... I could have done it,” she repeats under her breath.

“Ellie, my family is your family. Which, some days, you’ll probably curse me for, while others you’ll be glad to have them around.” I cup her chin between my fingers and tilt her face upwards. “You are my family,” I say, then press my lips to hers.

Chapter Twenty-Four



One week. I've lived with Gio for one week. I'm still not used to driving to his house after work, instead of back to my apartment. But I think I'm settling in. I've tried to make myself as scarce as possible, not wanting to take over the house or cramp his brothers' style or whatever.

They are all bachelors after all. Not that the house is a bachelor pad; it's quite the opposite. Extremely clean, thanks to Gio's staff. I've also come to learn that the De Bellis clan takes breakfast very seriously. It's the one meal they try to have together every day. I've made excuses three days this week already, just because I want them to still have that time without me. Like I said, I don't want to intrude.

It's a lot to get used to, going from living alone in a tiny one-bedroom apartment to living in a huge house with five men. Not to mention, the countless number of employees Gio has at his disposal at all times.

I pull into the garage and turn off the ignition. Gio made a spot for my Audi—although it looks very out of place when it's parked between a bunch of luxury sports cars. I put my foot down hard when Gio tried to gift me a car. That was one argument I was not going to lose.

I slide out of my convertible and make my way down the hall that leads to the main house from the garage. There are usually a few men hanging around but I don't see anyone tonight. That's when I notice how eerily quiet it is. I can normally hear voices coming from every corner of the house. Tonight, it's silent apart from the click-clack of my heels.

I stop, bracing myself on a wall as I slip off my shoes before tucking them under my arm. When I get to the kitchen, I see a little path made up of candles, a dozen or more on each side, and beautiful delicate blue flowers spread out down the middle. I take a few steps closer and spot a notecard, indicating the starting point. So I place my shoes and purse on the floor, pick up the notecard, and turn it over.

Welcome home Ellie,

Follow the path of Myosotis. These blue flowers represent love and remembrance. Forget-me-nots. I will never let you forget how much I love you, how it's eternal.

∞ **G**

I follow the path of candles and blue flowers past the kitchen and out the back door, where it continues into the yard. I can't help but notice how I've yet to spot any of Gio's men. He always has at least a handful positioned around the house at any given time.

I pick up my pace when I see him. Gio is standing on a wooden gazebo, which I'm certain wasn't there when I left for work this morning. There are more blue flowers spread out around him, running up the posts and hanging from the rafters, while candles continue around the edges of the wooden platform with a table set for two in the middle.

“Oh my god. Gio, this is... incredible.” I throw my arms over his neck as soon as he's within reach.

Gio catches me around my waist. “You are incredible, Ellie,” he says.

My lips find his and I push my tongue through his closed mouth. I can taste whiskey on his breath. I pull back to look up at him. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

“What’s the occasion?” I ask as my eyes try to take in the romantic setting.

“The occasion is I love you. There doesn’t have to be a reason for us to have dinner together, Ellie.”

“Gio, this is more than just dinner. This is effort, and a lot of thought. It looks amazing,” I say, stepping out of his hold.

“There is no effort I won’t put in for you.” Gio holds out a chair. “Come, sit down.”

“You know, if I would have known I’d come home to dates like this, I would have moved in months ago,” I tease as I take my seat.

“This is just the beginning of our forever, Ellie,” Gio says.

“Forever is a really long time, Giovanni.”

“You are it for me, Ellie. I know it. You know it. Why deny it and pussyfoot around? You and I are going all the way. Marriage, kids, the lot.”

“Gio, *if* this is your way of proposing, I’m gonna need a ring—but the answer is yes,” I tell him.

Gio stares at me wide-eyed. I was joking, but now that I think about it, my answer really would be yes. When I picture a life without Gio, my heart hurts. I need him, I want him, and I have no plans of letting him go.

“What kind of ring are we talking? How many carats do you want? What kind of cut?” Gio throws out question after question, making my head spin.

“I was joking, Gio. I do not expect you to actually propose.”

“Ellie, we’re getting married. That is not a question. But I do need to know what kind of ring you want,” he says, and I shrug.

“Surprise me. You could literally give me a ring from a vending machine and I’d say yes. I’m not with you for your money, Gio. I’m with you because I’m addicted to your dick and those orgasms you’re so good at handing out.”

“Good to know.” He smirks, before reaching out a hand to lift the silver lid on the platter I hadn’t noticed—though now I can smell it—and reveals a plate filled to the brim with my favourite pasta dish. “I don’t know how to make a lot of things, but pasta is in my blood. I practised until it was perfect. Try it. Let me know if it’s okay.”

“You made this?” I ask, lifting my fork to my lips.

“There is nothing I won’t do or learn to do for you, Ellie.”

I take my first bite and moan. “Oh my god! Gio, this is so good,” I say around a mouthful of food. Attractive, I know. But it’s really good.

“Thank fuck for that. I was worried I’d have to spend another five hours in the kitchen to get the recipe just right.” He appears relieved as he lifts the lid from his own plate and reaches for another fork.

“Where is everyone?” I ask him.

“Told them all to leave,” Gio says. “I wanted a night alone with you.”

“Is that... safe? Don’t you need all those *employees* keeping watch at all times?” I say, using air quotes.

“You are safe, Ellie. I would never put you at risk.” He doesn’t look up when he responds, telling me he’s choosing his words carefully. Which means we likely aren’t as alone as he wants me to believe.

“I’m not worried about me, Gio. I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. I’m a big boy. I’ve been playing this game for a really long time.”

“Have you ever wanted to do anything different?” I find myself asking.

“No.”

“Just *no*? Not even when you were a kid? You didn’t want to grow up to be a fireman or something?”

“No, I always knew what my future held—why want anything else when you know it’s unobtainable?”

“That’s... sad.” My eyes drop to my plate as I twirl my pasta around my fork.

“What did you want to be? When you were a kid?” he asks.

“Mmm, it’s stupid.” I shake my head. I can’t say it.

“I doubt that. What was it?” he presses.

“Until I was thirteen, all I wanted to be was a mum and a wife,” I say, looking everywhere but at him.

“Ellie, that’s not stupid. What changed? Why did you stop wanting that?”

“My mum worked two jobs, sometimes three, for our whole lives. I guess I got to the age where I actually noticed the struggle and how hard it was for her. That’s when I decided I’d never rely on a man for anything. And being a stay-at-home mum, wife, you’re fully dependent on a husband.”

“That makes sense, but not every father is a deadbeat. Not every husband is just gonna up and leave,” he says.

“Do either of us have personal experience that suggests otherwise?” I quirk a brow in his direction.

“No, but we are not our parents. I’m not my father and I’m certainly not yours. I’m never going to leave, Ellie. If you want to become a stay-at-home mum, then you can. If not, then don’t. I want you to be happy. But whatever you choose, know that you won’t ever be forced to rely on me. Whatever I have is yours.”

His words are nice, touching, but I’m too much of a realist. I can’t let myself become dependent on him. On anyone,

really. As easy as it would be to just live the carefree, luxurious life that Gio offers, I can't allow myself to get used to it.

"How're things going with Hannah?" Gio says.

I roll my eyes. I really don't like the interior designer he hired, then immediately dumped on me, but he's right. She is skilled at what she does. "Good. I'm hoping by next week we can be done with her altogether."

"You really don't like her, huh?"

"She's not my favourite person," I say politely.

"Why?"

"She has a major crush on you."

Gio tilts his head and smirks at me. "You're cute when you're jealous, but you have no reason to be."

"I'm not jealous." I scowl at him.

"Okay." His smile widens.

"I'm not," I reiterate.

"I believe you," he says, though his playful tone tells me otherwise.

I ignore him and decide to change the subject instead. "You know, this is really nice. I love that you did this for us."

"I have a dessert planned too. We need to head inside for that, though."

"Let's go." I set my fork down on my plate and stand up.

Gio does the same and steps over to me. He bends at the waist, and the next thing I know, I'm hanging over his shoulder as a few of his long strides land us inside the house. I try to wiggle free and he slaps a hand on my ass.

"Ah, put me down." I laugh, and Gio quickens his steps. I see the rooms go by in a blur of upside-down images. He takes the stairs two at a time and then everything spins, and I'm flying through the air before I land on my back on the cloud that is Gio's bed. Our bed. "I thought there was dessert?"

Gio stares down at me as he unbuttons his shirt. “I’m looking at the sweetest fucking thing I’ve ever eaten, Ellie. Spread those legs for me.”

“Well, when you ask so nicely...” I grin as I reach a hand under my dress and slide my panties down my legs. I bring my feet up and butterfly my thighs open.

“Fuck, Ellie.” Gio curses under his breath and climbs onto the bed, between my legs. “I love you,” he says, but he’s not looking at my face. He’s looking at my pussy.

“Me or my vagina?” I ask him.

Gio glances up to meet my eyes. “Both,” he says, and then slides his tongue from the bottom to the top of my slit.

“Oh shit.” My fingers curl into the blanket, gripping it in an attempt to keep me from flying off the bed.

Gio’s tongue spirals around, his mouth closes over my clit, and he sucks. My whole body alights with pleasure, while his fingers dig into the flesh of my thighs. He sucks and licks at me like I really am his favourite dessert on the menu.

“Gio, shit, oh my god!” I moan, my hips rising upwards and pushing into his face.

One of his hands moves from my thigh, and then his fingers are slipping into my opening, curling upwards before pulling out and thrusting back in again. All while his tongue continues to circle around my clit. A cold sweat coats my skin and my eyes squeeze shut as I ride the roller coaster of sensations. My legs shake as they attempt to close around Gio’s head, but he doesn’t let me budge even a little. One hand pins my right thigh against the mattress, his forearm doing the same with the left. His fingers move faster. Harder.

“Shit, Gio, I can’t...” My head shakes from side to side.

Gio answers with a growl. His teeth graze over my clit, and the new sensation sends me over that edge, into the abyss, where nothing exists except for the pleasure Giovanni De Bellis has once again wrung from my body.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Nine days. This asshole has been tortured for nine fucking days and hasn't given us a single useful piece of information to indicate who the hell is fucking with us. Most days, I wake up and can hear my father's laughter in my head. He's fucking with me from whatever hell he landed himself in.

Over the past week, we've had five businesses attacked. From having the places trashed to full-blown shootouts. So far, I've had to close down three restaurants and two bars for repairs. Gabe's handling the cleanup but that shit takes time, while Santo has been busy self-medicating with the blood he spilled while trying to pry information out of our little friend held up in an empty warehouse.

The only thing that seems to be going right in my life right now is Ellie. Which is why I've just got off the phone with a jeweller friend, organising a stone for her.

“Why did five hundred grand just get transferred to Smith’s Jewellery?” Gabe walks into my office with a puzzled expression on his face.

“I bought something,” I tell him. I should have known he’d have notifications set for anything having to do with the accounts.

“You bought something. From a jeweller. For 500K? What?” he asks.

“None of your fucking business,” I grunt.

“Holy shit. No. What happened to the guy who *just a few months ago* was talking about how he’d never get married and settle down?” Gabe’s mouth hangs open in shock.

“He met Ellie,” I deadpan.

“Fuck, Gio, this is insane. You only just met the girl.”

“Your point?”

“Make sure she knows if she marries you, joins this family, there is no leaving unless it’s in a fucking body bag.”

I blink, counting to ten so I don’t stab my brother with the letter opener that’s sitting on my desk.

“Okay, well, I can see you’re looking all murderous and shit, so I’m gonna bounce. Got shit to take care of. But do me a favour and check on Santo today,” Gabe grumbles.

I don’t say anything. I’m still trying to clear the fucking image of Ellie in a body bag out of my damn head.



“Fuck, it stinks in here,” I grunt. James and Dan cover their mouths and noses with a hand each as we enter the warehouse.

“Boss, want us to wait outside?” Dan asks me.

I look over at him. “Go on. I won’t be long.” I nod. Then stand back and watch Santo.

My brother is sitting in a chair facing the guy who's definitely seen better days. Whoever the fuck this asshole is, he's currently stripped bare, his ankles tied to the legs of another chair, his arms behind it. His face is swollen. Black, blue, and red with both fresh and dried blood covering his entire body. Like I said, he's seen better days. I'm surprised he hasn't cracked yet, given Santo the info he wants.

Unless, of course, this fucker doesn't know a damn thing.

I step forward and walk behind him, staring at my brother the whole time. Like I said, it's been nine days. Which means if this guy were going to talk, he would have done it by now. Taking my gun out of the holster on my chest, I point it to the back of his head and pull the trigger. Blood and brain matter rain down on everything within the splash radius. I look down at myself and instantly regret my choice of attire today. Now I have to burn these clothes and I really fucking liked this suit.

Santo doesn't move, doesn't flinch. He just sits there, staring. He's not looking at me, but through me. Whoever or whatever he's staring at is in his own head.

I step around the chair, kicking it along with the limp body to the ground. Then kneel in front of my brother and cup his face in my hands. "Santo, it's time to come home," I tell him.

He blinks, slowly, like someone coming out of a daze. His eyes look around, seemingly confused. "Gio?" he questions. "What happened?"

Fucking hell, he was so fucking out of it he didn't even know I was here. "You're finished. Let's go." I stand and take a step back.

Santo follows suit. He doesn't say anything as he turns and walks towards the door. I run a hand down my face.

What the fuck am I going to do?

I wish I could bring my father back from the dead just to fucking kill him all over again, except this time I'd do it slowly, painfully.

I jump into the back of the car, next to Santo. The entire trip home is silent. When we arrive at the house, I follow my

brother into his bedroom and close the door. “I’m at a loss here, Santo. I don’t know how to help you.”

He turns around, pulling the shirt over his head. “You can’t help me, Gio. This isn’t something you can fix.”

“I’m not trying to fix it. I’m trying to fucking get my brother back.”

He ignores me and walks into his bathroom. “Get a good look. Because *this*,” he says, stepping into the doorway of the bathroom while gesturing to himself. “This is exactly what you’re going to turn into when Ellie gets taken from you. It’ll happen. Marcel is right. We are fucking cursed.”

“There’s no fucking curse. What happened was the old man’s fault. The only thing we were cursed with was a fucking bastard for a father,” I yell.

Why are my brothers so insistent on putting images of a lifeless Ellie into my fucking mind? It’s fucking driving me insane.

“Keep telling yourself that. But when it happens, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Santo slams his bathroom door.

I keep my head down as I walk into my bedroom, stopping short when I see Ellie sitting on the end of the bed, her body hunched over as she buckles the straps on her shoes around her ankles. She looks up at me.

Her eyes widen and a loud gasp leaves her mouth. “What happened? Are you okay?” She jumps to her feet, discarding the other shoe, and hobbles over to me. Her hands reach up as if to touch my face. I grab hold of her wrists to stop her.

“I wasn’t expecting you to be home,” I say. “Sorry.” I release her arms, walk into the bathroom, and start ripping off my suit. When I glance up into the mirror, I curse under my breath, realising what Ellie just witnessed. I have blood splattered all over me. I thought I did a decent job cleaning off my face in the car. I didn’t.

“You’re sorry? That’s it? What the hell happened, Gio?” she says, stepping into the bathroom. Her eyes run up and down my now-naked torso.

“I’m fine. It’s not my blood,” I tell her.

“Well, I can see that.” She crosses her arms over her chest before adding, “*Now.*”

“I’m sorry... Just let me shower. I didn’t ever want you to have to see me like this,” I tell her. I kick off my shoes and socks, drop my pants, and reach an arm into the stall, starting the hot water.

I keep my back to Ellie as I step inside. I don’t want to see the disappointment, fear, shock, whatever she’s feeling right now. I don’t want to see it. I can hear her fussing with something, and then I feel her hands behind me. Her arms wrap around my chest and her lips press into the centre of my back.

“Gio,” she whispers.

I turn around to face her, circling my arms around her and holding her close. “I’m sorry,” I say again.

“I love you,” Ellie says before her eyes flick up to meet mine. “I love all of you. I don’t need you to hide parts of yourself from me, Gio. I know who you are and I love you.”

My heart skips a beat. I’ve heard her say those words before. I know she means them, but hearing them right now...? After she’s finally seen the monster I truly am? That’s more than I fucking deserve.

“How did I get so fucking lucky to find you?” I ask her, the backs of my fingers skimming down the side of her face.

“Mmm, you burnt your family’s house down and needed to buy a new one.” She smiles.

“Worth every fucking cent.” My lips close over hers. I reach down and cup her ass. Ellie wraps her legs around my waist, and I push her up against the tiled walls. My mouth travels down her neck, along her collarbone. “I need you,” I tell her.

“You have me.”

Shifting her weight, I move my fingers around to her pussy, pushing two in. She’s drenched, ready for me. I can’t

wait any longer. I remove my fingers and line up my cock with her entrance. I push inside her. One hard thrust. Stopping when I bottom out. Ellie's mouth parts on a gasp, and I claim it again. Pushing my tongue past her lips.

Our tongues duel for dominance—of course, this is a fight I won't lose. I draw my hips back and thrust forward again. Pulling away from the kiss, I look down into her eyes. "You are mine, Ellie. I won't let anyone or anything take you from me," I tell her as I continue to fuck her.

"I'm yours. Always," she says.

My cock twitches. My balls tighten. This isn't going to last long. I reach a hand between our bodies. My fingers find her clit, pressing down as I rub tiny circles. "Come for me. Squeeze my cock. Take it all. It's all yours," I tell her, increasing the speed of my thrusts.

"Fuck. Yes. Oh shit. Gio!" Ellie's screams echo off the tiled walls of the bathroom as an orgasm explodes through her.

Her pussy clenches so fucking tight around my dick I can't help but follow her right over the cliff. I thrust into her, one, two, three more times. Filling her cunt with my seed. Our chests heave as we both try to catch our collective breaths. I lower myself to the floor with Ellie still wrapped around me. I'm not ready to let her go yet.

I cup her face in my hands. "Thank you," I tell her.

"For what?" she asks.

"For loving me."

"I didn't exactly have a choice in the matter. It just happened, and now it can't be undone. So you're kinda stuck with me. But you're welcome." She smiles, and I swear a strange sense of peace washes over me. It happens every fucking time I see that smile.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eloise



I don't know why I'm nervous. She's my best friend. It's going to be fine. I decided that today is the day I finally tell Dani about Gio. I probably shouldn't have been keeping my relationship secret for this long; it just makes it that much harder to tell her I've been hiding a huge part of my life from... everyone.

I apply a second coat of gloss to my lips and then throw the tube into my bag. Gio tends to get up at an ungodly hour in the morning. He likes to go down to the gym and spend time working out before the sun rises. I'm not complaining. I definitely benefit from all that dedication.

A few minutes later, I'm walking into the dining room, only to find it empty. Usually it's full. Today, no one is here—although the table is still set and platters of every breakfast food you could imagine line the centre.

“Hey, sis, looks like it’s just you and me today,” Vinny says, strolling in behind me. He plops down in his usual spot on the right-hand side of the table, like he does every morning. “Oh, can you give me a lift to school?” he adds around a mouthful of bacon.

I sit down across from him. “Of course, I can drop you off at school. Where’s your car?”

“In the garage. I just don’t want to drive today.”

“Why?” I ask. “Where is everyone?”

“Gio and Santo headed over to the distillery. Gabe never came home last night, and Marcel already left for uni, I think.”

I glance around the room, my knee bouncing with nervousness. I don’t know if it’s because I haven’t heard from Gio this morning or if it’s because I have to tell my best friend I’ve been lying to her. I think it’s a little of the first and a lot of the second. When Gio leaves the house before I wake up, I usually get a text message from him by now...

“What’s wrong? Why are you nervous?” Vin asks, reading my expression a little too accurately.

“I’m not,” I lie.

“You are. Why?” he asks again.

I suck in a deep breath. I can’t believe I’m about to unload my emotional baggage on a teenager, but he’s the only person here, and right now I feel like if I get it off my chest, it might help. “I’m meeting my friend Dani for lunch today. I have to tell her I’ve been lying to her about something.”

“What have you been lying about?”

“Gio,” I say. “I haven’t told her I’ve been dating him.”

“You’re living with the guy—that kinda goes beyond dating, El. Also, if you haven’t told her, it doesn’t count as lying. I mean, have you said that you’re *not* in a relationship with him?”

My eyebrows scrunch down. The kid kind of makes a little sense. “No. I just... I don’t usually keep things from my

friends.” I sigh.

“Why haven’t you told her?”

“Because I’m not just dating some Joe Blow accountant. I’m dating Giovanni De Bellis. It’s... different.”

“It’s only different if you make it different. Why didn’t you tell her?” Vin repeats while shuffling a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

“I didn’t want to be talked out of it. I didn’t want anyone else’s opinions to impact my own,” I admit.

“That’s smart.” He nods. “So why now?”

“Because now it really doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. Gio is... well, I’ve made up my mind on the matter and it’s not changing.”

“It’s funny you think my brother would ever let you change your mind in the first place.” Vin laughs. “That man would have you holed up in a tower like Rapunzel if you even thought about breaking up with him.”

“No, he wouldn’t.” I shake my head.

“Live a pretty life in denial, El. Come on. I need to be at school early.” Vin pushes up from his seat and reaches for his plate.

Scooping an apple off the table, I follow him through the kitchen and grab my car keys off the hook while Vin sets his dishes in the sink.

As soon as we step into the garage and my eyes land on the line of cars, I turn to Vin. “Remind me why I’m driving you to school today again?”

“Because I’m your favourite future brother-in-law and this is great bonding time for us.” He smirks.

A few minutes later, we’re pulling up to the school and I follow the sign for the student drop-off area. Vin points to my right instead. “Stop over there,” he says.

“Why?” I ask before turning into the car park. “What’s going on?”

“Okay, so you’re Gio’s de facto, right? Which technically makes you my guardian.”

“Ah...” I don’t know how to answer that.

“I don’t need you to do anything. Just show face at a parent-teacher meeting and sit there. I’ll do all the talking. If they ask, tell them you’re my guardian, listen to whatever nonsense they say, and then we can never speak of this again.”

I blink. Did he seriously just ask me to go to a meeting with his teacher? I should call Gio. Right? He’s the kid’s actual guardian.

“I know what you’re thinking, but he’s working and honestly this is just a stupid misunderstanding. It’s not a big deal.”

I square my shoulders and pivot in my chair to face him. “If it’s not a big deal, then why haven’t you told your brother?”

“Because he’s busy. It’s okay. You don’t have to go. I’ll just tell Ms Natt we have to reschedule,” Vin says before climbing out of the car.

Shit. I jump out after him. “Wait! It’s fine. Just let me text the office and tell them I’ll be a few minutes late,” I say.

After sending Laura a quick text, I walk into the school with Vin in tow. It’s early, but there are still a lot of students and staff buzzing around the hallways. It doesn’t escape me how everyone’s eyes land on my temporary ward as he walks down the corridors with a swagger a little too well-practised for a teenager. He doesn’t say anything to anyone, doesn’t acknowledge the other students. Just keeps his gaze straight ahead.

Vin opens a door and walks in without knocking. There’s a young woman sitting at the desk. She looks up as soon as we enter the room.

“Ms Natt, this is Eloise, my guardian,” Vin says, while gesturing a hand in my direction.

The woman runs her eyes up and down my body before dismissing me and turning her glare on Vin. “Vincenzo, I asked you to bring your brother in. He’s the one listed in your files as your legal guardian.”

“Yeah, well, Gio’s busy, so we’ve got the better option with Eloise,” Vin tells her.

“You can’t just bring any random person in here and pass them off as your guardian, Vincenzo. That’s not how this works.”

Vin smiles. “Oh, Eloise isn’t any random person. She’s my guardian, like I said,” he states firmly.

I look back and forth between him and his teacher, who clearly does not want to talk to me. “What’s the problem?” I ask her.

“The problem, Miss...” The woman pauses.

“Just *El* is fine,” I say.

“The problem, *El*, is that you are not Vincenzo’s legal guardian. I need to speak with his brother, as previously stated.”

“Well, like Vin said, my fiancée is busy, so it’s just me. But I assure you I am Vin’s legal guardian. The ink is barely dry on the papers, but it’s there,” I tell her and see Vin’s lips tip up into a smirk.

“And who might your fiancé be?” Ms Natt asks.

“My brother. Gio, who else?” Vin says.

The woman’s lips press together in a thin line as she assesses me again, clearly not impressed by what she sees. “You’re engaged to Gio?”

“Uh-huh.” I nod. “Look, I don’t want to be rude, but I do have to get to work. So if you could just say whatever it is you need to say, that’d be great.”

“You’re not listed on the paperwork. I can’t talk to you,” she repeats before adding, “And, Vincenzo, since you failed to

bring in your legal guardian, you're suspended until a formal meeting can be arranged."

"Actually, I'm not. I was meant to hand these into the office last week and forgot." Vin pulls out a heap of papers from his bag and drops them on the desk. "It's all there. Change of details form, adoption certificate, you name it. Since El's joining the family, she wanted to adopt me to avoid misunderstandings like this."

I look over to Vin, doing my best to school my features. *Adoption papers? Really?*

Then I follow Ms Natt's line of sight. Her eyes are glued to my face. "You adopted him? He's almost an adult," she says, clearly taken aback.

"But he's not one yet," I remind her.

"Okay." She straightens the stack of papers in her hands and clears her throat. "Vin was caught cheating on his English essay."

"I didn't cheat," Vin tells her.

"You were caught talking to another student during an exam, which is classified as cheating."

"I didn't cheat," he says again.

"Okay, what happens now?" I ask Ms Natt.

"His score will be marked as a failure, bringing his average down to barely passing."

"But it's still a pass," I attempt to clarify.

"Barely," Ms Natt repeats. "I suggest Vincenzo participate in extra tutoring. I've offered to help him myself during after-school hours. Doing so will bring up his grades on his upcoming assessments and hopefully lift the overall average."

I blink. "Oh, well, that's great. Where do you need him to be?"

"I can come meet him at his home residence." She smiles.

“Our home residence? You want to come to our home? Is that ethical?” I ask her.

“Yes.” She nods.

“Okay. Vin, walk me out to the car.” I slide my chair back and push to my feet. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Ms Natt. Sorry it had to be under these circumstances.”

The woman doesn’t say anything in response, just nods her head at me.

As soon as we’re out of earshot, I turn to Vin. “Really? Adoption papers? How did you manage that one?”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t actually lodge them,” he says a little too casually.

“I’m not worried about that. What if she figures out they’re not real?”

“She’s not that smart.” He smirks.

“Do all of your teachers have a thing for your brother or just that one?” I grumble under my breath.

“Oh, you caught that, did you?” Vin laughs.

“It was hard not to,” I tell him, then ask, “Who were you talking to? During the exam?”

“Just a friend. She was panicking. I was just trying to get her to calm down. I didn’t cheat.”

“I believe you.”

“You do?” He looks up at me, with an innocence I’ve never seen on this kid before.

“If you actually cheated, you wouldn’t have gotten caught. You’re too smart for that.” I shrug.

“Thanks.” Vin smiles.

“You need to tell your brother about this.” I open the car door.

“Or it could just be another *new sister, favourite brother* bonding experience,” Vin suggests.

“I’m not lying to Gio, Vin.”

“Not telling isn’t the same as lying, El. We’ve had this chat,” he huffs, and I wait for the eye roll I’m sure is to follow.

“I gotta go. Do you need me to come back and pick you up after school?” I ask him.

“No, I’ll get a lift with someone,” he says, before adding in a softer tone, “Thanks, El. We’re really lucky Gio found you.”

“Thank you.”

I turn on the ignition and pull out of the car park, my mind whirling as I turn onto the street. Adoption papers? I can’t believe he forged adoption papers. By the time I make it to the office, I still haven’t heard from Gio, so I hit his number in my contacts before walking in.

“Hey, Ellie, everything okay?” he answers on the first ring.

“Yeah, I just... I haven’t spoken to you today,” I tell him.

“Sorry... I got caught up.”

“It’s okay.”

“Do anything interesting this morning?” Gio says.

“Did Vin call you?”

“I just got off the phone with him. I’m sorry he dragged you into that.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind. Did he tell you he had adoption papers?”

“No. What do you mean adoption papers?”

“The teacher wouldn’t talk to me because I wasn’t listed in the school’s forms. So Vin pulled out a stack of papers and claimed I adopted him.”

“He fucking did what?” Gio’s voice rises as he curses into the phone.

“It’s okay. I was thinking, though... What would we need to do to make it legal? Like put me on the forms or whatever so I can go to his meetings or get called if something were to

happen to him? I don't know... It sounds stupid now that I say it aloud..."

"Ellie, it's not stupid. It's incredibly sweet that you want to do that for him. But he's seventeen. He's in his last year of school."

"I know," I say.

"I'll call the school and make sure you're added," Gio tells me after a brief pause.

"Okay."

"What are you doing today?"

"Besides selling people their dream homes? I'm meeting Dani for lunch."

"I'll text you a place. Take her there."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Okay, I gotta go."

"I love you, Ellie," Gio says.

"I love you too," I reply before hanging up.



"Okay, why have you dragged me out here?" Dani asks as she wraps her arms around me in a tight hug.

"I've been seeing someone for the past two months," I blurt out before letting her go.

Dani pulls back, her hands firmly planted on my upper arms. "You what?"

"Sit down." I motion towards the table and drop into my chair. I wait for Dani to do the same. "I met someone, and I was going to tell you about him, but I didn't. And now I feel

like I've been living this horrible double life and keeping secrets and—oh gosh, I'm an awful friend," I ramble on.

"Eloise, stop. It's okay. Start from the beginning. Where did you meet this someone?" Dani asks me.

"I sold him a property." I hide my face in my hands.

"Oh, okay. So he's a wealthy someone." Dani wiggles her eyebrows up and down.

"Beyond measure." I shrug.

"Does he have a name?"

"He does, but if I tell you, you have to promise me you won't Google him." I do my best to stress the point.

"Why would I Google him? Actually, why shouldn't I Google him?"

"I can't tell you, but his job is... unconventional." I'm not helping the situation at all. I should have just said *Gio*. I didn't have to tell her his last name.

"What is he? A hitman?" Dani laughs.

"Not exactly..."

"Not exactly? Are you in trouble, El? Do you need me to hide you?" Dani asks, and I can't tell if she's joking or not right now.

"No, I'm not. It's just... I really love him, Dani. Like head-over-heels, *would take a bullet for him* kind of love."

"Let's hope it never comes to that. We have plans to be old widows together, remember?"

"We will be the life of the nursing home." I laugh.

Before Dani can reply, a waitress comes and takes our orders. "So why did you not want to tell me?" she asks as soon as we're alone again.

"I didn't want to see your disappointment or have you try to talk me out of being with him."

"If he makes you happy, and you approve of whatever it is he does, then that's all that matters to me."

I should have known she would never judge me, but there's still that little doubt in my head that tells me I'm going to lose my friends. That they won't want to be around me anymore because I'm with Giovanni De Bellis.

"It's not that I approve of his business. I just accept him for him."

"El, what exactly does he do?" Dani asks again.

I lean in and whisper, "He's a mob boss."

Dani laughs really loud, like she's at a comedy show or something. "Oh, sure, you've gone and gotten yourself involved with the mob. Okay." But her smile quickly drops when she notices I'm not laughing with her. "Shit, you're serious..." She sighs.

"I am." I don't know why but something has me glancing at the door. My breath catches in my throat and then the panic takes over. Shit. "Fuck. Pretend you don't know a thing. I haven't told you anything, Dani. Promise me," I hiss. I'm about to look up again when it dawns on me. *He planned this.* Of course he bloody did.

"Okay, my lips are sealed," Dani says.

"Ellie, I didn't know you'd be here." Gio grins in a way that tells me that's a lie.

"Gio, this is my friend Dani. Dani, Gio, my..."

"Boyfriend," Gio interjects as he holds out a hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Dani. I've heard a lot about you." He gives her that well-practised smile of his. The one designed to put you at ease. It works too. I can see Dani falling under the spell of Giovanni De Bellis.

"Hi. Wish I could say the same, but I haven't heard a thing about you," Dani tells him.

Huh, maybe she's immune to his spell after all?

"Well, I'll leave you two to catch up," Gio says before leaning down and kissing me like no one else is watching.

Dani clears her throat. She waits for Gio to walk away before she points at me. “You failed to mention he was hotter than the devil himself, El. That’s what you should have led with. God, I almost combusted on the spot just watching you two kiss,” she says.

“That’s ‘cause you get off on watching,” I remind her, something she learned that night I forced her to expand her horizons at Fire & Ice. She really does owe the happiness she found with her hot boss to me.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Dani asks.

“I want him,” I tell her.

“Okay.”

“Thank you for not judging me.”

“I’d never judge you, El. Ever. I will always be here for you,” Dani says.

By the time we finish lunch and Dani leaves, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I look towards the staff entrance and I begin to count to ten, knowing that Gio will walk out any second now. He appears before I make it to eight, and honestly I’m a little surprised it took him that long.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



When I heard how nervous Ellie was on the phone, there was no way I wasn't going to be here. Despite her glaring daggers in my direction the moment she saw me, I knew it helped ease some of her pent-up energy.

As soon as her friend leaves, I walk out from the back again. "How'd it go?" I ask, bending down and kissing her forehead.

"What are you doing here?"

"Working," I lie.

"Working? In a restaurant?" She lifts a brow in question.

"We own this place. It's good to show up every now and then to check on things." I shrug. "How was your lunch?"

"Better than I thought it would be," she says.

"How did you think things would go?"

“I just told my best friend I’ve been lying to her for months. I thought she’d be a lot more pissed off, actually.”

“You didn’t lie. You just didn’t tell her. There’s a difference between lying and omitting facts.”

Ellie laughs. “That’s exactly what Vin said this morning.”

“I’m sorry he dragged you into his shit,” I tell her again. I need to talk to the kid and find out what’s going on with him. I don’t believe for one minute that he cheated on an exam. Vin is book smart; he has no need to cheat.

“You don’t need to be sorry. I don’t mind helping where I can, Gio. It’s what family does,” she says, and I smile. Having Ellie join our family is good. For all of us.

“So what happened anyway? With Ms Natt?”

“Speaking of, how well do you know that woman, Gio?” Ellie asks.

“I’ve met her a few times. Why?”

“Were your clothes on or off during these meetings?”

I laugh. “I didn’t fuck Vin’s teacher, Ellie.”

“I don’t care if you did. I’m just asking because she’s coming to the house to tutor Vin.”

“What the fuck for?” I grind out. “My brother doesn’t need tutoring.”

“Ms Natt seems to think he does.” Ellie smirks. “Although I think it’s you she really wants to tutor.”

“You should probably put a ring on this finger then, show the world I’m not on the market.” I hold up my left hand.

Ellie squints her eyes at me. “If you need a ring to know you’re not on the market, Gio...” She pauses. “You know what? I don’t even care.” The smile that takes over her face is nothing short of sinister. “I don’t have a ring on my finger, so I guess I’ll consider my options until I do,” she says as she jumps up from her chair.

“If anyone even thinks about...” I stop myself. I wanted to say I’d slit their throats but I’m not sure how Ellie feels about gratuitous violence.

“You’ll what?” Ellie presses.

I stand and step closer to her. My palm wraps around the back of her neck as I pull her towards me. “You don’t want to know how it ends for them, Ellie, and I’m not about to tarnish your mind with those kinds of images.” I kiss the top of her head. “I gotta go, but I’ll see you at home later.”

“Okay.” She steps back.

“I love you,” I tell her.

“I love you more. Even if you are overbearing at times.” Ellie leans up on her tiptoes and presses her lips to mine. She pulls back much sooner than I want her to.

Then I watch as she gets into her car and drives off. I really would slaughter any fucker who tried to take her from me.



I throw the papers down on the desk. Gabe is still trying to find out who was on the receiving end of our old man’s three million dollars. There are no new leads. Not even a goddamn trace. The PI I hired has done nothing but tell us what we already know.

“There has to be something, somewhere. He didn’t just leave it to a fucking ghost,” I grunt.

“I agree, and we will find it. It’s just gonna take some time. It’s Dad. The old man was too cocky, meaning he didn’t cover his tracks as well as he thought he did.”

“Do you think it’s another kid? What if we have a sister out in the world somewhere?” Santo asks.

“Oh fuck, what if I’ve fucked my sister and didn’t know it?” Gabe screws up his face in disgust.

“That’s sick, but totally something you’d do,” Marcel tells him.

“Fuck off.” Gabe flips Marcel the bird.

“I doubt it’s another kid. There’s no way he would have had a kid out there and not used it to his advantage somehow,” I say.

“Anything on who’s been fucking with us?” Marcel asks.

“The streets are quiet. No one’s talking. Either they don’t know shit, or people fear whoever the fuck it is more than us,” Gabe replies.

“I can fix that, instil a little more fear in ‘em,” Santo chimes in.

“What I want is to know who the fuck is trying to take us down and why?” I grunt. My fingers rub at my temples. My head feels like little fucking jackhammers are having a party inside my brain.

Gabe’s phone rings, drawing everyone’s attention his way. When he answers it, we all stay silent and wait. I’m about to give him a lecture on how fucking rude it is to answer his phone in the middle of a meeting—something he never would have done in front of our father—until the look on his face has me swallowing my words.

“Two buildings just got firebombed on First Street,” he says.

“Which ones?” I ask him.

“G’s and Marcello’s,” he says, listing off two of our restaurants. My father had a thing for naming businesses after his kids. He wanted the public to be under the impression that he actually cared about his family.

“G’s? I was just there, a few hours ago,” I say. “Ellie was in that fucking building.” I look to Gabe. “Go and find her. Stay with her. It wasn’t a coincidence that they burned the same building I just left.”

“On it,” he says before quickly exiting the room.

“Marcel, you’re with me. Let’s go,” I say, then turn to Santo. “Hit the streets, do whatever you have to do to find out who the fuck is doing this.”

Marcel is quiet on the drive over to First Street. When we pull up, the firies are still hosing down the building.

I find Peter, one of the detectives on my payroll. “What happened?” I ask him.

“I was hoping you’d be telling me. What kind of war are you involved in, Giovanni?” he says.

“One I didn’t know about,” I grind out. “Did anyone see anything?”

“I’ve spoken to the neighbouring businesses. The only thing they’re saying is that a black SUV pulled up and someone they couldn’t see threw something out the window.”

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath. “Marcel, go grab the CCTV tapes, and have Gabe log into the street cams and find that fucking SUV.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Peter mutters.

“You never do.” I smirk.

“Whoever is targeting you, Giovanni, they’re amping up the attacks. How many more businesses can you afford to lose? Not to mention, the growing cleanup bill,” Peter says.

“I don’t pay you to keep track of my accounting, Detective. Find the fucking assholes who are doing this. That’s your job. So fucking do it. Unless you want to find out what happens to the people who are no longer of use to me.” I raise an eyebrow at him in question.

“I’m on it,” he says before turning and walking away.

I pull out my phone and call Gabe. As much as I want to ring Ellie instead, I don’t want her to know something’s wrong. I don’t want her worrying.

“She’s fine, Gio. She’s in her office,” Gabe says.

“Where are you?” I ask him.

“Outside her office. I just left her, told her I was looking for an apartment.” He laughs.

“Okay, thanks. Any luck on the street cams?”

“I’m logging in now. It takes longer than a minute to watch all that footage,” he grunts.

I hang up the phone and pocket it, my eyes flicking back up to what’s left of my building. I get chills thinking about what would have happened if Ellie had been here at the time. If they had driven by just a few hours earlier...

“Boss, you should see this.” James walks up, holding a plastic bag with a piece of paper inside.

“What is it?” I ask him, already reaching out to grab the note. My eyes scan the words scribbled across the centre.

I’ll huff and I’ll puff until all of your houses are burnt to the ground.

“What the fuck is this shit?” I say aloud, knowing exactly what it is. Because it’s a goddamn threat. “Give this to Peter. Have him run it for prints. Someone fancies themselves a wolf—it’s time we put our hunting skills to good use, James,” I tell him.

“On it, boss.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



I look around the pristine foyer. Large white marble tiles cover the floor, the walls painted a light grey with white accents. I think my whole apartment would fit inside this entryway. Even though I live with Gio now, I'm always awed when I walk into these multi-million dollar homes.

I can't even imagine having the kind of money these people take for granted. I know one thing for sure, though. If I did, I wouldn't be buying a house like this. I'd be more inclined to buy something like Gio's home. I love that property. And I love it even more now that I'm living in it with Gio. But it's not just the house. Honestly, if he wanted to move into my tiny apartment, I'd live with him there too. I'm even getting used to his brothers, not that they're around all that much. They all seem to have busy social lives. Most nights, Gio and I are alone.

I walk farther into the property and switch on the lights. Making sure that each room is ready for inspection. Not that there is a single speck of dust in sight. This place looks like it's jumped off a page of a home design magazine.

Once I've gone through the entire house, I make my way back to the front door to wait for the client. I haven't met this man before. His emails and phone calls have been short and sharp, so I'm expecting an older, businessman type. One who doesn't have time for small talk. He'll probably spend five minutes in the house and have his mind already made up.

Which leads me to wonder if Gio knew straight away that he wasn't going to purchase the properties I showed him...

I'll have to ask him tonight. I feel like he fits the same profile. He's always so busy he doesn't have time to be indecisive—although he sure did take his time when it came to purchasing a home. But that could have had something to do with me. Thinking about it brings a smile to my face.

The doorbell rings, returning my attention to the task at hand. *Showtime!* I plaster on my most professional smile, straighten my blazer, and then open the door. "Good afternoon, Mr Allen. Please come in," I say, stepping aside and gesturing for my client to enter.

Mr Allen is not the old, greying man I was expecting. He's more of the sleazy type with oily, slicked-back hair and sharp facial features. The kind of man you'd cross the road to avoid if you saw him while walking alone at night. I take another step back when he approaches me and positions himself a little too close for my comfort.

"Eloise, you are not what I was expecting," he says while looking me up and down.

And my immediate thought is: *That makes two of us.*

The hairs on the back of my neck rise on end, and that fight-or-flight feeling fills my gut. I do my best not to let my discomfort show, however. "This property has everything you're looking for, Mr Allen. Five bedrooms, seven bathrooms, three living areas, and a games room. Come on,

I'll show you the lower level first," I say before turning on my heel.

"It appears to have everything I need," he comments from behind me.

I don't know what it is, but I get the sense that I should not be here. That I shouldn't be alone with this guy. Maybe I'm just tired. It is the end of the day and all. "The kitchen is fully updated with new appliances," I tell him as soon as we enter the room in question. When he doesn't respond, I turn to see him staring at me, instead of the features I'm trying to point out. "Ah, there is a butler's pantry, and there's a wine cellar through there." I point to the door in front of us.

"Do you always show houses by yourself?" he asks.

"Ah, no, I usually have an assistant with me," I lie.

"Where is this assistant now?"

"She's on her way. She just stopped to grab some things from the office first." Another lie.

Mr Allen glances around the kitchen. "I've seen enough. This isn't the one. Try again, and next time, show me something worth my time, Eloise," he grunts.

I'm speechless as I watch him walk out. When I've had a moment to collect myself, I follow after him. "I'm sorry, Mr Allen. I have some other properties already in mind. I'll forward you a list."

"You do that," he says before slamming the door behind him. I quickly lock it and press my back against the frame.

My heart is hammering in my chest. What the hell was that? I really thought I was getting a handle on dealing with these entitled assholes, but this one takes the cake. I reach into my pocket, find my phone, and send a group message to my friends.

ME:

Drinks, thirty minutes at Unhinged?

It only takes a second before they're all replying.

DANI:

Count me in. My boss is an asshole!!!

DAISY:

On my way!

CLAIRE:

I'll meet you all there. Probably be an hour or so.

ME:

Great. See you all soon.

I tuck my phone again and walk back through the house, turning off the lights and securing the property. By the time I'm finished, I've decided that Mr Allen is just your typical rich asshole, the kind that treats everyone as if they're beneath him. And I'm more determined than ever to find him a property and take his money.



The club is so loud I have to yell over the noise as I raise my glass with my friends. "To us always being together," I yell.

"To us," the girls echo.

We're sitting in the VIP section of Unhinged. As soon as I walked through the door, I was ushered up the stairs. I had to message the girls to let them know where to find me. I'm sure

Gio had something to do with the special treatment we're receiving.

I called him on the way over. He seemed a little preoccupied but told me to have fun and let him know when I was ready to come home. That he'd come and pick me up. I thought that was really sweet of him. I have no plans of making him come all the way here though. I'll just take an Uber home.

"Okay, so tell me again... Gio... when do we get to meet him?" Claire asks, gesturing between herself and Daisy.

"Ah, soon," I say, my tone noncommittal.

"I still can't believe you've kept him from us. I mean, he has brothers, and they're just as hot as he is—although that Gabrielle, geez, what I wouldn't do to tie that man to a bed and have my way with him." Daisy fans herself dramatically.

"No, Daisy, just no. Trust me, you do not want that," I tell her.

"Uh, yes, I do," she says while nodding like a bobble head.

I roll my eyes and fill up our glasses. Whoever suggested tequila shots is a genius. I pass each of the glasses around and wait. It's Claire's turn to toast.

"To finally knowing where El's new glow is coming from." She laughs, and we throw back our shots before slamming them on the table in unison. "I honestly thought you'd found a new face cream or something, but you're just getting fucked right," Claire says, then points from me to Dani. "Both of you."

"Argh! So not fair. I need to get fucked right," Daisy huffs.

"What about that mechanic you were seeing?" Claire asks her.

"What mechanic?" Dani and I ask at the same time.

"No one, just some guy I went on four dates with." Daisy sighs.

“Well, he’s certainly not *no one* if he’s made it to date number four,” I tell her.

“He’s hot, but he’s got nothing going on upstairs.” Daisy shrugs. “And he can’t make me come.”

“So why have you gone on four dates with him then?” Dani chimes in.

“No idea. I was bored. And every time he asked me out, I figured why not?” Daisy picks up the bottle and refills our glasses.

“You know, you’re both going to find your person,” I tell Daisy and Claire.

“Just make sure he’s not your boss.” Dani laughs before adding, “Learn from my mistakes.”

“Hot boss is not a mistake,” I remind her.

“Meh, he has his moments,” she says. “And one of those moments is about to happen. I gotta go, girls. People to see. Bosses to do. You know how it is.” She laughs as she rushes to the door.

“Actually, no, we don’t know how it is,” Daisy calls after her with a pout on her lips.

“Yes, you do.” I nudge her with my shoulder. “But I should go too.”

“Want to share a cab?” Claire asks me.

“Ah, no, I’m going to Gio’s,” I say. I haven’t told them that I live with him yet. I mean, *technically*, I still have my apartment. So I’m not lying—a thought that has me thinking that maybe I am spending too much time with the boys, because that is definitely something they would say.

“Okay, well, while you two are having unforgettable sex, I’ll be getting my buzz on.” Claire smirks. We all know she means her vibrator.

“Have fun. Thanks for coming out tonight.” I hug each of my friends and call for an Uber on my phone.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



The fact that I still don't know who is targeting us, targeting me, makes me fucking nervous. Add hosting a reveal night for the new De Bellis whiskey label and, yeah, I'm fucking stressed.

There's also the whole *Ellie being at a club without me* thing. I know I can't hover over her, and I can't wrap her in bubble wrap like I want to. I know that I can't, because she's told me as much. I could remind her about the risk, but that will scare her—something I don't want to do. So, instead, when she mentioned she was stopping at Unhinged, I had Gabe and Marcel go and watch over her. From what they tell me, they've managed to stay out of sight and she's having a great time with her friends.

James, Dan, Santo, Vin, and I have been going over the schematics for the reveal party. My main priority is security. I plan on taking Ellie, which means we need to be on extra alert.

I've always trusted my gut, and right now, it's telling me something big is about to go down. I just fucking wish I knew what or *who* is fucking with my business.

"I want ten at the front and an additional ten at the back. Thirty inside, but make sure they're discreet," I tell James.

"Ten? You sure, boss?"

"Do I look like I'm not sure?" I ask him.

"No, boss, it's just... excessive is all."

"When it's your fiancée's life at risk, then tell me it's excessive." I pin him with a glare.

"If you're that worried, why the fuck are you taking her?" Santo asks.

"Because I'm not going to hide. Someone wants to come at me, let 'em. But I'll make sure they can't get to Ellie," I reply. "Anything—at the first sign of fucking *anything*—you get her out of there. I mean it."

James and Dan look to Santo and Vin before turning back to me. "Boss, you know we'll protect her with our lives. But you are more important," Dan says.

My blood boils. It's not their fault. I try to remind myself that it's the lessons that have been drilled into us since we were little. *Protect the boss at all costs*. Well, fuck that. I will not have them protect me before Ellie.

"She is your priority. Anything happens to her, you might as well fucking disappear," I grunt.

"Got it, boss."

"I want everyone searched and stripped before they step foot in the room. No weapons enter that building," I remind him.

Vin raises his brows at me but doesn't say anything. I know he wants to, though.

"That's all." I dismiss Dan and James. Once they're gone, I look to Vin. "You got something you wanna say?"

“Nope, I’m good. But if you know something that might help the rest of us, you should say it.” He shrugs.

“I know a lot of shit that would help you, and if I thought for one second you’d listen, I’d tell you,” I’m quick to reply.

“Like what?” Vin asks.

“Like stay in school and don’t get yourself into shit.”

Vin rolls his eyes as Gabe and Marcel push their way into the room, with Ellie in tow. “Oh, you’re all here. Good, because I have something to say,” she calls out as she walks into the living room—well, walk is a generous term. She more like staggers forward.

I’m up and in front of her within seconds. “Ellie, you okay?” She smells like straight-up tequila.

“Oh, Gio.” Ellie brings her hands up to my face and runs her fingers over each of my features. “You’re pretty, you know. Of course you know, because women are throwing themselves at you all the time. Women like Ms Natt.” She hisses the name before turning to my brother. “Vin, I’m sorry but your English teacher sucks.”

“Don’t be sorry. She does suck.” Vin smiles. “But you know who doesn’t suck? Drunk El. I like drunk El.”

“Oh, drunk El likes you too.” Ellie pushes off me and stumbles over to where Vin is sitting and ruffles the top of his head. “You’re so cute. Like the little brother I never had but always wanted.”

Gabe and Marcel laugh, while Santo stares as I wrap an arm around Ellie’s waist and pull her back. “Ellie, babe, maybe we should go upstairs, to bed,” I suggest.

“*Oh*, bed,” Ellie repeats as loudly as she possibly can. “You know, Gio and beds are a good combination,” she tells my brothers, and all four of them screw up their faces in disgust.

“Come on, Ellie. Let’s go.” I do my best to guide her towards the door, but she stops me.

“No, wait. I have something to tell you.” She pauses, almost as if she can’t remember what she wanted to say before declaring, “I just... I really love you all. Well, I love him the most. But you’re all a really close second, and I’m really glad I’m going to be part of your family.”

“You’re already a part of our family, El,” Gabe tells her.

“I know, but it’s not official yet. Do you know I love Gio? Like not a little bit, but a lotta bit. I think I’ll marry him before someone like Ms Natt tries to steal him from me,” Ellie says.

I should pick her up and take her to our room, especially since my brothers are getting way too much entertainment out of her drunken honesty. “Ellie, no one is going to steal me from you. I’m yours,” I remind her.

“You are?” She gasps and appears generally surprised by that information. “Mine? Like I can keep you?” she asks in the most adorable voice I’ve ever heard come out of her mouth. “When I was little, I found a puppy and took him home. He was so cute, Gio, but my mum wouldn’t let me keep him.”

“Nice, bro, you’re being compared to a lost dog.” Marcel laughs.

“Oh, no, Gio is much better than a puppy... *especially* when he does that thing with his tongue where he—”

I bend over and pick her up. “Okay, we’re going to bed now,” I say before walking out of the room with Ellie in my arms.

“Oh, come on, we were just getting to the good part,” Gabe calls after me as the rest of ‘em laugh at my expense. The sound has me glancing over my shoulder, because for the first time in months, I see Santo crack a smile. I don’t think Ellie will ever know how grateful I am to her for that.

When I get to the bedroom, I finally set her down on her feet. “Are you going to do that thing with your fingers? Or your tongue? Or your, you know, other part?” she asks me.

“Other part?” I smirk.

“Yeah, the part of your body you love the most,” she says.

“The part of my body I love the most is my heart.”

“Your heart? Why?” Her eyebrows draw together in confusion. She’s much more animated when she’s drunk.

“Because it belongs to you, and I love anything that’s you,” I tell her honestly.

“Oh, shit, Gio, you’re so sweet. You’re going to make me cry,” she says.

“Don’t do that. It fucking tears me apart to see you cry, Ellie.”

“You’ve never seen me cry.” She frowns.

“You cry watching movies all the time.”

“Well, yeah, because they’re sad. But that’s movie crying, not real crying. It doesn’t count. You haven’t seen me cry because I’m sad or hurt or anything,” she says.

“And I plan to live the rest of my life without seeing it, because I won’t survive seeing you hurt or sad. I want you to be happy, safe, and content. Always.” I lean in and press my lips to the centre of her forehead.

“That’s sweet, but also not realistic. Anyway, can we do the fucking part now?”

“You want me to fuck you, Ellie?” I ask her.

“So much.” She nods eagerly.

I slide her blazer off her shoulders, pushing it down her arms before it drops to the floor. “Mmm, you are very fuckable,” I hum while lifting the hem of her blouse.

“I am,” she says.

I smile, trying to hold back my laughter. I shouldn’t be doing this right now. She should be sober when I fuck her. “Ellie, you’re drunk,” I tell her aloud.

“And you’re sex on legs, so come on, get naked already.” She reaches for my belt and tugs at it before moving her hand down farther and cupping the bulge in my pants. “I love your cock. It’s the best I’ve ever seen. Please let me have it, Gio.”

“It’s yours, Ellie,” I admit. Then I lean forward, my lips trailing along her neck as I reach behind and unzip her skirt. The fabric falls to the ground and pools around her feet. I unclasp her bra and take a step back. Ellie discards the lace, her breasts bouncing free. I trace a hand around her perky nipples, teasing before pinching them as I roll the peaks between my fingertips.

“Oh god!” Ellie’s legs wobble.

I pick her up and place her in the middle of the bed. “Fuck, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever fucking seen,” I say, sliding her panties over her thighs.

“Thank you.” She grins.

I make quick work of stripping out of my clothes and climbing onto the bed before I nestle between her legs. My eyes stay connected with hers. “I fucking love you, Ellie.”

“I love you too,” she says.

My fingers slide through her slit. She’s wet. I line up my cock with her entrance and plunge into her. Filling her up. This connection, how I feel when I’m inside her, it’s nothing like I’ve ever felt before. I wish I could stay buried here forever.

I slowly rock against her, moving in and out in gentle motions. “Fuck, you feel good.”

“Mmm, fuck me, Gio, harder,” she says.

I rise to my knees, lift her legs, and rest her ankles over each of my shoulders before I lean forward and wrap a hand around the base of her neck. “You want me to fuck you harder?” I ask her.

“Yes, harder,” she moans as she grinds her hips against me.

“You know I will always give you whatever you ask for,” I say.

Keeping Ellie pinned beneath me, I clench my fingers around her throat as I pull out before slamming back in as hard as I can. I continue to fuck her like she asked. She’s fucking wet, her juices dripping down all over us.

“Oh yes, don’t stop,” she cries out.

“Never. Going. To,” I grit out between clenched teeth as I keep up this relentless pace.

My balls tighten and tingling sensations creep up my back. I feel my release coming, but no way am I going before her. I reach down and press on her clit. Ellie screams as her body convulses underneath me. I continue to thrust into her four more times before spilling my seed inside her. Painting the walls of her pussy and marking what’s mine.

Chapter Thirty



I look over to Gio. One of his hands is on my leg, his fingers tapping to the beat of the music. His other hand is on the steering wheel. “Thank you for doing this,” I tell him.

My mum has been pestering me to bring Gio home for dinner for weeks. I dodged her as much as I could until I ran out of excuses.

“Ellie, you don’t have to thank me for sharing a meal with your family.”

“My mother, Gio, not just family. And she’s going to grill you, so you know,” I say.

“It will be fine. Women love me.” He smirks in my direction.

“Did you do interrogation training? Like, as part of the onboarding process or something?”

“I’m a Don, Ellie. I think I can handle a few questions from your mother.”

I take a huge breath in. “You’re right. Of course you can. But if you need to leave, if it gets to be too much, the code word is *platypus*.”

“Platypus?” Gio laughs. “We’re going to your mum’s house. Why would we need a code word?”

“You’ll see,” I tell him. “Now, what’s the code word?”

“Platypus.” He shakes his head before asking, “Why platypus, by the way?”

I lift a shoulder. “They’re cute and I’ve always wanted one.”

“They’re not pets, Ellie,” he says.

“So I’ve been told. My whole life.” I roll my eyes. “Also, Jenni said she’s bringing her boyfriend—I can’t believe I haven’t met him yet.”

“How long have they been dating?” Gio asks me.

“Longer than we’ve known each other,” I tell him.

“What’s his name again?”

“Taylor... *something*,” I say. I can’t remember his last name. I know my sister has mentioned it, but it’s not like he comes up in conversation that often.

Now that I think about it, she hardly ever mentions him anymore.

I remember when they first met. She’d talk about him every chance she got, but it’s been less and less over the last few months. Maybe it’s because I’m too busy going on and on about Gio to her... I’ll have to make more of an effort to ask her about her life instead.

“Which one is it?” Gio asks, slowing down when he turns onto my mum’s street.

“Keep going. It’s at the end,” I say. The cul-de-sac I grew up in hasn’t changed one bit. It’s the same as it’s always been.

“Just there.” I point to my mum’s house. It’s small, a single-level, three-bedroom, one-bathroom home.

It was all we needed, though, because we had each other. My mum made sure we were always happy, and we never went without a home-cooked meal. She might have struggled working multiple jobs, but she did it. My mum really is the strongest woman I know. I admire her so much, and now that I’m an adult, working out in the real world, I appreciate and am so grateful for everything she sacrificed for my sister and me growing up.

“It’s not much, but it’s home,” I say as Gio parks the car.

“Ellie, I don’t care where you grew up. I love you.”

“I know. It’s just... you’re used to having so much money and... I don’t know. It’s stupid.” I shake my head.

“I grew up in a house of horrors, Ellie. Sure, we had money, but you had something we never did,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“A home. A mother who loves you more than anything else in the world.”

“You don’t think your mother loved you?” I ask him.

Gio hasn’t really spoken much about the woman. He told me that his father killed her when they were little, but that’s it.

“In her own way, she did. She wasn’t strong like your mum. She should have tried harder. Not that it would have mattered, but she didn’t even try, Ellie. She let my father do whatever he wanted and never once questioned it.”

“She was probably afraid,” I tell him.

“Without a doubt, but she should have tried.” Gio turns off the car. “Are you ready?”

“Platypus,” I say. “I’m safe-wording it. Let’s go home.”

Gio laughs. “Come on, you’re overreacting. It’s just dinner, Ellie.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you...”



“This chicken is amazing, Sheryl,” Gio tells my mum.

He’s exaggerating. It’s okay, but *amazing*? Not likely. I’ve had the luxury of eating the food Gio’s kitchen staff prepares.

“Thank you, Gio.” Mum smiles at him. “So, what are your intentions with my daughter?”

I choke on the chicken I just bit into. Gio starts slapping me on the back. When I shoo him away, he grabs hold of my chin and turns my face towards his. Those dark eyes of his scan my every feature.

“Fuck, are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine. Relax,” I tell him.

“Relax? You just fucking choked, Ellie. I’m calling Doc,” he says before motioning to stand.

“No, you’re not.” I tug him back into his seat and pivot towards my mother. “Really, Mum? We just sat down, and you’re going straight in for the kill?” I ask her.

“What?” She raises her hands in the air. “I’m your mother. I’m allowed to ask questions.

“My intention is to marry your daughter,” Gio replies before I can stop him. “To do my best to make her happy every day for the rest of our lives.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” Jenni says wistfully, and Taylor scoffs. Everyone looks at him, but Gio is the one who calls him out on it.

“You got a problem?”

Taylor looks up from his plate. “I have a problem with assholes who spit out shit they read on a Hallmark card.”

Gio tenses. I reach under the table and squeeze his leg. “So, Jenni, how’s school going?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“Oh, good, except my physics teacher is an ass. Can you believe he gave me a ninety on my last essay? *A ninety*. I wrote that paper. I read it. It was worth at least a ninety-five,” Jenni huffs.

“A ninety is a good grade, Jenni,” I tell her.

“Want me to have a chat with him?” Gio asks.

“No, she doesn’t,” I interject.

“Ah, yes, *she* does.” Jenni smiles.

“No, she doesn’t. Jenni, it’s time to go.” Taylor pushes up from his chair and looks down at my sister.

“Taylor, seriously? Now?” she asks him.

“I’ve got a paper due tomorrow. I need to hit the library,” he grunts.

“Oh, right. Sorry... I forgot about that,” she says, then turns to our mother. “Sorry, Mum. I’ll make it up to you next time.”

“Jenni?” I call out before she makes it to the door. I have a bad feeling. “I can give you a lift back to school after dinner. You should stay.”

“No, it’s okay. I have some studying I need to do too. I’ll call you tomorrow,” she replies with a tight smile. Then Jenni and Taylor leave without another word.

Gio pulls his cell out of his pocket and stands. “I have to take this,” he says while gesturing to a phone that isn’t ringing.

“I like him,” Mum says when Gio walks out of earshot.

“Yeah, me too, Mum,” I say as I watch him leave. “What’s going on with Jenni?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure about this Taylor kid, but whenever I talk to her about him, she gets defensive and changes the subject.” Mum sighs.

“Do you think he’s hurting her?” I ask, ready to run after my sister.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Not physically anyway,” she says.

Gio returns a few minutes later and reclaims his seat. “I should go and check up on her,” I tell him.

“I had James and Dan follow them back to campus,” Gio says.

“Thank you.” I breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that my sister is being watched over. Although I still want to go and get her myself.

“Who are James and Dan?” my mum asks Gio.

“Part of my security team,” he says.

“You have a need for security?” She quirks an eyebrow in question, and Gio doesn’t miss a beat.

“I like to make sure the people I care about are protected against anything.”

“So, Mum, how’s work been?” I chime in, hoping to change the subject.

“I’m ready for retirement.” She laughs.

“You’re too young to retire,” I tell her.

“You can retire if you want. I can—”

I elbow Gio in the ribs before he can say more.

“How’s the agency going?” Mum asks me.

“It’s good. The houses I’m selling are top tier, and the commissions are great.”

“But you don’t like it?” she presses.

“I never said that...”

“You don’t need to. I know you, El. If you don’t like it, find something else. You’re young,” she says, and I can feel two sets of eyes firmly planted on me.

“I like my job,” I insist, a little too firmly. “Why don’t you ask Gio about his job? It’s way more exciting than mine.”

“What is it that you do again, Gio?” Mum asks him.

“My family owns various businesses. I just oversee them all.” He lifts one shoulder into a half shrug.

“Oh, so you’re the boss?”

I laugh, and Gio squeezes my thigh under the table. “He likes to think he is,” I tell my mom. “But we both know who wears the pants in this relationship.”

“My brothers all help out,” Gio says.

“That’s good, that you’re all close. You should bring them next time.” Mum nods as though it’s a done deal.

“We should have you at our place. You should see what Ellie has done with it.” Gio smiles down at me.

“What did Ellie do to your place?” Mum asks him.

“*Our* place. She worked with the designer, chose all the furnishings,” Gio says.

“Our place?” Mum parrots.

“I moved in with Gio,” I say, and Gio glances between us.

“You didn’t tell her?”

“I told her. Just now,” I groan.

“You moved in together? That’s a big move, Eloise.”

Oh, great. When Mum says my full name, it means I’m in trouble.

“It is, and we’re both happy about it.” I take a deep breath. “Gio tried to get me a platypus for the pond, but he couldn’t find one. So, instead, he had a painting of a platypus put up in the sunroom. You know how much I love platypuses,” I say, putting extra emphasis on the code word.

“I promise you, Sheryl. I love Ellie. I’ve never loved anyone like I love her. I know we’re moving fast, but we both feel it’s the right move for us,” Gio tells my mum.

“Okay. As long as you’re happy, El,” Mum says to me before turning to him. “But if you hurt her, Gio, I don’t care what your last name is. I will come for you and I won’t stop until you’re no longer breathing.”

Gio nods his head and smiles. "I believe you."

I make a mental note to open that can of worms with my mum later. I was trying to keep what Gio really does for a living under wraps for a bit longer; although I should have known better. The De Bellis name is notorious in this city.

After dinner, Gio helps me clean the dishes, and we say goodbye to my mum with Gio promising to have her over again soon.

The moment we're back in the car, I yell at the top of my lungs. "Platypus, platypus, platypus!"

"What the fuck?" Gio asks, his eyes wide as he stares at me.

"I said platypus in there. That was your cue to make some excuse to leave," I tell him.

"I know, but I want your mum to like me, Ellie. I didn't want to leave early. *Also*, she made mint chocolate pudding for dessert." He shrugs.

"It was good pudding." I sigh.

"It was a good dinner." Gio picks up my hand and kisses each knuckle. "James and Dan said Jenni is in her dorm alone."

"I should call her."

"I have Dan following Taylor. He's not going to be an issue for your sister."

"You don't need to do that," I say.

"She's important to you. I'm not going to let some little fucking weasel treat her like shit."

"Have I told you how lucky I am to have you?" I lean over and press my lips to his. "I love you," I tell him.

"I love you. So fucking much," he says.

Chapter Thirty-One



I've checked in with James at least ten times already. Everyone is in place. The location is secure. It's not enough, though. I'm still feeling off about tonight. Santo tells me it's nerves. It's not fucking nerves.

It's fear.

A feeling I'm not accustomed to experiencing. Ever since Ellie came into my life, I've been fucking scared of losing her. I can still remember the morning we found Santo holding Shelli's bloodied corpse in his arms. The memory haunts me. Fills me with dread, reminding me of everything that could go wrong, could happen to Ellie if I'm not fucking on top of my game.

I pick up the bottle and refill my glass. The amber liquid sloshes around the tumbler as I bring it to my lips, only to have my hand freeze when Ellie walks into the room. My eyes widen and my cock is instantly fucking hard.

Fuck me. Ellie is always beautiful. But right now... Fuck, right now, the breath in my lungs gets trapped there. She's wearing a floor-length black dress. Which hugs her curves right down to her knees, where it flares out like a fucking mermaid tail. While her hair hangs in loose curls over one of her shoulders.

"Gio? You okay?" she asks, walking towards me.

My glass reaches my lips and I gulp down the whiskey. "No, I'm not," I tell her.

"What's wrong?"

"My fiancée is trying to kill me," I groan, before reaching out to snake an arm around her back and pull her chest flush against mine.

"You have a fiancée? Does she know about me?" Ellie's eyebrow cocks with the question.

"Funny. You look fucking stunning. I think we should just skip this thing and stay right here." I press my cock into her.

"Mmm, tempting but *this thing* is for your business, Gio. You can't *not* go," she says.

"I'm the boss. I can do whatever the fuck I want," I grunt. "And right now, I want to tear this dress off you and bend your ass over the sofa."

"When we get home, *after* we've attended the event, you can do exactly that," she says.

"Let's go. The sooner we make an appearance, the sooner we can come home." I tug Ellie out the door, where Dan is waiting with the car. There are two SUVs in front of him and two behind. Each full of my men.

"Why do you need a convoy?" Ellie asks while eyeing the line of cars suspiciously.

"Because I have precious cargo on board." I smirk, trying to lighten the mood and put her at ease. Then I guide her into the back seat, sliding in after her. "Buckle up, Ellie. Dan's driving skills are questionable at best."

Dan looks up into the rearview mirror and laughs. “Ready, boss?” he asks.

“Yeah, let’s get this shit over with.” I tug at the bowtie around my neck.

“Stop fidgeting. You’ll ruin it,” Ellie says.

“I hate these fucking things,” I grumble between clenched teeth.

“You’re the one who made this a black-tie event, Gio.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Well, I’m excited.” Ellie smiles a huge fucking smile at me. If going out like this makes her happy, we’ll have to do it more often.

When Dan pulls to a stop in front of the venue, I turn to Ellie. “I need you to stay by my side tonight. Don’t wander off,” I tell her.

“Okay. But where would I wander off to? I don’t know anyone here, other than you and your brothers.”

“I know. I just... I need you to be close,” I stress.

“It’s okay. I’ll be right by your side the whole night.” Ellie squeezes my hand, and I try to shake off that feeling of dread, the one that’s telling me to take her home.

When Dan opens the door, I step out of the car, keeping my back to Ellie while blocking her exit. I look up and down the walkway, then across the street, before perusing the faces of all of my men surrounding the building. Then I turn back and reach a hand inside the car. Ellie takes my extended palm and steps out. My men flank us as I escort her to the door.

“Gio, what’s going on? Why do you have so much security?” Ellie asks under her breath.

“It’s nothing. I just don’t want to take risks,” I tell her.

The moment we enter the building, I scan the room until I find my brothers and guide Ellie straight over to them.

“Why is everyone staring? Do I have something on my face?” Ellie asks.

“They’re staring because you’re the most beautiful woman in here, and they’re staring because they all fucking want what’s mine,” I grunt as I glare at every fucker presently eyeing Ellie up and down. My trigger finger is itching to get to work.

“You’re late,” Santo says when we reach the table. “El, you look amazing.” He stands and kisses Ellie on the cheek.

“Thank you, so do you. All of you. Who would have thought you’d all scrub up so well?” Ellie says, looking at each of my brothers.

“Ah, I did.” Gabe raises a hand.

I pull a chair out for Ellie and then sit in the one beside it. “What’d we miss?”

“Nothing exciting. A lot of ass-kissing... and looks like more is incoming.” Marcel nods his head to the side, where an older guy in a suit is approaching our table.

“Mr De Bellis, congratulations on the new line,” he says while holding out a hand.

“Thank you.” I nod and return the gesture, hoping he fucks right off.

“I’m Lyle. Lyle Anderson,” he says. “I was an acquaintance of your father’s.”

“Mr Anderson, I know every one of my father’s acquaintances, which means I’d know you if you were one of ‘em.” I push up from my chair, positioning my body in front of Ellie’s. I don’t know this man, or what his angle is.

The fucker smiles. “You are every bit as cocky as your father said you were. Enjoy the rest of your night, Giovanni,” he says before turning and walking away.

I look to where James is standing and point at this Lyle Anderson guy. James knows to get rid of him. He’ll also find out who the fucker is.

“Gio, you okay?” Ellie asks.

I sit back in my chair. “Fine,” I grit out between clenched teeth.

“So, Ms Natt wants to come over for that tutoring session tomorrow,” Vin says, dousing the tension with more tension.

“What time? I’ll make sure I’m home.” Ellie grins.

“You don’t have to do that,” I tell her.

“Oh, I’m not doing it. *We’re* doing it.” She waves a hand between the two of us. “It’ll be fun.”

“I think we need to work on your idea of fun, Ellie.” Gabe laughs.

“You’ll see.” The twinkle in Ellie’s eyes tells me she’s up to something. What? I have no fucking idea.

I watch her pull her phone out of her clutch and frown. “Who is it?”

“My sister. Sorry,” she says before answering the call. “Jenni?”

I don’t hear what’s said on the other line but Ellie’s whole body stiffens and her face pales.

“I’m coming. Stay where you are until I get there. Don’t move, Jenni.” Then Ellie jumps up. Her chair topples backwards, and I’m on my feet just as fast.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

“Jenni... I have to go. I have to get her,” Ellie says. She’s not making sense. She’s panicking.

“Okay. Let’s go. It’s okay.” I take her hand in mine and try to slow her down.

“No, Gio, you should stay. This is your thing.”

“I’m not fucking letting you walk out of here like this, especially alone. If your sister needs you, I’ll take you to her. Let’s go,” I repeat.

“I don’t know what happened. She was crying, Gio, and said she locked herself in her dorm. I could hear someone

smashing through the door, yelling at her.”

“It’s okay. We’re going to her now,” I tell Ellie, before looking back to my brothers. “Marcel, Gabe, let’s go.”

They both get up and follow us without question.



Dan stops the car in front of Jenni’s dorm. Ellie jumps out and starts running towards the door.

“Fuck, Ellie, wait.” I reach her just as she enters the code to get into the building. “Which floor?” I ask her.

“Three,” Ellie says, stabbing the button for the elevator.

When the doors open onto Jenni’s floor, Ellie starts running again. Fuck, she’s fast. I catch up and shove her behind me before she can rush into the room. Ear-piercing screams, followed by the sound of flesh hitting flesh, are the only things I can hear.

A red haze washes over my vision when I enter the room and find some guy on top of Jenni, beating into her. I don’t think. I act. I pull him off her and start throwing punches. Nothing else matters right now except ending this fucker. I keep landing blow after blow before grabbing a fistful of his hair, picking his head up off the ground, and slamming it back down. I don’t stop until Gabe and Marcel are pulling at both of my arms.

“Gio, stop. He’s out cold,” Gabe says.

“It’s not enough,” I hiss, yanking my arm free so that my fist can connect with the asshole’s face again.

“Gio, I need help. Please.” Ellie’s plea breaks through my haze. I look up and see tears running down her cheeks. “We need to get her to a hospital,” she says.

I glance over to Jenni. Her face is bruised and already swelling. Blood drips down from her forehead and nose.

“Fuck!” I yell as I land another hit to the unconscious body beneath me.

“Come on, Gio. Get her out of here. We’ll take care of him,” Marcel says.

I push to my feet and turn to Ellie. “I’m sorry.”

It’s all I can say. I promised her that her sister would be fine. She was meant to be fine. James and Dan both said that Taylor had been warned off. Usually that’s all it fucking takes. A verbal threat from the De Bellis family is supposed to be enough.

Am I losing my touch?

Fuck that, I have too much at stake to lose the respect—the fear—that’s attached to my last name. I’ll make sure everyone in this city gets a reminder of who we fucking are.

I bend down and scoop Jenni into my arms. “It’s okay. We’re gonna get you to a doctor,” I tell her.

“I’m sorry...” she cries between bloodied teeth.

“You didn’t do this, sweetheart,” I say as I set her into the back of the car and then climb in after Ellie.

“Where to, boss?” Dan asks.

“The closest hospital,” I tell him.

“No, no, I don’t want to go to the hospital,” Jenni sobs.

“You need to see a doctor—you have to,” Ellie tells her sister.

“No, please, El, I can’t...”

“It’s okay. Take us home, Dan. I’ll have the doc make a house call.” I grab hold of Ellie’s hand. “It’s going to be okay. She’s going to be okay,” I promise her.

Ellie opens her mouth to reply and then closes it again. She turns back to look at her sister. I don’t need to guess what she was going to say. She doesn’t believe me. I should have made sure Taylor wasn’t an issue, and I failed. I failed them both.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Eloise



My heart is broken. I've been sitting here for an hour, watching Jenni sleep, and I can't help but feel like I let her down. I should have seen the signs. I did see the signs, and I didn't do anything about them.

I could have prevented this. I could have gotten her away from that asshole. I should have made time to meet him months ago when he first came into the picture. But I was so wrapped up in my own life, wrapped up in all that is Giovanni De Bellis, that I pushed everyone else to the side.

This is my fault. My baby sister is hurt because I didn't see it sooner. I'm such an idiot—a selfish bloody idiot.

"Ellie, babe, come on." Gio kneels down in front of me.

I look up. I didn't hear him come in. "It's my fault," I tell him.

"No, it's not."

“I didn’t know. I should have known, Gio. She wanted me to meet him months ago, and I was always too busy. I should have made time. I would have known. I could have stopped this.”

“This is not your fault, Ellie. Listen to me. You didn’t do this.” Gio picks me up, carries me out of the room, and places me on our bed.

“I’m the big sister. I’m meant to look after her.”

“And you are. She needs you now, Ellie, and you’re here for her. You’re going to help her get through this,” he says.

My eyes connect with his again. “I want him dead, Gio. I don’t want him to be able to ever hurt anyone else. And I know it’s not fair of me to ask you for something like this. But I just... I want him to die.”

I know it’s wrong. I mean, what kind of person does this make me? Asking my boyfriend to kill someone for me...

“Ellie, you know I will always give you anything you ask for. But this... you didn’t ask for this. I won’t allow you to have it on your conscience.”

“I meant what I said, Gio,” I insist.

“I know you did. But he’s already gone. I did that, not you.”

I nod my head. “Thank you.”

Gio lies down next to me on the bed. Then he pulls me into his arms, and that’s how I fall into a restless sleep.



“El, she’s fine. She’s asleep. You need to stop calling,” Mum says.

The day after I brought Jenni home from her dorm, she went to stay with Mum for a while. The only reason I let her go was because I knew that Taylor couldn’t hurt her anymore.

I've spent hours talking to Jenni, and she swears to me that this was a one-off incident. That he hasn't laid hands on her before that night.

"I just worry. I want to help her," I tell my mum.

"And you are, but hovering isn't the way to go about it. She knows you're here for her. She knows she can pick up the phone anytime and you will come running, El," Mum says.

"I feel so useless." I sigh into the phone.

"So do I. She's my daughter, El." Mum's voice cracks. "I don't know what happened to Taylor, and I don't need to know, but tell Gio I said thank you."

"Gio?"

"Whatever he did, I... Well, I appreciate him."

"Okay. I have to go, Mum. I'll call you later," I say.

"Or you could leave it until tomorrow," she reminds me.

"Okay."

As soon as I hang up, my phone lights up with Dani's name on the screen. "Hey, babycakes," I answer, attempting to sound lighter than I feel right now.

"El, can you come and get me? Please," she asks, and I'm instantly reliving the incident with my sister.

"Of course I can. Where are you and what's wrong?" I can't help the panic that fills my voice, and I can feel my hands already shaking.

"I've just left work. I'll be in the café across the street. I need to get out of here," she says and then hangs up.

Shit. I run out to my car. I don't know how many road rules I break while driving to the café, but I do know I'm parked in a loading zone when I walk in and find Dani sitting at a table.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I rush over to her.

"Nothing. Come on, I need to get out of here," she says.

As soon as we're seated in her car, with both doors closed and locked, I pivot towards her. "Want me to take you to your place?"

"No, he'll show up there." She shakes her head.

"Who? Alistair?" I look her over. I don't see any physical marks. But then again, I didn't see them on Jenni at first either.

"Just... can we go to your place?" she asks me.

"Always. I... ah... I moved in with Gio," I tell her.

"You what? When?"

"Three weeks ago." I watch her reaction out of my peripheral vision.

"Oh, okay," Dani says, looking down before adding, "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, why would you think that?"

"Because you're not telling me stuff. Important stuff like: *Oh, hey, Dani, you know my boyfriend? Well, he asked me to move in with him.* That kind of important stuff," she says.

"It's not because of you. I wanted to make sure it stuck. That's all," I tell her. A few minutes later, we're pulling up to the gate and I quickly punch in the code.

"This is where you're living? Shit, El, I would have moved in here too," Dani says, her lips curling into a smirk as she eyes the property.

"It's just a house." I drive up and park out front. "Come on. And don't stare. Just pretend everyone you see doesn't exist. Ignore them," I tell her before getting out of the car.

Shit, I should have thought this through. I've never invited any of my girlfriends over, and now that Dani is here, I'm wondering what she's thinking as she takes in the countless men in suits filling almost every corner.

"Miss, I need to check your friend before you bring her into the house," one of the guards says.

"No, you don't," I tell him, my voice firm.

“I do. Boss’s orders.”

“Boss’s orders? Really?” I take hold of Dani’s hand and drag her down the hallway.

“Ah, boss is busy,” another one of Gio’s men says while holding up a palm to stop me from entering the office.

“Well, he’s about to get busier.” I shove the guy out of the way and push open the door. “Gio De Bellis, I swear to God, if my friends have to be searched to visit me, I’m moving out,” I yell at him the moment I enter the room. Five sets of eyes hone in on me.

Good, let them see how pissed off I am right now.

“Ellie, you know the rules are in place to keep us all safe,” Gio says before standing and buttoning his suit jacket.

Damn it, why does he have to look so bloody hot when he does that?

“Really, Gio? You’re scared of her? Dani? My best friend since forever? Little Dani? You know what? It’s fine. Come on, Dani, I still have my apartment anyway. I’ll grab some of my things and get the rest later,” I huff and pivot on my heel, turning my back on him.

“I’ll search her. I’ll even make it fun,” Gabe offers.

“Touch her and I’ll cut your dick off. I know how fond of it you are, Gabe,” I warn him. To which, he just laughs.

“Enough. Eloise, a word,” Gio interjects before walking up to me. I pause momentarily, he just *Eloised* me. He has never used my full name like that, nor has he ever spoken to me in such a tone.

“I’m not leaving Dani here with the ferals,” I tell him.

“Any of you touch her, I’ll cut your fingers off myself,” Gio grunts over his shoulder, then turns back to me. “Happy?”

“No. Not even close,” I tell him before glancing over to Dani. “I’ll be two minutes. These goons are Gio’s brothers. They’re mostly safe. Don’t leave.”

Gio shuts the office door and glares at the guard standing in the hallway. I watch as the man disappears. “Ellie, you know we have to take security seriously here,” Gio grumbles.

“And you can, all you like, but that doesn’t mean I have to live here while you do it.” I fold my arms over my chest, and Gio’s face hardens.

“You’re not fucking moving out.”

“You can’t stop me,” I remind him.

“Are you sure about that?” He lifts a single brow in question.

“Well, you probably could, but you couldn’t do it without making me hate you,” I counter.

His face pales. “I need you to work with me here, Ellie. This...” He gestures between us. “Arguing and threatening to leave me. It’s not how we’re going to work through our disagreements.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” I actually feel extremely childish right now, but my emotions are all over the place after everything that’s happened. “This is my friend, Gio. Haven’t you wondered why I’ve never brought any of them around here?”

“And why haven’t you?” he asks.

“Because I’m scared that if they come here... if they see all *this*... that they’re going to distance themselves from me.”

“You think your friends will leave you because of who I am?”

“I love you. I don’t care who you are or what you do. But I can’t stop other people from making judgements, and it will hurt too much to lose everyone important to me,” I tell him. “Though it’d hurt more to lose you. So I’ve just been keeping them away.”

Gio pulls me into his chest. “I’m sorry you’ve been feeling like that,” he says. “And I’m sorry I can’t be the kind of man you can proudly show off to your friends.”

“You are. It’s not that. It’s just... I’m not ashamed of you, Gio. But my friends? They don’t know you like I do—actually, I doubt many people do.”

“Your friends can come, Ellie. Invite them all here. Have one of those girls’ nights or whatever it is that you all do. I’ll make sure everyone is more discreet,” he says.

“I love you.”

“I love you more.”

“Mmm, doubtful.” I smile up at him. Then I take my phone out of my pocket and text Claire and Daisy, telling them we’re having a girls’ night.

A few minutes later, I walk back into the office, feeling lighter.

“Come on, we’re having a girls’ night in. Claire and Daisy are on their way over.” I drag Dani out of the room.

“El, who the hell are you and what have you done with my friend?” she asks when we’re about halfway down the hall.

“Shut up. I’ve just learnt to be a little more assertive around that lot. If you let them, they’ll walk all over you. But they’re harmless... mostly,” I repeat.

“Well, that’s reassuring. Are you sure it’s okay for me to be here? I don’t want to cause any trouble,” she says.

“It’s fine. This is my home now, Dani. We have to get used to it,” I remind her. “Now, tell me why you, of all people, left work in the middle of the day.”

“I quit my job,” she blurts out.

“You what?” Claire and Daisy say at the same time as they enter the room with Marcel sauntering in behind them. Shit, they got here fast. Something tells me they must have been in the area.

“Thanks, Marcello. And, before you suggest anything, the answer is no,” I tell him.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.” He pouts.

“Still a no.”

“You kill all my fun, El. Seriously, what’s the point of having a sister if I can’t fuck her hot friends,” he says while aiming a panty-melting smirk at Daisy and Claire.

“Well, I wouldn’t go as far as saying you can’t...” Daisy returns the gesture.

“Daisy, no,” I growl.

“Okay, no-go zone. Got it.” She laughs while holding up her hands in surrender.

“Right, well, I’ll be around if you change your mind, beautiful,” Marcello says to her before pivoting on his heel and walking out of the room.

“Really, El, can’t I just play with him a little bit?” Daisy huffs, her eyes glued on my future brother-in-law’s retreating back.

“Nope. Don’t go there. Now, why the hell would you quit your job?” I turn my glare on Dani.

“I walked in on Alistair today. He was about to be on the receiving end of a blow job, from a woman who I’m pretty sure was a client.” She’s trying to sound nonchalant, but it’s not working. We can all see the tears welling in her eyes.

“He what?” I scream. “I’m going to kill him. Actually, I’ll have Gio put a hit out on him.” I press my finger to my lips. He’d do it too. I have no doubt about it.

Dani laughs, then stops and stares at me. “Holy shit, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“What’s the point of dating Gio De Bellis if I can’t ask him to make someone disappear?” I shrug.

“No. I don’t want him to disappear. I want the visual to disappear.” Dani’s voice cracks, her eyes water, and then the dam breaks. “I just... I really thought...” she says between sobs.

“I know,” Claire says, rushing forward to pull Dani into a hug. “Maybe we can tear off his balls?”

“Maybe.” Dani smiles slightly at the suggestion.

“I mean, there are plenty of available hot-as-fuck men walking around this place. Revenge sex is good sex,” Daisy tells her.

“Daisy, control your libido.” I scowl at her.

“What? Why? And, seriously, how have you not invited us here before now? I mean, come on, El, this house? These men? You’ve been holding out.”

“I was scared you girls would stop talking to me,” I admit.

Dani lifts her head and wipes her cheeks dry. “Never,” she says. “Nothing would make me stop talking to you. Ever.”

“Me either. We are endgame girls. All of us. Together always,” Daisy adds.

“Always. We’re going to be raising children together. Our grandchildren will be friends. The four of us are a package deal.” Claire nods like it’s fact.

“Thank you,” I tell them. I am so grateful these women are my friends and that I’m not about to lose them because the universe decided to make Giovanni De Bellis my soul mate.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Watching Ellie sleep is one of my favourite things to do. I could lie here all day and just stare at her. And I would too, if the whole fucking family wasn't counting on me. I drag myself out of bed and pull on a pair of gym shorts and step into my sneakers.

The sun isn't up yet. The house is quiet. It's the only time I ever get to hit the gym. After stretching out, I jump on the treadmill. I know Gabe or Marcel will be down here within the next hour or so. Then I'll start on weights.

About thirty minutes into my run, the door opens. I look into the mirror and press the stop button on the machine. Ellie walks over to me, wrapped in a silk dressing gown.

"Sorry... I didn't mean to interrupt you," she says.

"You are never an interruption, Ellie," I tell her through laboured breaths.

“Still.”

“Why are you awake this early?” I ask her.

“The bed was lonely. I wanted to thank you. For letting Dani stay here the past week.”

“This is your home, Ellie. If you want your friends to stay here, they can. You don’t have to thank me for that.”

“I know,” she says, her eyes flicking to the floor before landing on me again.

“What’s really going on?”

“I don’t know. I can’t explain it. I just feel like something horrible is about to happen and I can’t do anything to stop it.”

I’ve had that same feeling for weeks. I’ve increased security, done everything I can to make sure she’s safe. That feeling of dread, though? It won’t fucking leave, and it’s fucking with my head.

“I promise you I won’t let anything happen to you, Ellie. I will die before I let anyone hurt you.”

“I’m not worried about myself. I’m worried about you. Nothing will hurt me more than not having you. So just make sure you don’t die,” she says.

“I’m not planning on it.” I smirk. Then reach out and pull on the tie around her waist. The gown falls open, revealing her naked body underneath. “Hold that thought. Don’t move,” I tell her as I walk over to the door and lock it. I stalk back towards Ellie.

She drops the dressing gown to the floor and stands completely naked in front of me. I toe off my sneakers, close the distance, and pick her up. Her legs wrap around my waist.

“You really should join me in the gym more often.”

“If I did, you would never get to work out,” she says.

“I don’t know... I’d still get my cardio in.” I smirk as I walk over and sit on the weight bench with Ellie straddling my lap.

She moves her pussy against my cock. Her lips press onto mine and her tongue pushes inside my mouth. My palms massage the globes of her ass while her fingertips trail down my chest.

“I need you,” I tell her, trailing kisses along her neck.

“You have me,” she says. Her hands reach between our bodies, into my shorts, and beneath the band of my underwear. Fisting my cock, she frees it from the confines of my clothes. Her knees settle on each side of me as she raises her body, lines my cock up with her entrance, and sinks down onto me.

“Fuck. Yes.” My fingers press into her flesh.

“Oh god,” she moans, her head falling backwards and her mouth opening. Her body lifts and falls back down onto me.

“That’s it. Ride me, Ellie,” I tell her as she starts to increase her pace, chasing her release.

There’s a jiggling of the handle, followed by a knock. “Why is the door locked?” Gabe’s voice yells out.

Ellie freezes. I don’t. We’re not fucking stopping. Taking hold of her hips, I lift her and slam her back down onto me. She lets out a moan and I do it again.

“Really, Gio? We fucking work out in there. Communal areas are not for fucking,” Gabe calls out.

“We should stop,” Ellie says when I lift her again and pull her back down onto me.

“We are not fucking stopping. Come for me, Ellie. I want to feel your pussy squeeze my cock,” I tell her.

“Oh my god, yes. Gio!” she moans as her body seizes and her pussy shudders around me. Electricity travels over my every nerve ending as my own release follows right after.



I want to be back in the fucking gym with Ellie. This morning's workout was the most enjoyable fucking gym session I've ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Instead, I'm standing in one of our warehouses, on the other end of my brothers' glares while they likely wonder how I'm going to react. If they should be worried or not.

It's not Gabe and Santo who need to be fucking worried, though. It's the asshole who did this. When I find him, I'm going to fucking enjoy peeling the skin from his body, piece by fucking piece. I'll cut into him, find creative new ways to inflict pain. I will get my vengeance for the four soldiers currently laid out in front of me. One of the men found them here this morning, their pinkie fingers removed from their hands and shoved between their teeth. They're naked and covered in cuts, burn marks, and fresh bruises.

These men—my men—were tortured. For what? I have no fucking idea. They're low-level soldiers. They don't have any information that'd help someone take us down. So why go after them?

Then I spot the note written in blood, next to the bodies.

Houses were made to burn.

The phrase is all too familiar to us. It's something our father used to say whenever we were at war, whenever we had a new enemy that needed reminding...

The old man is fucking with me from the grave. I can hear his voice in my head. *"You thought you won. But I always win, Gio. Don't forget that."*

"Anyone check the cameras? This building has CCTV. They should have caught something," I say.

"The footage was cut. There's fifteen minutes missing," Dan tells me.

"How the fuck have we not found these assholes yet?" I yell.

"Gio, we're going to find them." Gabe steps forward to lay a hand on my shoulder.

I shrug him off. “Yeah, before or after they fucking destroy everything we have to our name?”

“I’m gonna search some of Dad’s properties again. Make sure I didn’t miss anything,” he says before walking out.

“Dan, go with him. From now on, everyone pairs up. Do not go out alone,” I tell them, then turn to James. “Make sure at least three men are tailing Ellie. And Vin.”

“On it, boss,” James says with his phone already at his ear as he walks out.

“I need to go see their families.” I sigh.

“I’ll come with,” Santo says.

“No, you stay here. Have the funeral home come and collect the bodies. They deserve proper burials,” I tell him.

Informing four mothers that their sons are dead because they worked for me isn’t how I wanted to spend my fucking day. It’s not something I can send someone else to do, though. The news has to come from me.



By the time I’ve done my rounds, comforting four sobbing women, I’m fucking exhausted. All I want to do is go home, shower, have a stiff fucking drink, and forget today ever happened.

When I walk into the living room, I find Vin seated there with his fucking teacher. Ms Natt. She still hasn’t gotten the hint that I’m not fucking interested. I watch as she sits up straighter and pushes her chest out. Ignoring them, I walk over to the bar and grab the whiskey from the shelf.

“Ah, Gio. Can I have a word? About Vincenzo’s progress,” Ms Natt asks.

“You can call Ellie and talk to her about it.” I wave a dismissive hand. Ellie has been enjoying this little game with

Vin's teacher. She makes a point to show the woman that I'm taken every chance she gets. Not that I'll ever complain about Ellie throwing herself at me.

"No offence, but I'd rather speak to you. Eloise isn't capable of understanding the importance of Vincenzo's education. She's pretty, sure, but intelligence is not the girl's strong suit," Ms Natt says, pushing up from her chair.

After the day I've had, that's what finally sends me over the edge. I embrace the rage flowing through me. "What the fuck did you just say?" My voice is calm, quiet, even. But my hand is already wrapped around the pistol I just pulled from my waistband and aimed directly at the woman in front of me.

Ms Natt gasps and takes a step back, her face paler than the marble benches.

"Gio, relax. Put the gun away," Vin says.

"Yes, I think you need to relax. I can help you with that, you know. And maybe we can work out an arrangement, something that ensures Vincenzo gets top marks for his end-of-year exams." Vin's teacher quickly recovers and starts walking towards me.

"You have got to be kidding me. You've mistaken me for a whore, Ms Natt," I tell her and then pull the trigger. I don't know why I do it exactly. It's probably not even one hundred percent her fault, if I'm honest. She was just the tipping point after a really shitty fucking day.

"Oh my god!" Ellie's voice comes from behind me. I turn around, and the gun drops out of my hand and lands on the ground with an audible clank. She wasn't meant to be here. She was not meant to see this side of me. Ever.

"Ellie..." My words trail off. What the fuck can I say?

She steps into the room. Right up to me. Then her hands reach forward and cup my face. "Are you okay?" she asks.

I shake my head. Because I'm not fucking okay. Everything is going to shit, and I'm losing control. Of everything. Even myself. Ellie takes my hand, and I follow her upstairs to our bedroom.

Chapter Thirty-Four



I'm way out of my element here. What do I do? What *should* I do? Any normal person would be running out the door and not looking back. That's not what I'm doing, though. No, instead, I'm leading Gio into our bathroom. I close the door behind us and turn on the shower. Gio is silent, just watching me. Not moving a muscle.

"Take off your clothes," I tell him as I lift my dress over my head.

Gio doesn't move.

Tossing my dress into the hamper, I step closer to him and start unfastening the buttons on his shirt. "Talk to me. You're scaring me," I urge him.

His hand comes up and cups my cheek. "I don't know what to say, Ellie. I'm fucking terrified of losing you. I don't... You weren't meant to see that."

“You are not losing me. I’m still here,” I tell him. When I get to the last button, I remove the cufflinks on his wrists and pull the material down his arms. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I just... snapped.” He sighs. “I went into the living room to grab the whiskey and she started talking shit. About you. And I... I lost control. I’m losing control of everything. I’m losing you.” Gio rests his forehead against mine.

“No, you’re not,” I assure him. “I promise you are not losing me. I’m right here.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Tell me one thing you’ve ever done to me that makes you not deserve me?” I ask him.

“I just... I shot an innocent woman in front of you, and I don’t feel a single ounce of remorse for doing it, Ellie. I’m sorry you were there to witness it, but that’s all.”

“I know. But that doesn’t make me love you any less, and it sure as hell has nothing to do with whether or not you deserve me, Gio.” I pull at his belt and then undo the button and fly on his pants. “And you know what? Who cares if you deserve me? You have me, and you promised me you weren’t ever letting go. You are not allowed to break promises to me.”

“I won’t ever keep you against your will, as much as I’d want to. I won’t do that to you. If you want to leave, I’ll figure out a way to let you go.”

“I’m not leaving.” I finish undressing myself, and Gio, and then pull him into the shower. “What else happened today? Something else is wrong. I can tell.”

Gio’s lips thin out. “I can’t tell you.”

“You *won’t* tell me.”

“I don’t want you involved in my work shit, Ellie. I’m trying to protect you. I’m trying to fucking protect my family. I’m trying to be the leader they all fucking need, and all I’m doing is failing,” he says, and I see the pain behind the mask he wears.

“Why do you think you’re failing?”

“Because everything is going to shit. I...” He stops whatever he was going to say and shuts his mouth tight.

“Gio, I can’t help you if you don’t let me in.”

“You are helping. By just being here. That’s what I need. I just need you.” He wraps his arms around me and presses me against him.

The water rains down over us as I hold him as tightly as I can, trying to let him know with my actions that I’m here. I’m anchored to him. And I have no plans of going anywhere.



My eyes open, the room cloaked in darkness. Gio is knocked out. After our shower, we curled up on the bed and fell asleep. I slide out from under his arm. I don’t know who the hell is making so much noise, but they’re about to stop. I’m not having them wake Gio up. He needs to sleep. I pull one of his shirts on and slip into a pair of yoga pants.

The noise gets louder as I make my way downstairs. It’s a party. Someone is throwing a bloody party. Following the commotion, I end up in the games room, and my heart drops at the scene before me.

The room is packed full of people, women in various stages of undress. I scan the space for the closest De Bellis brother, finding Santo sitting on the sofa with a woman on each side of him. Then I spot Gabe and Marcel both leaning against the back wall.

Santo notices me enter the room and smiles, which tells me he’s wasted. Santo never smiles. Okay, that’s not entirely true. I think I’ve seen him smile maybe four times since I moved in. But he definitely doesn’t make a habit of it.

“Sis, get a drink. Join the party. Where is that brother of mine?” Santo’s words are slurred.

“Asleep. Think you can turn it down a bit?” I ask him.

“Turn it down? It’s a party, El.” He climbs to his feet, shaking the girls off him as he does.

“Gio’s asleep, Santo. I don’t want him to wake up,” I explain and have to practically yell over the music to be heard.

“Hey, Santo, bro, who’s the hottie?” An arm drapes over my shoulder. I try to shrug it off but the guy’s not having it.

“My sister. Remove your fucking arm. Now,” Santo says, suddenly sounding very sober.

“Nice try. You don’t have any sisters.” The asshole laughs and tugs me against his side.

This has Gabe and Marcel jumping over the sofa. Everything happens so fast. One minute I’m trapped under the arm of some drunk asshole. The next, the guy is sprawled out on the floor and Santo is on top of him, laying down punch after punch.

“Come on. You shouldn’t be in here.” Gabe drops a hand to my waist and guides me out of the room.

“Everyone out. Party’s over,” Marcel yells over the music.

I’m at a loss for words. I don’t know what just happened. I mean, *I do know*. But it’s all a blur. It was like a switch flipped in Santo’s head. I saw it in his eyes. They went so dark. Darker than I’ve ever seen them before.

“Is your brother going to be okay? We should go get him,” I tell Gabe.

“El, no fucking way are you going back in there,” he replies. “Santo is fine. He’ll deal with the asshole. No one gets to treat you like that.”

“I’m fine,” I insist, as Gabe leads me into the kitchen.

“Where’s Gio?”

“Asleep.”

“He’s going to be fucking pissed.” Gabe sighs, then holds up a mug. “Tea?”

“You want to make me tea? Now?” I ask, looking back to the direction we came from. “I don’t want any of you getting into trouble because of me.”

“No one is getting into trouble here, El. And that asshole deserves everything Santo is dishing out. You are our sister and we look after what’s ours. More than that, though, you’re about to be Gio’s wife, and that’s like the first lady of the De Bellis family. If people don’t treat you with the respect that comes with that role, then they lose their right to breathe.”

I gape at him. “There is no ring on this finger,” I say, holding up my left hand.

“Yet.” He places a tea bag in the cup and then pours the hot water over top. “Vin told me about what happened today. With Gio and the teacher. Wanna discuss it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say.

“Huh, I think you’re going to fit in this family just fine, El.” Gabe hands me the mug. “Go back to bed. If Gio wakes up and you’re not there, he’s gonna come out here guns blazing... and probably naked. I don’t need that kind of image ingrained in my head.”

“He’d put clothes on first.” I smile.

“You sure about that?” Gabe asks.

“No.” I slide off the stool and pick up the mug. “Thanks for the tea,” I tell Gabe before heading back upstairs.

When I walk into the room, Gio shoots up in bed. “Ellie, where’d you go?”

“I just went to make tea,” I say. “Sorry I woke you.” I set the mug on the bedside table and climb back under the blankets. Gio grabs me and pulls me against him.

“Is it because of what you saw? Why you can’t sleep?” he asks.

“No, I promise it’s not that. I just woke up—that’s all.” I lean in and press my lips to his.

“You’d tell me if it were? You can’t hold that stuff in, Ellie. It’s not healthy.”

“I promise to tell you everything that troubles me.”

“Okay.”

“Am I a bad person?” I ask him.

“No. You’re far from a bad person, Ellie.”

“I haven’t thought about that woman at all. What kind of person sees something like that and doesn’t even give it a passing thought?”

“It’s fresh, Ellie. Trust me, it will hit you. And when it does, I need you to tell me. We need to be able to talk about these kinds of things. Together. It’s you and me. Always.”

“Always,” I repeat.

Chapter Thirty-Five



I've been waiting for today all week. Keeping this secret from Ellie has been hard. But it'll be worth it.

"Why do I have to wear this?" Ellie asks, touching the blindfold on her face.

"Because it's a surprise and it won't be if you look."

"I don't like surprises." She pouts.

"Get used to them, because I intend on spending the rest of our lives surprising you," I tell her.

I pat the top pocket of my jacket. The little square box is still there. I've had this ring for a week now, and the urge to just shove it on her finger and tell her we're officially engaged was fucking strong. My future wife deserves more than that, though. She deserves a grand, romantic gesture. I've had this in the works for a while, and I'm fucking nervous now that everything is finally coming together. Not that she's going to

say no, because that's not fucking happening. No, I'm nervous about what could go wrong. Which seems to be a constant recently.

I stop in front of the building. "Do not lift that blindfold. Wait here." Then I jump out of the car and run around to her door. Opening it, I take hold of Ellie's hands and help her slide off her seat. "Okay, step up," I tell her when we approach the platform that leads to the front door.

"Where are we, Gio? And can I take this off yet?" she asks.

"No. We're almost there." I unlock the door and guide her inside. When we reach the middle of the room, I drop her hands, lower myself to one knee, and take the box out of my pocket. "Okay, take off the blindfold."

She lifts a hand and tugs the material down, but her eyes are still squeezed shut.

"Ellie, you need to open your eyes," I tell her.

"I'm scared," she says.

"Of what?" I ask.

"What if I don't like your surprise, Gio? I'm a really bad actor. I failed drama class in school. Who fails drama class? It's like the easiest thing to pass, and I'm so bad at it I failed." Her words are rushed and there's a slight panic rising in her voice.

"Ellie, open your eyes. And don't pretend if you don't like it. But I'm almost certain you're going to like this," I tell her. At least I fucking hope she does.

She slowly blinks her eyes open. She looks down at me, and I open the box. "Oh my god!" she gasps.

"Ellie, I can't imagine living my life for even a minute without you. I promise I will always put you first, above anything else. I promise to protect you. Every part of me is yours. Will you give me all of you? Will you marry me?" I ask her.

She drops to her knees in front of me and her arms wrap around my neck. “Yes, yes, yes!” she screams out. “Oh my god! Yes.” The high-pitched sound pierces my eardrums.

“So I take it that’s a yes?” I laugh.

“Wait... are you serious? You really want to do this. Like for real?” Ellie removes her arms from my neck as she looks me in the eye.

I pick up her hand, take the ring out of the box, and slide it on her finger. “This is as serious as it gets, Ellie. We’re getting married.”

“Holy shit, Gio. Does this rock have satellite tracking or something? It’s freaking huge,” she says while holding up a hand to inspect the very large diamond weighing it down.

“I wanted to make sure it was noticeable. So every fucker checking you out sees you’re mine real fucking quick,” I tell her.

“I think people on the moon will be able to see this rock.” She laughs. “I love it. Thank you.”

“I should be the one thanking you for saying yes.” I lean in and capture her mouth with mine.

When we break away from each other, Ellie finally glances around the room. I had this office set up with flowers in every corner, on every available surface. It’s actually hard to tell that it’s an office and not a flower shop.

“Where are we?” Ellie asks.

“This is your new office,” I tell her.

“What?”

“I bought it, for you. The paperwork has been drawn up. You are officially the owner of a registered real estate agency.”

Ellie is silent. Her face doesn’t reveal any hint of emotion as her eyes continue to scan the room. “You what? Why? How?”

“Why? Because I can tell you’re not happy at your current job. How? Well, it wasn’t hard. Starting and managing

businesses is what I do for a living. And I did this for you. I want you to have something that's yours. It's all in your name, Ellie. The building, the business. It's all yours. Nobody can take it from you."

"You bought me a business? That's... extreme," she says.

"Have you ever known me to be anything less?" I quirk a brow, and her lips curl into an almost smile.

"No."

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you're happy, content with your life. With me. Always," I tell her.

"I don't need anything but you, Gio. And this ring. I really freaking love this ring." She smiles now.



I'm on edge. I hate clubs at the best of times. But being in this crowded nightclub with my fiancée while knowing there's a faceless enemy out for my blood? Yeah, I'm more on edge than usual.

However, these are Ellie's friends, and I need to make an effort. Especially considering she's been so hesitant to mix her worlds together.

Someone approaches the table, and I'm about to reach out and grab them, stopping myself when I realise it's Ellie's friend Daisy. She jumps right over us to squeeze herself between Ellie and Claire.

"Please tell me you brought at least one of your hot brothers with you tonight, Gio," the girl says.

"Sorry, they're all busy tonight," Ellie answers for me.

"Busy, or are you just withholding them from me?" Daisy laughs as Dani slides in next.

"Oh, Gio, this is Alistair, my... exclusivity partner," she says.

“Boyfriend works too, Dani,” Alistair says, holding out a hand to me. “Nice to meet you.”

I return the gesture with a polite nod. “You too, and I’m glad it’s not because my fiancée put a hit out on you.” I laugh.

“Wait. What did you just say?” Dani screams.

“I was kidding, Dani. I told her no,” I say.

“No, not the hit part. The fiancée part.” Dani snatches up Eloise’s left hand. “Holy shitballs. No fucking way! Eloise, how...? How could you not video call me the moment it happened?” she screams over the music.

“It’s new, today actually, and I was otherwise occupied immediately afterwards. And then you called and said to meet you tonight so I decided to tell you in person,” Ellie explains.

“I can’t believe this. You’re getting married. Like for real!” Dani says.

“For real,” Ellie repeats before smiling up at me.

“Ah, so are we,” Xavier adds. “Next week.” He’s one of the partners at the law firm Dani works at.

Though he and I aren’t strangers. Xavier is actually on retainer for us. When your family’s businesses aren’t on the up-and-up, it pays to have the city’s best defence attorney on your side.

“Excuse me, repeat that?” Alistair turns to Xavier.

“Shardonay and I are getting married next week. We’ve booked out a resort in the Whitsundays. You’re all coming, obviously, but it’s going to be a small ceremony. Family and close friends only.” Xavier smiles proudly, before he’s tugged over to the bar to engage in what appears to be a heated conversation.

I watch because, well, I watch everyone. And if they’re going to start brawling in such a tight space, I’ll be grabbing Ellie and getting her the fuck out of here.

“So, have you set a date?” Claire asks, drawing my attention back to the group in front of me.

“Not yet,” Ellie says. “But when we do, you all will be the first to know.”

The two lawyers return to the table a few minutes later. Xavier looks like he doesn't have a care in the world, while Alistair appears ready to burst at the seams. The guy has a lot of pent-up rage beneath that nicely pressed suit of his.

“Now that my fiancé is back, I just want to clarify that we are *not* getting married next week,” Shardonday says. “It'll be a while yet.”

“What? I thought we agreed on next week.” Xavier turns to Shardonday, shock written all over his face.

“No, *you* tried to talk me into next week. *I* declined,” she says, pointing from him to herself.

“I happen to think next week is a great date for a wedding. And I already booked the resort,” he tells her.

I have to admit I've seen this guy in a courtroom, and I don't think his girl stands a chance. The man doesn't back down from an argument, even when the odds are stacked against him. He always wins too.

“Well, it sucks that you'll be going by yourself. We're not getting married next week, Xavier,” Shardonday replies, and it's hard to ignore the conviction in her voice.

“I'll get married next week,” Eloise says. “I'll take your booking, Xavier.”

My head snaps in Ellie's direction. “Babe, we can't just go to some random resort and get married. There's shit I need to put in place before we travel,” I remind her. Fuck, there is so much that has to be organised before we can all disappear to an island. I need to send James and Dan ahead, probably Gabe too. Just to get a security plan in place. And that's not even the half of it. My mind is going a mile a minute as I try to figure out if the logistics are even possible.

“Gio, I'm going to be at that resort next week. If you want to marry me, then you'll figure out a way to meet me there.” Ellie crosses her arms over her chest.

“Fucking hell. You are going to be the death of me... I swear to God,” I mutter under my breath, but the smile on my fiancée’s face tells me she heard it. I pull out my phone and start sending messages to James.

“You guys might as well have it. Someone should get use out of it,” Xavier grumbles. “I’ll send you the details.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Eloise



It's today. I'm getting married today. I'm going to be Mrs Giovanni De Bellis. I pinch my arm to make sure I'm awake and not dreaming. Yep, that bloody hurt like it's real.

We decided that, with only a week to plan an entire ceremony and reception, we wouldn't have a wedding party. It would just be me and Gio at the altar with the celebrant. My husband-to-be wasn't thrilled that we wouldn't have a priest and insisted that we redo our vows when we return home. Which is an odd request. You wouldn't think these guys would be overly religious. But, apparently, they are. Either way, I agreed. Because I don't mind repeating my vows as many times as it takes. My feelings about this man won't change.

I'm in the dressing room, by myself. I told the girls, my mum, and my sister to go and wait outside for me. It's almost

time to walk down that aisle. Towards my future. Towards Gio.

It's funny. I was never that little girl who dreamed of having her father walk her down the aisle—mostly because I didn't have a father. But now, when I'm minutes away from doing it alone, it's hard not to dwell on the fact that I don't have that person.

The door opens, and I glance into the mirror to find Gio's reflection standing there in a three-piece suit. He looks so freaking good. Then again, he always does.

“What's wrong?” he asks as he comes up behind me.

I don't turn around, just watch his approach in the mirror. “Nothing's wrong,” I tell him as I examine my own reflection this time.

I'm wearing a white, floor-length, lace dress. It has a fitted bodice that flares out at the waist with a slit up the left leg. I wasn't expecting to get such an exquisite gown on such short notice. Gio surprised me one night after work. He'd booked out a boutique and had all of my girlfriends, my mum, and my sister there waiting for me.

“You look fucking stunning,” he says, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“Mmm, so do you,” I hum.

“Are you ready?”

“So ready, but you're supposed to be out there. You know, waiting for me at the other end of the aisle,” I remind him.

“Yeah, fuck that. I'm not having you walk down the aisle alone. We're in this together, Ellie. We do everything together, which includes walking down the aisle. You will never have to do anything alone again.” He kisses the side of my neck.

“How do you always know?” I ask him. “It's like you can read my mind.”

“I know you.” He shrugs. “Now, come on. Let's make this official.” He spins me around and takes my hand.

We stop at the back door, where I'm supposed to emerge. The music starts, the song I chose playing softly in the background. Gio opens the door and holds out an arm. I take it and we walk down the aisle. Together. Just like he said we would. I keep my focus on Gio the whole time, quietly singing the lyrics to him as we go. This is when the rest of our lives starts. I will remember this day forever. The day I became his wife. The day he becomes my husband.

When we reach the front, I hand my bouquet of white and pink roses to Dani, and Gio and I face each other while holding hands. Everyone else fades into the background—which is no small feat, considering there are over two hundred attendees.

The celebrant does a very quick opening speech before addressing us. “The bride and groom have prepared their own vows. Gio, you may start with yours.”

“Eloise, I wake up every morning counting my blessings that you're next to me. I've been in love with you since the moment I first saw you. I promise to always love you, to protect you, and to spend the rest of my life making sure you have everything you ever need or want. I promise to always listen to whatever it is you have to say, even when you're rambling and don't make much sense. You're my other half, the part that completes me. It will always be you,” Gio says as he slides a gold band onto my finger.

Then the celebrant turns to me. “Eloise, can you read out your vows to Gio?”

I take a deep breath, trying really hard to hold the tears at bay. “Gio, you are everything I'm not supposed to want in life. And, at the same time, you are exactly what I'm meant to want. You have shown me what it's like to be loved unconditionally, to be accepted for who I am. I promise to always be by your side, to be your cheerleader through life. To be your confidant. I promise to love you despite the red flags, *and* because of them. I will be forever grateful that you chose me.” I slide the gold band that matches mine onto his ring finger.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride,” the celebrant announces.

There are hollers and cheers all around us as Gio picks me up off my feet and slams his lips down onto mine. “I love you, Mrs De Bellis.”

“I love you.” I smile up at him.

After we sign the paperwork and take what feels like a million photos, Gio and I head into the ballroom for the reception. I don’t know how, but he managed to get this all organised with very little input from me. He asked me for a colour scheme, and I told him light pink and white. He did everything else himself, or more than likely paid someone else while he hovered over them.

“How’s it feel to be an old married woman?” Jenni asks, wrapping her arms around me and stealing me away from Gio.

“Amazing.” I smile.

“Gross. But I’m so happy for you,” she says.

“Thank you.” I kiss my little sister on her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“El, I’m fine. I’m dealing with it. Going to all the sessions you and Mum set up for me. I’m healing.” She sighs.

“I’m still going to keep asking, so get used to it,” I tell her.

“Okay, well, tonight isn’t about me. It’s about you. So let’s party, because after tonight, you’re going to turn into one of those boring couples who never leaves the house. That’s what married people do.” Jenni laughs.

“But I’ll be with Gio, which means I’m fine with that future.”

“See! It’s already happening.” She shakes her head at me. “Oh, I see someone I need to talk to. Get a drink. Party. You know, before the carriage turns into a pumpkin,” Jenni says and then disappears into the crowd.

“How do you think she’s really coping?” Gio asks as he comes up behind me.

“I’m not sure, but she seems okay.”

“Can I have this dance?” He holds out a palm for me to take, and I glance around the room.

“But no one’s dancing.”

“That’s the point. They won’t dance until we do.” He smiles.

“Right. Let’s do this.” I nod and Gio guides me to the middle of the ballroom.

When he wraps an arm around my waist, I nervously place my hand on his. “Why are you nervous?” he asks.

“Because I don’t know how to do this. Dance like this,” I admit.

“It’s easy. Just follow my lead.” Gio sweeps me around the dance floor, his movements effortless, and somehow it feels like I’m doing it right. “You’re a natural, Mrs De Bellis.”

I smile, because hearing him call me that makes me stupidly happy. “You’re going to wear out the name before the ink’s dry.” I laugh. I think he’s said it about twenty times since we exchanged vows only two hours ago.

“I’ll never be able to say it enough,” he says.

“Okay, my turn. Let me dance with my new sister.” Gabe shoves at Gio, who literally growls in response. “Relax. Jeez, bro. Go get a drink. Ellie, care to dance?” Gabe turns back to me.

“I’d love to,” I say, taking his hand.

Gio grunts from where he’s still standing beside me. “I want her back after one song, Gabe.”

I laugh as I watch him stalk away, but then I see him head over to my mum. He takes her out to the dance floor, and my heart swells.

“You have love hearts in your eyes, sis,” Gabe says.

“That’s because I’m *in love*. One day, you’ll have them too.”

“Nope. That’s not me. I plan to be the eternal bachelor. The fun uncle after you birth me some nephews.”

“Or nieces.”

“Huh?”

“They could be girls,” I remind him.

“We don’t have enough guns for that, El,” he deadpans.

I laugh, but he’s not joking, so I add, “Relax. That’s not something we’ll have to deal with for ages.”

When the song is close to ending, we’re interrupted by Marcel. “My turn,” he says, and Gabe steps aside so that his brother can take his place. “So, how’s it feel to be a De Bellis?”

“Is it meant to feel different?”

“Well, yeah. I’d assume so. I’ve gone my whole life being told how grateful I should be to carry this last name.” He shrugs.

“Mmm, well, I’m grateful that Gio is mine and that I now have four brothers.”

“I always wanted a sister. Shelli was like a sister to us until, well...” He doesn’t finish the sentence.

Shelli was Santo’s fiancée, the one who got murdered the night before their wedding. The guys don’t really talk about her much, so it always takes me off guard whenever they do mention her.

“What was she like?”

“I’m not the person you should be asking, El,” Marcel says before taking a step back.

Vin appears by my side. “Looks like I’m up.”

“What is this? A game of Pass the Parcel?” I laugh.

“It’s tradition. You have to dance with all of us.” Vin wraps his arms around me.

“You know, I haven’t had a chance to talk to you recently. It’s been... chaotic. But how’s school been? Since you know?”

I swallow down the guilt. I wasn't the only one who witnessed Ms Natt's dead body hit the floor.

"Since Gio lost his shit and blew my teacher's brains across the walls?" He smirks.

"Yeah, that."

"It's fine. Our sub is better anyway. And word around the halls is that Ms Natt ran off with one of the student's dads." Vin laughs. "How have you been? It's not exactly something you see every day."

"It's weird. I've thought about it, and I remember it at odd times, but I don't feel bad. I'm probably an awful person and headed straight for hell." I sigh.

"Ah, nope. I've met the kind of people hell is reserved for. And trust me, El. You are not one of them," Vin says, glancing over my shoulder and taking a step back.

I turn around and see Santo. "Can I have this next dance?" he asks me.

"Of course." I take his hand.

"You look beautiful by the way. Gio is lucky to have you."

"I think I'm pretty lucky to have him too," I say. "How are you? I can't imagine all of this is easy for you..."

"I'm fine. Shelli hated weddings. She begged me to take her away and elope. Just the two of us. I thought it was just nerves, that she'd regret not having something bigger when the day finally came."

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

"Yeah, me too," he says quietly. Then he clears his throat. "Anyway, welcome to the family. I'm really glad Gio found you, and I'm sorry I gave you a hard time."

"You gave me a hard time? Huh, I didn't notice." I smile, and he returns it with one of his own.

"See? This is why you're going to make the best sister."

“Okay, if everyone is done, I’m taking my wife back now,” Gio grunts from behind me. Then he pulls me out of Santo’s arms. Literally grabs my waist and drags me back.

“Possessive much?” Santo says.

“You have no idea.” I laugh.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



I nstead of being in bed with my wife—which is my favourite fucking place to be, mind you—I’m sitting in my office at six in the fucking morning. Why? Because ever since we returned home, I can’t sleep. Ellie won’t truly be safe until I find the fucker who’s killing off my men and fucking with my businesses.

We were called back from the island the day after the ceremony because five more of my men were tossed inside a dumpster bin outside one of my restaurants. Detective Peter called me on my wedding night to break the fucking news.

Gabe walks into the office with Santo, both dressed in the same clothes they were wearing yesterday.

“Big night?” I ask as they walk farther into the room. They don’t look like they’ve been out on a bender. They are, however, covered in what appears to be plaster.

“Not the kind I would have liked,” Santo grunts before dropping onto the sofa.

I push from my chair and walk around my desk.

“You’re going to want to sit down for this,” Gabe tells me.

“What?” I ask as I continue walking. I don’t sit.

“Here. Found *this* at the address Vin gave us. By the way, have you been there?” he says.

“No. Why?” I sent Gabe to check it out and he returned empty-handed. Haven’t thought about it much since then. “You went back there?” I question him.

“We pulled an all-nighter, tearing the place apart. It’s Dad, which meant I knew there had to be evidence somewhere. And I was right,” Gabe says before handing me a manilla folder. “Found this in a wall cavity that was plastered and painted over.”

“You tore down walls?” I quirk a brow. That’s extreme, even for Gabe. Although it does explain why they look like they’ve just stepped off a construction site.

“Like I said, it’s Dad. I knew it was somewhere. That’s a dossier on the Allen family,” he explains.

I lower myself onto the single sofa and open the folder. It’s full of documents. “Why would the old man have a dossier on the Allens?”

They were a bunch of fucking nobodies, wannabe gangsters trying and failing to climb up the ranks in Melbourne’s underworld. They dealt in petty crime, carjackings, dealing pot.

“Well, it seems we overlooked them. They’ve come into a sudden influx of cash this year. Moved into a nice, big old house and are driving around in expensive cars that aren’t stolen,” Santo says. “They’ve also been keeping a low profile. Haven’t been out on the streets much at all.”

“And no one thought that was odd?”

“Just thought they moved on to being honest. They were low-level fuckwits. Didn’t think they were capable of or, better yet, *stupid enough* to go up against us. Murder is a long way from petty theft and selling dope,” Santo grunts. He’s right. I never would have seen the Allen family as an enemy capable of attacking us.

I flick through the documents. There are printouts of text conversations between my father and Oliver Allen, the man you’d call the leader of their family. He and his three sons make up their entire *empire*. They don’t have the means to fuck with us. Or at least they didn’t.

“The old man was working with them, giving them products,” I say aloud while reading through the messages.

“Yeah, and that’s not all he gave them,” Santo grinds the words between his teeth.

“What do you mean?” I ask before finding the answer myself when I flick to the next page in the folder. A printout of an email from our father to his solicitor that details exactly who that three million went to. And the solicitor was the one who made the transaction on his behalf.

I continue sifting through the documents and see an agreement signed between my father and Oliver Allen. Detailing the three million dollar exchange for “taking down the De Bellis Empire” in the event of his death.

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” I yell out as I chuck the folder and its contents across the room. “He fucking paid them to fuck with us?” I shouldn’t be surprised at how low the bastard would stoop to beat us from beyond the grave.

“Seems that way.”

“Why would he print this shit out and save it?” I ask the question everyone’s thinking.

“Why did he do anything he did? So he could get the last word in, get the last fucking laugh? Who the fuck knows?” Gabe runs a hand through his hair in frustration. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it sooner.” He sighs.

“No one would have suspected the fucking Allens,” I tell him. “Where are they now? I want every single fucking one of them rounded up in warehouse seven by tonight.”

“Done.”

“Those assholes want to get in on the torturing and killing scene? Then let’s see how long they fucking last before they crack under pressure,” Santo grunts.

“A thousand says ten minutes.” Gabe laughs as he rubs his hands together. “This is going to be fun.”

“This doesn’t leave the room. Tell no one. I don’t want word getting out and tipping the fuckers off that we know it’s them,” I remind my brothers.

“You think we have a rat?”

“I don’t fucking know,” I huff. I hate to think that any of our guys could be leaking intel. Then again, a lot of them were loyal to my father, so I wouldn’t be surprised by anything at this point.

The door to my office opens and Ellie walks in with a coffee in her hand. “Sorry. I didn’t know you all were in here,” she says, passing me the cup. “Why are you both covered in dust?”

“It’s plaster,” Santo tells her.

“Okay, why are you both covered in *plaster*?” she repeats

“Spent the night knocking down walls.” Gabe smirks. “I’m out before you two start acting like a happily married couple and shit.”

“We are a happily married couple,” I tell him.

“My point exactly. It’s sickening.” He laughs. Santo gets up and follows Gabe out of the room. I don’t hear what he grumbles under his breath as he does, nor do I care. Because my wife is in front of me, and right now, all I want is her.

“It’s your last day today. You excited?” I ask Ellie.

“Nervous. What if I can’t do it?”

“Do what?”

“Run a whole agency by myself.”

“You’re never by yourself. I can help with anything you need, and we can hire staff. Whatever it takes. Whatever you need.”

“You have enough businesses to run, Gio. I don’t want you wasting time running mine,” she says.

“Ellie, I will always have time for you. If you need my help, I’ll help. If you don’t, then just say the word and I’ll stay out of it.”

“You’ll stay out of it? Really?” she asks, and the look in her eyes tells me she doesn’t believe me.

“Well, mostly. You’re my wife. Besides, I kinda like the idea of visiting you at your office. Locking the door and fucking you over your desk.” I smirk, eyeing her up and down.

“That could be arranged. I mean, even the boss needs a lunch break, right?” She smiles.

“They do.” I nod.

“Damn it, Gio. Now all I can think about is you and your addictive orgasms, and I don’t have time. I have to get ready for work.”

I walk over and lock the door to my office. Then turn back and face Ellie, who is shaking her head at me.

“I don’t have time for this, Gio,” she repeats.

“And I don’t intend to ever let my wife leave this house in need of anything.” I stalk towards her. She’s wearing one of my shirts and a pair of pyjama shorts.

“I really do have to get ready for work,” she says with a little less conviction this time.

“I’ll be quick,” I promise before dropping to my knees in front of her. Then I slide her shorts down her legs, lift her shirt, and bury my head underneath it.

That first lick... That first taste of her... Somehow it gets better and better every fucking time. I pick up her left leg and hang it over my shoulder. Her hands land on top of my head, her fingers curling into my hair.

“Oh shit,” she moans.

I hold her hips, running my tongue up the centre of her slit again before I trail it back down. Moving one of my hands, I push two fingers into her opening and cover her clit with my mouth. I pump in and out while my mouth sucks and licks at her hard little nub. It only takes a few minutes before she’s tugging at my hair and her legs wobble. Ellie screams out my name as she loses herself to the pleasure. Removing my fingers, I lick and kiss all over her mound until her hands drop and her body relaxes.

I stand and cup her cheeks in my palms. “Told you I wouldn’t take long.” I smirk.

“Uh-huh,” she says breathlessly.

“Come on. Let’s shower, then feed you breakfast,” I tell her. “Oh, I have something for you too.”

“What?” she asks as I guide her out my office door.

“It’s a surprise. I’ll give it to you after breakfast.”

“I hate surprises.” She smiles. Truth is she only says she hates them, while that smile tells me she’s excited.

“You loved the last one.”

“Well, yeah, that’s because you were giving me *you*, Gio. Not even the great Giovanni De Bellis can top that gift. It will always be the best thing I ever received.”

“I fucking love you, Mrs De Bellis,” I say as I continue leading her up the stairs.

“Right back at you,” she tells me.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



That surprise Gio had for me? It was a brand-new car. Complete with a red bow on top. I tried to tell him I didn't need a fancy vehicle, and he told me his wife wasn't going to have anything less than what she deserved. So that's why I got stared at the whole way to work this morning... and when I parked in the staff car park. Even now, as I sit in my office, I can feel everyone's eyes on me. Hear the silent whispers about how I married Giovanni De Bellis and had a shiny new car to show for it...

He bought me a Mercedes G-Wagon. Went on and on about all the safety specs, and in the end, I needed to get to work so I took the keys from him. Told him I loved him and that we'd discuss the car when I got home.

I've been ignoring the stares, the whispers too. After all, it's my last day here. I won't ever have to see any of these people again if I don't want to.

My phone buzzes on my desk. I pick it up and tap on the message.

DAISY:

Happy last day of work at that stuck-up place!

CLAIRE:

Tell them where they can shove their snotty attitudes.

DANI:

Don't do that. Hold your head high and walk out at the end of the day knowing you're going to kick ass out on your own.

ME:

Gio bought me a car...

DANI:

Go, Gio!

DAISY:

Rub salt into my single wounds, why don't you?
Also, wow, husband of the year award!

CLAIRE:

What kind of car?

ME:

A G-WAGON.

I type out my response in all caps because, well, it's a freaking G-Wagon.

DAISY:

OMG! Does he have a single brother??? Asking for a friend.

ME:

No, he does not!

CLAIRE:

Pretty sure he has four of them.

DANI:

Ignore them, El. Congrats, and enjoy being spoiled by your husband. You deserve it.

ME:

What did I do to deserve a car?

DANI:

You married the guy.

ME:

And I'd do it again. Every day. Wasn't exactly a chore.

DAISY:

There you go rubbing salt into my single wounds again. I love your love story though!

There's a knock at the door, so I set my phone down and look up to find Keith standing in my office.

"Hi," I say.

"Hey, Eloise, I need your help. I just got a call from the school. I have to pick up my daughter, and I have a showing for that client of yours who won't take no for an answer. He wants to see the house today."

"Which one?" I ask. I had to pass off my client list to the other agents.

"Mr Allen. He wants to see the property over on Georges Road."

"Ah, okay, what time?" I agree to show the house, because it's my last day and I literally have nothing else to do anyway.

"Two thirty. Thank you. You're a lifesaver," Keith says before walking out the door.



That fight-or-flight sensation is going strong today. I contemplated ringing Dani and asking her to come with me to show this listing, but I felt stupid and didn't want to bother her. Now though, as I walk through this house with Mr Allen following behind me, I wish I'd called her.

I really have an off feeling about this guy. He hasn't said anything, but the way he looks at me is bloody creepy. I pull my phone out of my bag. "I just have to make a quick call. Have a look around," I say, stepping to the side to pass him.

We're currently in the primary bedroom. It's empty. There's no furniture. It's also the spot that's farthest away from the front door.

"I don't think so." Mr Allen's hand snaps up and snatches my phone out of my grip. He tosses it behind me, over to the far corner of the room.

"Excuse me?" I ask him. I don't know what else to say. I'm equal parts dumbfounded and scared.

"You won't be making any calls. I've been waiting for this day, Mrs De Bellis," he says.

At first, I don't respond. I do, however, take a step backwards. And then another. "I don't know what you want, but you don't have to do this." Whatever *this* is.

"What I want is to ruin your husband. And the fastest way to ruin a man is to ruin what he loves most. Unfortunately for everyone, Eloise, that means you."

I continue stepping back, and he continues stepping forward. And then my heels hit the wall. I look around. The room is completely bare. There is nothing I can use for a weapon. So I do the only thing I can think of doing. I scream.

At the top of my lungs. As loud as I possibly can. "Hel—"

His closed fist connects with my face, and my entire head snaps to the side before pain like I've never felt radiates through my jaw. I cry out, only to have him hit me again. Then he knocks me to the ground and covers my body with his.

"No!" I scream. My hands start flailing as I try my best to shove at his chest. "Get off me," I yell. My nails dig in and I scratch at his face.

"You little cunt. Shut up and this will be a hell of a lot easier and quicker for you," he hisses as his fist shoots out to hit me again.

I almost black out. I can feel myself fading. I try to stay in the moment. To fight back. But I can't. He's too big. He tears at my blouse, and then his hand is pushing up my skirt and yanking at my underwear. I try to close my legs, but his knee is pinning me in place.

"He's going to kill you," I hiss.

This finally gives him pause. Mr Allen stares me in the eyes. "He can try." He laughs. And then one of the worst things I could ever imagine happening to someone... *happens*. To me. He pushes his dick inside me.

I scream and flail. I will not lie here and take this. But no matter how much I cry out, hit, kick, punch... nothing works. He eventually pulls out of me, and I watch as he rips a condom off and then I feel him come all over my thighs. I didn't notice him put one on while I was fighting for my life. And I'm not sure if the bastard expects me to be grateful for the extra step he took before he...

I close my eyes and lie on the ground, motionless, as Mr Allen pushes to his feet. Does up his pants and looks down at me. "Tell your husband to quit while he's ahead. Because next time, I won't leave you breathing." Then he walks out of the room like I was just some piece of trash he'd discarded on the floor.

I don't know how much time passes before I move, but I finally manage to crawl over to my phone. I should call Gio. I want to call Gio. But, as much as I hate to admit it, Mr Allen is right. This would destroy him. So, instead, I call Dani.

"Hey, is everything okay?" she answers on the second ring. It's rare for me to call her when I am meant to be working.

"Dani..." I try to hold in my sobs, but my chest feels like it's caving in.

"Shit, El, what happened? Where are you?" she asks.

"I... I'm at a property. I... need..." I can't get more words to form as I cry into the phone.

"El, what house? I'm coming now. Tell me where you are," Dani asks in a rushed tone.

I continue crying. I know I need to tell her. I know she can't find me if I don't.

"El, I need an address. Come on, where are you?" she asks again.

I take a deep breath. "Okay, sorry... I... I just need you to pick me up, Dani. I need to go home," I whisper into the receiver.

"It's okay. I'm leaving the office right now. I'm coming to get you," she says.

"71 Georges Road, Toorak," I tell her.

"Okay, I'm coming. El, are you... are you hurt?" Dani's voice cracks with her question. I can't answer her. All I can do is cry harder. She responds with a quiet sob of her own.

Shit. I need to get myself together. I need to find a way to be stronger. I will not allow this asshole to destroy Gio. I will not allow anyone to destroy my husband. They can do what they want to me. They can tear me apart piece by piece, but not him.

"El, stay on the phone. I'm close, okay? I'm almost there," Dani says.

"Okay..." I push myself to my feet and walk out of the bedroom. I need to get out of this house.

A few seconds later, I hear a car screech to a stop in the driveway and I rush the rest of the way down the stairs.

He's back. That's my first thought. That he changed his mind about leaving me alive.

"El, I'm here! Where are you?" Dani calls as she comes barreling through the door.

"I'm here." I step out from the corner where I was hiding. My legs wobble.

Dani's eyes glass over with tears. "What happened?" she asks as she closes the distance and wraps an arm around my waist.

"I..." I can't get the words out. I feel myself falling.



“Eloise, wake the fuck up. Please, Ellie, wake up.”

My eyes blink open to the sound of a familiar voice. My husband. My safety. “Gio?”

“It’s me, Ellie. You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him.

Gio holds me close to his chest. He’s carrying me somewhere. Where is he taking me? Then I’m placed on a bed. Our bed. How long was I out?

“Dani... where is she?” I ask, panic rising in my chest.

“I’m right here, El.” Her voice comes from behind Gio. And then she’s on the bed beside me, gripping onto my hand.

“I’m going to need the room cleared,” a new voice says from the doorway.

“Doc, if you think I’m leaving, think again,” Gio growls.

I grip onto Gio’s hand. “Don’t leave me,” I plead with him..

“I’m not going anywhere,” he says as he lowers himself next to me. “Ellie, I need you to tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened. I fell,” I lie.

His face turns to stone. Emotionless. Cold. Like I’ve never seen it before. “Don’t fucking lie to me, Eloise. Whether you tell me or not, I will find out who did this.” That tone is lethal, unlike anything I’ve ever heard from him.

“Gio, I’m okay. I don’t want to cause trouble,” I tell him.

“You were attacked. My wife. Who the fuck did this?” he asks again. He’s struggling, losing his fight for control.

“Okay, can you give me some room? I need to examine her.” The doctor pushes forward, interrupting us.

“Gio, no, don’t let him touch me!” I scream and try to jump off the bed.

Dani gasps and squeezes my hand tighter. I look over to her and then follow her line of sight. Gio catches on and does the same. And I quickly pull my skirt down over my thighs, trying to conceal the dried blood.

“I’m going to fucking kill every last one of them,” he says, his words eerily quiet before he stands and leaves the room. A few seconds later, a loud crash sounds from somewhere in the house.

“Eloise, I know an examination is the last thing you want to endure right now, but I need to make sure you’re going to be okay,” the doctor says.

“Doc, I’m fine. I’m going to have a shower and I’ll be fine. Tell him that what he thinks happened isn’t what happened. I wasn’t... I wasn’t...” The word dies on my tongue.

“I can’t lie to him,” the doc tells me.

“He’s going to start a war. I’m not worth it,” I cry out.

“You are worth every bit of blood shed coming their way, and between you and me, I hope he guts those fuckers alive.” The doctor starts taking some instruments out of his bag. “I’m going to clean up your face. That’s all. Can you let me do that?”

I look over to Dani, then quietly agree. Once the doctor is finished with my face, he asks one more time if he can treat me. He wants to look between my legs. I tell him no. He nods, then he leaves the room.

“Oh, El,” Dani cries.

“Dani, can you help me shower?” I ask her.

“Who hurt you, El?”

I know my friend. She wants my attacker to pay. Which means she will tell Gio what he wants to know as soon as she gets the chance. And I can’t have my husband starting a war over me. He’s already dealing with so much. He doesn’t need this on top of it.

“I can’t tell him.” I shake my head.

“But you can tell me,” Dani urges.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



My fist slams into the wall. My knuckles are red, fucking raw, blood dripping down from where the skin is broken, but I don't stop. I can't stop. I just keep hitting, over and over again. Waiting for the rage within me to either consume every cell in my body or finally dissipate—something I don't count on happening.

“Gio, stop.” Santo holds my arm back before I can land another blow. I should be stronger. She needs me to be stronger. I had to leave. She begged me to stay, and I fucking left.

I couldn't hold it in. I couldn't sit there and pretend I was okay when I was anything but. I did this to her. I promised her I would never let anything happen to her, and I fucking lied. I didn't protect her.

Her voice plays over and over in my head. “*You are not allowed to break promises to me.*” She warned me, and I

didn't listen.

"Get the fuck off me." I shove Santo back and tug my arm out of his grasp as I stare at the wall in front of me. It's covered in holes. All the size of my fist.

It's not enough. I need more. I storm down the hall, walk into my office, and pull on the book that opens the door to the hidden room I had built behind the wall. The one that opens up into a small armoury. I grab a bag and start filling it with guns, hand grenades, smoke bombs, anything and everything within arm's reach. Then I load another bag.

"What are you doing?" Gabe asks. I turn to find him standing beside Santo in the doorway.

"What's it fucking look like I'm doing?" I yell. "I'm going to burn this fucking city to the ground until I find the fucking asshole who did this."

"That's not what she needs right now, Gio. You have to go back in there. You have to be with her," Gabe says.

"What she needs is a husband who can do his fucking job and keep his promises," I hiss. The person I should be hunting down is myself. I'm the one responsible for letting this happen. I should have protected her. "Find the guys James assigned to her tail. I want them in the basement within the hour."

They didn't do their fucking job. They'll pay for that mistake.

"Gio?" Ellie's voice is quiet, but loud enough to have me freezing in my tracks. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

My brothers step aside. Santo looks from me to Ellie. "El, maybe give him a minute. You shouldn't be in here right now," he tells her.

Ellie glares at him. Her face is covered in bruises and there's a bandage on her forehead. Her hair is wet, dripping down her shirt. She's fresh from the shower.

"I sent Dani home," she says to me, ignoring my brother.

“Why? Call her back. You need your friends,” I tell her.

“No. What I need is my husband.” Her voice is quivering now, and the sound breaks what was left of my heart.

The more I look at her, the more the inferno builds inside me. I don’t know how to control this fire, and truth be told, I don’t fucking want to. What I want to do is hit the streets and make sure the fucker pays.

“I…” I can’t be what she needs right now. “I’m going to find them and I’m going to make them wish they were never born. I…” I stop myself from saying more. I can’t promise her anything, because my promises don’t mean shit.

“No. I don’t want that,” she says before falling to her knees.

“Fuck,” I curse and walk over to her. Then I scoop her up and take her to our bedroom, where I lay her on the bed.

Her fingers curl into my shirt, her grip firm. “Don’t leave me. Please, Gio, don’t leave,” she cries.

I can’t stay, but I can’t fucking leave her like this either. “Shh, it’s okay. I’m not going anywhere,” I tell her as I climb in next to her.

Ellie crawls into my lap. Her hands fist my shirt and her face buries into my chest. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” she repeats to herself over and over again.

“Shh, it’s okay. This isn’t your fault, Ellie,” I tell her.

“I’m sorry,” she says through a sob.

My hands run up and down her back, trying to soothe her. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to do. Except find the fucker who did this to her. “I need to know who, Ellie.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t. I just want to forget. I want to wake up. I’m ready to wake up.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll never forgive myself for this, and I don’t expect you to forgive me either.” I pull her closer and kiss the top of her head.

“Forgive you for what?” she asks, turning to look me in the eye.

“I was supposed to keep you safe.”

Ellie doesn't say anything after that, and we sit like this for ages. My wife crying into my chest and my skin crawling, urging me to get up and do something. Anything.

When she finally falls asleep, I roll her over and cover her with the blanket. “I promise I will make them pay. I won't stop until I find them,” I tell her.

She can't hear me but that's probably for the best right now.

I find all four of my brothers sitting in the living room. They go silent the moment I walk in.

“How is she?” Vin asks.

“As good as you'd expect her to be,” I say as I try to swallow down my guilt. I cannot let my emotions get to me. Especially since there's a small part of me that wants to fall to the ground and crumble. I want to let the tears out. The fucking devastation I feel for her. The disappointment I feel for myself.

I can't do that though. No, I refuse to be anything but who I need to be. The ruthless leader of the De Bellis Crime Family. That's who these assholes wanted to see—well, they've got my fucking attention. They've just become my prey. I promised my wife they'd pay for what they've done, and I don't break promises. Especially not to her.

Except you already did, a little voice repeats in my head.

Fuck, I need to focus. This is not the time for me to fall apart. “Gabe, she met someone at that house. Find out who it was,” I tell him. “It'll be in the agency's booking calendar.”

“On it,” he says, jumping to his feet. “You know, I'm here for whatever you need, whatever she needs.” He clasps a hand over my shoulder as he passes.

I sit on one of the sofas. “I need to find who did this.”

“We will,” Santo assures me.

“Is she asleep?” Vin asks.

“Yeah. But I don’t know for how long. I need two of you to stay with her. I need to go out,” I tell my brothers.

“I’m coming with you,” Santo says.

“I’ll grab Gabe and go and sit with her.” Vin nods.

“Thanks.”

“Where are you going?” Marcel calls out. I’m already headed to the door. I can’t sit and I can’t stand. I just need to move.

“Back to the house. There would be cameras in a property like that,” I tell him.

“No. Gio, that is not something you can ever unsee.” Santo tries to stop me.

“I need to know,” I grunt.

“You do know. But you don’t need to see. It won’t change anything,” he says. “Trust me. Knowing and seeing are two very different things—that shit will fuckin’ haunt you.”

“You can either come with me or you can stay here.” I head back into my office and pick up the bags I packed. I’m going to hunt down this asshole and I’m going to fucking make him hurt. Death is too fucking easy for a guy like that.



When I pull up to the house, there’s already a car in the driveway. I walk inside. I don’t care who the fuck is here. My hand is on my gun when I find the real estate agent I was dealing with before I met Eloise.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I ask him.

“Ah, working. Did you have a viewing scheduled?” Keith says.

“Who was here earlier? Who met Eloise today?”

“Ah, Dane Allen. She’s been showing him properties for a while. Where is she by the way? I got a call from the security company telling me the doors weren’t locked and that the alarm was still disabled,” he asks me.

“Dane Allen,” I repeat the name and walk out the door, adding the fucker to the top of my hit list.

Santo follows me back to the car. “Give me the keys. I’ll drive.”

“No.” I don’t bother looking his way.

“Gio, you are in no fucking condition to drive. Give me the keys. It’s not a request,” he says, reaching out and snatching the keys from my hand.

Chapter Forty



Someone is screaming. I look around the room. Light trickles in from the open door, but I can't see who's making so much noise.

"El, stop. It's okay. You're safe," a voice calls out to me. I can barely hear them, though.

Then it hits me. Those screams. They're coming from me. And everything comes crashing back like a tsunami wave, leaving nothing but destruction and devastation in its wake.

"Eloise, it's okay."

I turn my head and see Gabe staring at me. His hands clenched at his sides, his face hard.

"Wh-where's Gio?" I ask, my throat sore from overuse.

"He had to go out," Gabe says. "What can I do? How can I help?"

“No.” I shake my head. “No, go and get him, Gabe. Don’t let him go after anyone. Tell him to come back. I need him. He should be here,” I sob.

“El, it’s okay. He’ll be back soon. I’m going to go make you a cup of tea. I’ll get you something to eat,” he says.

“No, don’t leave me.” I throw the blanket off my legs. I don’t want to be alone. I want Gio. He should be here. He said he wouldn’t leave.

“Okay. It’s okay.” Gabe takes out his phone and types something on the screen before he pockets it again. “I’ll stay here. I won’t leave.”

“Thank you.” I sigh in relief, as my eyes continue to flick around the room.

I’m in my home. I’m safe here. At least I’m supposed to be...

I should feel safe. Except I don’t.

I get up out of bed and walk over to the window. We’re on the second floor, but I check to make sure the glass is secure. Then I remember the secret room Gio was in earlier, a room I haven’t seen before. It was full of guns. I want one.

I don’t like this fear, the coldness I feel all over my body. My hands tremble. “I need to get something,” I tell Gabe.

“Okay,” he says, holding the bedroom door open for me.

Instead of going downstairs, I walk into the next room. A guest room. I check the windows there too. Then I move on to the bathroom and closet. Both are empty. I repeat this process with every room in the house while Gabe follows silently behind me. He doesn’t say a word, not even when I open his bedroom door and walk straight to the window.

“None of the windows in this house are unlocked, El,” he finally tells me when I’ve checked every possible entry point on this floor.

I look back over my shoulder. I want to go and climb back into bed, but I need to get to that hidden room of Gio’s first. So I take the stairs. There are a lot of people here, more than

usual. A lot of men. I stop at the bottom landing. They're all looking at me. I step closer to Gabe.

"It's okay. Gio increased security," he says just above a whisper. "What do you need?"

"The office," I mumble.

"Okay, come on." Gabe takes hold of my hand and leads me that way. Then he opens the door and steps aside again. I head straight to the wall where the little room was just a few hours ago, but it's not there anymore.

Was I imagining it?

"There's a room behind this wall. How do I get to it?" I ask him.

"You don't need anything that's in that room, Ellie." Gabe sighs.

"Yes, I do."

If he won't open the door, I'll find a gun somewhere else. This is Gio's office after all. He'll have them all over this place. I start moving books around on the shelf and then I walk over to his desk. Opening the top drawer, I immediately find what I'm looking for. A handgun. I pick it up and feel the weight of the metal in my palm.

"Ellie, put that down. You don't know what you're doing. You're only going to end up hurting yourself," Gabe says, and I look at him.

"Show me what to do then."

He shakes his head, walks over, and removes the gun from my hands. "No."

"Please, I need it. I need something. I can't be left defenceless again, Gabe," I plead with him.

"Ellie, there are over a hundred men on the grounds. Including me, Vin, and Marcel. You are safe here."

"No, I'm not. Please, just let me have it."

“I’ll teach you how to use one. I will, and when you can prove that you can use it properly, without killin’ yourself, then I’ll give it back. I’ll even buy you a pretty pink Beretta with diamonds on the grip,” he says.

“Fine, show me,” I huff.

“Not here. We have a range. I’ll bring you there.”

I take a step back. I’m not leaving the house. I can’t. “No, I don’t want to go anywhere.”

I walk around the other side of the desk so I don’t have to walk past him. It’s not that I don’t trust my brother-in-law. He’s never given me a reason not to. But, right now, I don’t trust anyone.

Gabe’s easygoing smile drops as he watches me. “I’m not going to hurt you, El.”

“I know that,” I snap at him.

“Do you?”

I nod my head. “I’m going back to bed.”

Gabe walks behind me, but not as close this time. When I get to the bedroom, I stop in the doorway. I need to check the window again. So I head that way. It’s still locked. I then peer inside the bathroom and the closet. Once I’m satisfied that the room is empty, I climb onto the bed.

Gabe is still standing at the doorway. He doesn’t enter the room. “I’m so fucking sorry, El. I swear whoever did this to you will pay.”

“I don’t need vengeance, Gabe. I need my husband,” I tell him.

He nods and sits down on the floor just outside the door, removing his phone from his pocket and messaging someone. Or so I assume.

I lie on the bed, staring into space, waiting for my husband to come home. I want to call him, but I won’t. Instead, I’ll stay put. Until I hear Gabe talking in hushed tones. Daisy. She’s here. Why is she here?

“You can’t go in there looking upset, Daisy. She needs you to be strong. You can do that. Hold it in. For her,” Gabe says. I look up and see him reach out a hand to wipe at her cheeks.

Is she crying?

“Daisy? What are you doing here?” I ask her.

She moves away from Gabe, swipes at her face, and plasters on a fake smile. “To see you, obviously. And I brought supplies.” She holds up a grocery store bag. Coming over and sitting on the bed, she looks around and then picks up the remote and presses a button that brings the television down from the ceiling.

“How did you know how to do that?” I ask her. It was weeks before I discovered there was a television in the bedroom.

“All these fancy houses have things like that.” She shrugs.

I look back over to the doorway, where Gabe is watching us. More specifically, he’s watching Daisy. “Oh god,” I groan. “Gabe, do not make me have to find a way to kill you. It’ll break Gio’s heart, and I don’t want to do that. So, for both of our sakes, don’t hurt my friend.”

Gabe smirks. “The only person who’s managed to thaw through my brother’s heart is you, El. Don’t worry. He won’t miss me all that much.”

I turn to Daisy. “Really? Him?” I ask her. I know she’s been joking about doing one of Gio’s brothers for ages now, but I thought it was nothing more than that. A joke. I didn’t think she would actually do it. Them. *Him*.

“I’m a big girl, El, and it’s nothing. I just like his dick. That’s all,” Daisy says as she picks up the grocery bag and tips it onto the bed. A whole heap of chocolates, lollies, and chips falls out in front of me. None of it seems the least bit appetising right now though. “We’re watching a movie. You pick.”

“You pick.” I shake my head and curl up in the blanket. Daisy puts on some rom-com and then lies down beside me.

She takes hold of my hand and squeezes it. “Thanks for coming,” I whisper.

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” she says.

“Can you... maybe call the others? Tell them to come. I sent Dani home.”

“Dani’s here. She never left, El. She’s downstairs with Claire. Want me to send them up?” Gabe calls out from the door.

I nod my head, and both girls walk into the room and climb onto the bed a few minutes later. Neither mentions anything that happened to me today. They know that when I’m ready to talk about it, I will. This is what’s great about my friends. We each know what the others need.

“I’ll, ah, just be out here if you need anything, El,” Gabe says.

“Gabe, wait up.” Daisy jumps off the bed before turning to me. “I’ll be right back.” Then she walks over to Gabe and whispers something. He nods and closes the door behind him.

The moment she turns back to the bed, I ask, “What did you say?”

“I told him to find Gio and tell him he better get his ass home, or I’ll have Dani call Alistair to have the divorce papers drawn up within minutes.” She smirks.

“I’m not leaving my husband,” I tell her firmly.

“I know that, but a little threat goes a long way. And he should be here,” she says.

“He’s out looking for them.” I sigh. “I tried to get him to stay, to not do anything about it.”

“He’s out looking for the asshole who did this to you?” Claire chimes in. When I nod my head, she turns back to Daisy. “Withdraw your threat. We will stay here as long as it takes Gio to find them.”

“No, I don’t want him risking his life for me.” I shake my head.

“I know he’s doing this for you, but I also think he needs to do it for himself. Think about it, El. Think about his personality. That man is always in control. He needs it. And they took it from him when they did this to you. He needs to take it back. Also, you married into the mafia. Not just into it, but the boss himself. He can’t sit around, allow his wife to be attacked, and not fight back,” Dani says.

I look at her. She’s right. Even if I don’t want her to be. I just want Gio here. “I don’t know how or why you know any of that.”

“I Googled mafia shit and watched a heap of movies when you first told me about Gio.” She smiles. “If my best friend is dating a made man, I’m going to do my research.”

“Google and movies are not reliable sources,” I tell her.

“Maybe, but I’m still right and you know it.” She shrugs.

A silence falls over the room as we all get comfortable on the bed. I’m between Daisy and Claire, with Dani on the far end. I can’t tell you what happens in the movie. My mind is everywhere but here. But the white noise is good, and being surrounded by my friends is more comforting than I expected it to be.

Chapter Forty-One



The bottom of this whiskey glass might not be the cure for my demons, but it sure as fuck helps numb the pain. Santo and I weren't able to find the fucking Allens. I don't know what rock they've all gone and hid under, but I will upturn every single stone until I find them.

They can run, but they will never outrun me. The only reason I came home was the message I received from Gabe—the one that told me how Ellie went looking for a gun. What the fuck does she want a gun for?

Gabe said she wanted it to protect herself. Given what she's just been through, I'm not about to hand her a weapon that could take her away from me completely. Her friends all left about an hour ago. I've been sitting here watching her sleep ever since, while trying to numb myself with enough alcohol to take down a horse.

I'm so fucking torn between staying here, being what she needs... and going out hunting. The only thing I'm certain of is that I can't lose her. Santo was fucking right. I never should have brought her into this world. I ignored his warnings. I thought I knew better. That I could protect her. I was wrong, so fucking wrong.

For the first time in my life, I can't fix something. Which has never happened to me before. Nothing I do can erase what that fucker did to her. There is no fixing this. I've failed my wife. The person who means the world to me. I've fucking failed her...

I refill my glass and down the amber liquid. I want to feel the burn, but I feel nothing.

Ellie stirs, mumbling something in her sleep before she settles. I made a huge mistake in thinking she was safe. Something I won't ever do again. Whatever it takes to make sure no one can reach her, I'll do it.

She was used to hurt me. And it fucking worked. It's a pain like nothing I've ever experienced before. A pain I can't bear, which is why I'm attempting to numb myself with this bottle of whiskey.

"No!"

The glass hits the floor as I jump out of the chair, Ellie's scream echoing through the room. I pick her up. I know you're not supposed to wake people from their nightmares, but I'm not leaving her trapped in it either.

"Ellie, wake up." I pull her against my chest and run my hands up and down her back. Her body thrashes around as she continues to scream. "Ellie, please wake up. I'm here. I've got you," I tell her.

The bedroom door bursts open and Santo runs in, followed by Marcel, both pointing guns at me.

"She's having a nightmare," I explain when their eyes bounce from my wife to me.

They lower their sights and glance around the room. "What can we do?" Marcel asks.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I don’t know what to fucking do.” I hold Ellie’s body tighter to my chest. I feel her still and the screaming stops. Her hands grip around my arms.

“Gio... I... I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“I’ve got you. It’s okay. You’re okay,” I repeat the words over and over. When I look up at my brothers’ faces again, I see their distress. They’re at as much of a loss as I am.

“Fuck this. I’m heading back out,” Santo growls and storms from the room.

“I’ll go with him.” Marcel nods and follows Santo.

I move Ellie into a more comfortable position on the bed without letting her go. “You smell like a distillery,” she says.

“I own a distillery.”

“Yeah, but you smell like you drank one.” She sits upright and pushes away from my chest as her head turns to the wall of windows. “Are they locked?”

“All the windows in this house are locked.”

“It’s because of me, isn’t it?”

“That the windows are locked? No, we’ve always kept ‘em that way.”

“No, the reason you’ve been drinking so much. It’s my fault.”

“Absolutely fucking not. None of this is your fault. This is on me, Ellie. You want someone to blame, then blame me. But don’t you dare fucking blame yourself for this.”

She shakes her head. “I won’t let him win. I won’t let this break us. I’m fine. I’m fine. We are not broken,” she says.

“No one will ever be able to break us. What we have, our bond, it’s unbreakable,” I tell her.

“I’m going to be okay, Gio. I think... it might take a little while, but I *will* be okay. I promise.”

“You are okay, Ellie. Whatever you need... whatever time you may need to take to help you with this... you just gotta tell

me and I will support you... get it for you... do whatever it is you need me to do.”

“I just need you,” she says. “I need you to stay with me. Don’t leave me.” She rests her head back on my chest.

I don’t know what to say to her. I can’t give her empty promises, tell her that I won’t leave. As much as I want to, I know I can’t.

Ellie picks up her head again and stares at me. After what feels like an eternity, she closes her eyes and nods. “You can’t stay,” she says.

“I want to,” I tell her.

“I know. But you can’t. You need to go and find him, Gio. I need you to find him, so you can come home and stay with me.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” I repeat.

“I know. But what other choice do we have? You need to do this. It was selfish of me to ask you not to.”

“You kinda own me, Ellie. You’re entitled to be selfish.”

“I just... I don’t want this to consume you. What happened to me, it’s... it’s hard but it’s not your fault. You didn’t do it. I’ll...” She sighs. “I’ll tell you who it was. So you can find him.”

“I know who it was,” I admit.

“How?”

“I ran into Keith, found out the name of the client who met you at the house.”

“So you can go and find him then.” She sounds almost hopeful, and it breaks my heart.

“The Allens were a very low-level street crime family,” I tell her.

“Were?” she questions.

“I found out yesterday that my father left them three million dollars in his will.”

“Why would he do that?” Her brows pull together in confusion.

“As payment. He paid them to attack us in the event of his death.”

“Your father paid someone to attack you? That’s... I don’t know what to say...” she tells me.

“It’s because of me that they did this, Ellie. They used you to hurt me, and it fucking worked.”

“No,” she says firmly. “We are stronger than that. We are not going to let them win, Gio.”

“No, we’re not, but that doesn’t stop it from hurting. You’re allowed to hurt, Ellie.”

“Gio, go and find that family and make sure they can’t hurt anyone ever again. Then come home to me.”

“Are you sure?” I ask her.

“I’m sure,” she says, and I search her eyes for any hint of doubt. I don’t see it. “When this is done, I want to go on our honeymoon. Just the two of us. Someplace secluded and warm.”

“I love you.” I lean in and press my lips to her forehead, trying not to let the way her body flinches affect me. “I’m going to leave Gabe and Vin here. There are over a hundred men inside and outside the property.”

“I’ll be okay. As long as you come back in one piece, I’ll be okay,” she repeats.

I climb off the bed and cover her with a blanket. Before I walk out the door, I turn back one more time. “Why did you want a gun?” I ask her.

“I want to be able to protect myself,” she says.

“Is that the only reason?”

“What other reason would there be?”

“Never mind. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Call me if you need anything,” I tell her before heading to Gabe’s room.

I knock once before walking in. I was expecting him to be alone. He's not, and the person in his bed? Well, I certainly was not expecting to see her either.

"I'm going back out. Ellie's in our room. I was going to ask you to go in and sit with her, but I think she'd prefer to be with her friend."

"Why are you leaving? She needs you." Daisy starts to argue with me as she shuffles out of my brother's bed.

I don't bother answering her. "Gabe, tell Vin he's not leaving until I get back." Then I walk out the door and make my way downstairs. I need to find James and Dan, create a plan, and end this fucking shit today.



"Where the fuck are they?" I grunt. I've been calling Santo and Marcel for the last hour.

"I've got a ping on Marcel's cell. It just turned back on," Dan says.

I hit his number and the ringtone sounds through the car's speakers. For the last two hours, James, Dan, and I have made our way through the city, leaving a long bloody trail in our wake. But we've finally got an address of where these fuckers are hiding out. And the body presently dumped in the trunk is our key into their so-called compound.

If my father really wanted to take us down, he should have chosen someone more capable. These fucking assholes playing gangster don't have a clue what they're doing. The fact they've managed to escape me this long is pure fucking luck on their part. But that luck has run dry.

"Hey," Marcel finally answers.

"Where the fuck are you? I've been trying to call you for the last hour," I yell.

“Sorry, boss, cell went dead. And Santo left his back at the house. We’re at the docks. There’s nothing here. No one knows shit,” he says.

“Head over to warehouse seven. I’ll meet you there. I know where they are,” I tell him before disconnecting the call.

Chapter Forty-Two



“I ’m going to make you a cheese toastie and some hot chocolate.” Daisy jumps off the bed. I don’t have the heart to tell her that I won’t eat it. I don’t have it in me to stomach anything.

As she walks out of the room, Vin walks in. “I thought she’d never leave you,” he says. “I’ve got something for you. But, if anyone asks, you did not get it from me.” He glances over his shoulder, then back in my direction before handing me a black box.

Curious, I sit up and lean against the bedhead. “What is it?” I ask him.

“Alternatives to that gun you want,” he tells me as he places the box on the bed, removes the lid, and reaches in to pull out a...

“A pen?” I say aloud. “How is that an alternative to a gun?”

“It’s no ordinary pen—it looks and feels like one, sure. But this little baby is tactical. They usually have ink inside ’em too, but I’ve switched yours out for a vial of... Well, let’s just say it’s a special pen, El. You stab this into someone and they’ll be paralysed within seconds. Giving you the chance to run,” he explains before adding, “Just don’t fucking stab yourself. ’Cause Gio will kill me.”

“Okay.” I take the tiny weapon from Vin, and he’s right. It looks and feels just like an everyday pen.

Then he picks up the next item in the box. “Now, this bracelet has a quick release. You can use this charm to stab someone. Go for the sensitive areas. Eyes, throat, groin.” He passes me a chunky silver bracelet and reaches inside again. “This ring can pierce skin. If you need to use it, aim for someone’s neck and it’ll cause enough damage to seriously hurt them.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, and I’m not sure if I want to laugh or cry. The gesture is extremely sweet. The kid is risking being on the receiving end of his brother’s wrath just to help me feel a little better. Safer. At the same time, it’s crazy to think a teenager has all these weapons at his disposal and the knowledge to use them.

“I don’t think anything like this will ever happen again, but if these items make you feel a little bit better, safer, than keep them on you,” he says as if he can read my mind.

“I still want to learn how to shoot,” I tell him.

“That’s a conversation between you and that husband of yours.” He laughs. “Good luck.”

“Why doesn’t Gio want me to have a gun? Everyone in this house has guns.”

“I don’t know, but my guess? He’s worried about you using it on yourself, not on others.” Vin shrugs.

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“El, death seems like an easier option to many,” he says.

“I won’t let anyone take my life from me. When I married your brother, I already envisioned our future together. I still want that,” I tell him.

“Good. Keep that future in your head, El.” Vin nods.

Daisy walks into the room with a tray in her hands. She eyes me and Vin, then the black box. I quickly shove all the items back inside and place it on the bedside table.

“I’ll be down the hall if you need anything, El,” Vin tells me, and I give him something resembling a smile.

“Okay, thank you.”

Daisy places the tray on the bed and sits next to me. “I don’t think he likes me,” she says.

“He doesn’t know you,” I tell her.

“Still, I get that vibe from him,” she says. “He caught me sneaking out of Gabe’s room one morning, and ever since then, whenever I’ve seen him, he just puts out this whole *I hate Daisy* vibe.”

“He’s a teenager—*that’s* the vibe you’re getting from him. Also, I think all of them are just really guarded about who they allow to get close to them.” I shrug. “He’ll come around.”

“Maybe,” she says. “Anyway, eat up.” Daisy hands me a plate with a half-burnt cheese toastie in the centre.

“Ah, you know there’s kitchen staff who could have made this without adding the burnt-bread flavour?”

“I know, but I’m not going to ask them to make something for me. It’s weird,” she says. “Just eat around the burnt bits.”

I set the toasted sandwich back onto the plate. “I’m not hungry, Daisy. I’m sorry.”

“I know you’re not. I also know you don’t want to eat. But you need to, El. If you don’t, you’re going to make yourself sick.”

“I can’t,” I tell her.

“Just one bite,” she urges, holding the toastie up to my mouth.

I take a small bite and do my best to chew and then swallow it without any of it coming back up. Just the thought of food is making me nauseated.

“If you want to talk about it, I’m here. I know that it seems better to keep it all in, but trust me when I say talking will help. I can recommend some really great therapists.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’m fine,” I insist.

“Yeah, that’s what I used to tell myself too. I was fine. It wasn’t that bad. Or I’d try to convince myself that it was my fault, so I should just accept it and move on.” Daisy looks out the window as she speaks.

“What are you talking about?” I grab her hand. I’ve never heard her mention anything like this before.

“I was thirteen when it started. It didn’t end until I turned seventeen,” she whispers.

I open my mouth to ask her when *what* started, but I don’t need to. “You met us when you were seventeen,” I say instead.

“I think, in a lot of ways, you and Dani saved me. I wanted so much to be like you girls that I just started doing what you did. Going to school, making better choices. I stopped drinking and taking pills. Because of you and Dani, I got my shit together,” she says. “I started talking to a counsellor not long after that. She got me out of my house and my... my stepdad was arrested.”

“Oh my god, Daisy, I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you ever tell us?”

“Because I didn’t want you to judge me. I know that sounds stupid now, but when I was young, I felt... dirty. Like I did something to deserve it, you know? I still don’t tell people, El.”

“I won’t tell anyone. You can always talk to me,” I remind her.

“Thanks, you too. This goes both ways.” She gestures between us, before a noise in the hall has us both looking out the open door. Gabe picks up a vase and throws it against the wall, and then he just keeps walking.

“I take it he didn’t know.” I sigh.

“No. I lied to him, El. I lie to everyone who sees the scars.”

“What scars?” I ask her. I’ve seen Daisy in a swimsuit. I’d remember if there were scars.

“I’m good at hiding them. But it’s not so easy when I’m completely naked. I told him I was a clumsy kid. I fell a lot,” she says.

“What are they from? The scars?” I ask her.

“My stepfather liked to use knives to keep me from screaming,” she whispers.

“Oh, Daisy...” I grab her and pull her body against mine.

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago, El. I’m in a good place now. But I... I want you to know that I understand. If you ever want someone to talk to, I know what it’s like,” she says.

“The whole time it was happening, the only thing I could think about was how to protect Gio,” I admit. “I fought. I tried so hard, but I wasn’t fighting for myself. I was fighting for him. I should have been fighting for myself...”

“You and Gio are one and the same. You think you were fighting for your husband, but who is he without you? Who are you without him?” she asks me.

“Whoever this man is, the one who... he said to tell Gio that he wouldn’t leave me alive next time,” I say. “That’s what has me scared to death. I can’t help but wonder when that next time is going to be.”

“Gio is out there right now. He’s going to find the guy and do whatever it is he has to do. This asshole is not going to be able to breathe, let alone get to you again,” she says.

“Thank you for staying last night, for being here today,” I tell her.

Daisy smirks. “It’s not the first time I’ve slept in this house.” She laughs.

“*Ew.*” I shove her away from me. “Do you think you should go and talk to him? Gabe, I mean?”

“Nope,” she pops the P at the end. “I’m staying right here with you and we’re doing a *Twilight* marathon.”

“Okay.” I bend over and pick up my phone. I send Gabe a message.

ME:

Are you okay?

GABE:

I’m good. You okay?

ME:

No, but I will be.

GABE:

You will be.

Chapter Forty-Three



I didn't manage to find the Allen I wanted, but I did find the youngest sibling. His corpse is currently on top of a tarp in my warehouse and there is one less fucking asshole roaming the earth. Santo is cutting his chest cavity open while Dan and Marcel work on building the bomb that will be embedded in his body. My skin is crawling with the need to fight. My knuckles are already bruised, the cuts that were closing up open and raw again. But it's not enough.

I need more. I need Dane fucking Allen's head to roll. And the sooner I can make that happen, the sooner I can go home to my wife.

"How much longer is this going to take?" I ask Santo.

"I'm ready. I just need the device."

The device—nice word for bomb. I look over to where Dan and Marcel are currently assembling it. "How much

longer?" I ask them.

"About five minutes," Marcel says.

"Make it three. I want to get this shit done already. They're going to notice he's missing. We don't want to risk the fuckers going deeper underground," I tell them.

I've had three cars doing surveillance on the street the Allens are holed up on. Not a single one of 'em has left the building. Which leaves me to wonder what the younger Allen was doing out on the streets.

If the tables were turned and we had to fucking hide—although, let's face it, we would never run from a fight, but on the off chance we did—I certainly wouldn't be letting any of my brothers out on their own.

"Okay, we're done," Marcel says, carrying the bomb over to the metal slab where the body is laid out. He hands the device to Santo, who inserts it between a couple of cracked ribs—guy looks like a Sunday barbecue gone wrong. Santo then grabs the staple gun and pieces the chest back together better than Dr Frankenstein himself.

It's dirty work but someone has to do it, and my brother was more than willing to oblige.

Marcel and James then move the body onto a clean tarp and redress it in blood-free clothing. "Okay, load him into the trunk. Marcel, talk to me about this device. How does it work?" I ask him.

"We press the red button on this remote and watch it go bang." Marcel smiles.

"How big of a blast we looking at?" Santo chimes in.

"Big enough to send body parts flying and knock anyone within a one-metre radius on their ass," Dan says.

"Great. Let's go." I head out to the car and jump in. I'm anxious to get this done.

When James starts the ignition, I look behind us and see the convoy of SUVs on our tail. There're only five, a small

crew. I refused to take anyone off guard duty back at the house. Ellie is my top priority; she always will be.

Besides, I know that it's not going to take much to get this shit done. They're too fucking cocky and inexperienced to actually go toe-to-toe with us. The difference is my brothers and I were trained for combat from a very young age. Every single member of our family is a lethal weapon.

"Let's go over the plan again," I say.

"The plan is to kill. It's not rocket science." Marcel laughs.

"The plan is we jump out, a few houses down. James and Dan move the body to the back seat, roll past the driveway, and throw 'em out. I'll call the fucker and tell him to come and collect his brother. When Dane is within range, we press that red button of yours, and we rush in. Everyone in that house is a target. No survivors," I repeat for the millionth time. There is no room for error. I want this shit done.

"Sounds like a solid plan." Santo nods.

I spend the next twenty minutes contemplating if I should call Ellie. When we pull onto the last street, I decide to send her a message instead.

ME:

I love you. I'll be home soon. You are my everything, Ellie. Don't forget that.

Then I pocket my phone and follow Marcel out of the car. I draw a gun from my holster and twist on a silencer. Not really sure why I'm bothering. The noise from the blast is going to be loud enough to wake the dead. It's more out of habit than anything else.

Once I see Dan in position, the body rolling down the driveway, I take the Allen kid's phone and dial Dane's number. He answers almost immediately.

"Where the fuck are you, Justin?" he hisses into the phone.

I debated on which of these fuckers to call and settled on Dane, because he's the one I need dead. I can't risk him running at the sound of the blast.

"He's in the driveway. Might want to come and get him. The poor bastard's not in good shape." I hang up and wait.

It only takes a minute before the fucking asshole is running out the front door. And right into our trap. Like I said, the world will not be missing out on this gene pool.

Dane kneels down and scoops up the body of his dead brother. And I take the remote out of my pocket and press the button. The detonation is almost instant. The sound of splattering body parts a symphony to my ears, the ensuing damage a work of fucking art.

As soon as it stops raining blood and gore, we breach the house, sloshing bodily fluids across the driveway with our boots. The front door opens just before we get there. My arm raises, and I pull the trigger. I don't know who the fucker is—*was*—but he drops to the ground with an audible thud. Santo shoves past me, right through the door, and I hear another two shots as I enter behind him.

"Clear," he says and nods his head towards the back of the house.

Together, we continue to search room by room. For a family who was given three million, you'd think they would have invested in security. There's no one here other than the four Allen men presently down for the count.

"Well, that was fucking anticlimactic," Santo huffs.

"Almost too fucking easy," I agree. "Why the fuck would the old man choose these idiots?"

"Probably because no one else was stupid enough to go along with him."

"Want a clean-up crew, boss?" James asks from behind us.

"No, let everyone see. This city needs to know what happens to anyone looking to go up against us," I tell him.

The moment I make it back to the car, I pull out my phone and read the message from Ellie.

ELLIE:

I love you too. Please be careful. I need you in one piece.

ME:

On my way home now.

The *read* notification pops up under my text but she doesn't reply.

"He died too quickly, should have been more painful," Santo mumbles under his breath.

"It should have been, but I wanted a guarantee. It's done. Now we can move on," I remind him. I would have loved to make the fucker suffer, but that would have been for me. Not for Ellie. She needs to feel safe in her own home, out on the streets, and that was never going to happen as long as Dane Allen and his family were still breathing.



I shower in the downstairs bathroom, put on a pair of sweats and a shirt, grab my laptop from my office, and then head up to my bedroom. I find my wife sitting on the bed with Daisy.

"You're back," Ellie says, running her eyes up and down my body.

"I'm back," I repeat before sitting next to her. I bend down and kiss her forehead. She doesn't flinch but she does hold her breath. "What are you watching?"

"A *Twilight* marathon," she says.

“Are you Team Edward or Team Jacob?” I raise a brow in question.

“You know *Twilight*?” Ellie smiles.

“No, I just remember Shelli talking about it a lot,” I tell her.

“Oh. Well, I’m team Edward. True love always wins out in the end,” she says, then quietly adds, “Did you finish that thing you went out to do?”

“It’s done.” I lean my back up against the bedhead and wrap an arm around her waist. “It’s finished, Ellie. He can’t ever hurt you again,” I whisper into her hair. Tears stream down her cheeks. I reach up and wipe them away with a thumb. “It’s going to be okay.”

“El, I’m going to go have a shower. I’ll be around if you need me,” Daisy says.

“Thanks,” Ellie tells her. “For everything.”

“It’s what we do.” Daisy nods, walking out of the room.

Ellie waits until her friend is out of earshot before turning back to me. Her eyes drop to her hands. “I’m sorry you had to do that for me.”

“Ellie, there has never been a better reason for me to eliminate someone than for you. I will do anything, whatever it takes, to ensure you’re safe,” I tell her.

“Do you have work to do?” she asks, nodding towards my laptop, as I crack it open.

“I thought we could look for some honeymoon destinations.”

“Oh... yes, let’s do that.” Ellie smiles slightly, then snuggles in next to me as I load up Google and start punching in some spots I had in mind.

Chapter Forty-Four



Gio is sitting at his desk working. I'm not sure what he's doing, but he keeps glaring at the screen on his computer like he wants to draw the gun from behind his back and shoot it. I'm camped up on the sofa in his office.

For the last week, I've followed him around the house like a lost puppy. In a lot of ways, I am lost. He hasn't said anything about it, but I do catch the concerned looks he aims in my direction every now and again when he thinks I'm not watching him. He's worried about me, and if I'm honest with myself, I'm worried too. I wake myself up screaming every night. I've developed an unrealistic attachment to my husband.

What's going to happen when he has to leave the house? When he has a job to do and I can't follow him?

As it is, he's been either talking in code or using Italian when he's on the phone or whenever one of his men comes to see him about something. There are still a lot more soldiers

around this house than what there would normally be. Maybe that has something to do with why I'm sticking so close to Gio. I've even had his brothers try to convince me to go watch a movie with them or check out the games room and do something. I've been declining their offers. I'm sure they're doing it so Gio can get five minutes alone, but I just... I'm not ready. Ever since he came home to stay, I haven't been able to separate from him.

The words in the book in my hand blur. I turn the pages, keeping up the appearance that I'm reading and engrossed in the story, when, honestly, I couldn't tell you what the main character's name is.

I thought after Gio got the vengeance he wanted, *needed*, that we would both be okay. Looking back on those first couple of days, I guess I kinda was...

At first, I was in some form of shock, denial. To a point, I'm still in the denial stage. I'm trying to be okay. I *want* to be okay. And I want Gio to be okay too. More than all of it, I want to go back to before it happened. When we were in our little, happy, newlywed bubble of bliss that I didn't think anything could pop.

I just don't know how to get there. I'm guessing the first step is to be able to pry myself from my husband's side. To not be so dependent on him. I should be able to do that. I'm at home. This is our house. I'm safe here.

I just wish I felt safe. I wish I was stronger. Until I am, I'm going to fake it. I'm broken but not beyond repair. I'll borrow my husband's strength and pretend I'm whole again... until it's the truth.

I close my book and stand. Gio's head snaps towards me so fast I'd be surprised if it didn't hurt. "I'm going to make coffee. Want one?"

His eyes bore into mine. I don't know what he's searching for. What he sees. "Want me to come with you?" he finally asks.

“I know how to make coffee, Gio,” I bark and walk out of the room.

The entire way down the hall, all I want to do is run back to his office. I don’t know why I snapped at him. I actually feel awful. He hasn’t done anything to deserve that from me. When I get to the kitchen, I find Marcel there, making a sandwich.

“Hey.” He looks at me, and then behind me. “Where’s Gio?”

“In his office.”

“Oh,” he says and continues to make his sandwich.

I guess everyone in the house has noticed how much I’ve been glued to my husband’s side. They’re all watching me like I’m a fragile piece of glass, ready to shatter with the slightest movement.

I’m not.

Or at least I don’t want to be. I head over to the fancy coffee machine and turn it on. It took me a week of fidgeting with the damn thing when I first moved in to know how to use it properly. Then I make two cups of coffee. One how Gio prefers it. Straight black. The other with milk and caramel syrup. For me.

“What are you up to today?” Marcel asks me.

“Ah, nothing. Why?”

“No reason. I have a... ah... friend coming around if you want to meet her,” he says.

“You want me to meet your girlfriend? What’s her name? What does she do? Oh! How’d you meet her?” I throw out question after question, more intrigued about this news than I’ve been about anything in days.

“Okay, slow down. She’s a friend, not a girlfriend,” he tells me.

“A friend? Okay, well, I would love to meet your *special friend*.” I grin. “What time is she coming over?”

“Around five. I invited her for dinner,” he says.

“Dinner, okay.” I press a finger to my lips. “We will be there,” I tell him with a nod.

“Thank you,” he says.

I take the cups back into my husband’s office. “Did you know Marcel has a girlfriend?” I ask, placing the black coffee on the desk in front of Gio.

“Thank you. And, no, I didn’t. What makes you think he has a girlfriend?”

“He invited her for dinner, wanted to know if I’d meet her.” I smile. It really means a lot to me that he asked. I don’t know why, but it just makes me feel included in this little family.

“Okay. Sure the girl’s not just some friend?”

“Well, he claims that’s what she is, but you don’t bring friends home to meet your family.”

“Are you up to having dinner? You don’t have to meet his friend, you know?” Gio tells me.

“Uh, yes, I do. It’s his girlfriend and I want to meet her,” I say.

“Dinner it is, then.” Gio nods, and I sit back down on the sofa, my thoughts focused on what I’m going to wear for this dinner.

I really want to go upstairs and rummage through my closet. I look at the door and mentally calculate how far our bedroom is from here. How far I’ll be from Gio. I don’t know if I can go that far. My heart was pounding when I was in the kitchen. I felt like I was on the brink of a panic attack before Marcel distracted me with the whole girlfriend announcement. I wonder if Gabe’s invited Daisy. I should ask her, but then I don’t want her to feel left out if he hasn’t mentioned it.

“Why are you frowning?” Gio asks.

“Do you think Gabe and Daisy are going to work out their issues? Like, do you think he invited her to this dinner

tonight?”

“I don’t know, but whatever Gabe and Daisy are doing is none of our business, Ellie. They’re grown adults. They can do whatever they want.”

“But they’re both so stubborn I don’t know if they can overcome whatever it is that’s going on between them on their own.”

“Well, that’s on them. Not us,” Gio repeats.

“Maybe...” I sigh. “What are you going to wear tonight?”

Gio smiles at me and looks down at himself. “This?” he asks, pointing to his shirt.

“Nope. This is the first time we’re meeting Marcel’s girlfriend. We need to make a good impression,” I remind him.

“It’s his friend, not a girlfriend. And why the fuck do we need to make a good impression?”

“Because if he’s serious about her, that means she’s going to be around more. And I don’t know... We just should. She should like us,” I say. “I’m going to go find something to wear.” I jump up from the sofa. I make it all the way to the door before I turn back around. “Actually, it can wait...”

Gio pushes back from his chair and stands. “Come on, you can tell me which suit will make a good first impression.” He holds a hand out to me.

I take it and follow behind him. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For being so needy, clingy,” I tell him. “I don’t know what it is, but the thought of being in a different room from you... I don’t like it.”

“Ellie, if you want to spend the rest of our lives in the same room together, you will not hear me complain about it. I like having you close.”

“It’s no way to live...” I shake my head.

“It could be.”

“I think... I think I should talk to someone. A doctor, a counsellor, or something,” I admit aloud for the first time.

Gio pulls me into his chest. His arms encircle me. This is my safe place. Right here, in my husband’s arms. And given the choice, I’d never leave. “If you want to talk to someone, I’ll arrange it for you.”

“Will you... would you do it with me?” I ask him.

“Of course, I will.” He kisses the top of my head.



I’ve applied at least three layers of concealer and then another heavy layer of foundation. It’s not working. You can still see the bruising on my face. I don’t know why I didn’t consider this before I agreed to have dinner with Marcel and his new girlfriend.

What kind of impression am I going to make if I turn up looking like I just stepped out of a boxing ring?

I pull my hair out of my ponytail and try to style it in a way that covers the side of my face with the worse discolouration.

“You look beautiful, Ellie. Stop fussing,” Gio says from behind me.

“I look like I’ve been used as a punching bag,” I huff, and watch his face turn to stone in the mirror’s reflection. His jaw clenches so tight I’m afraid he’s going to crack his teeth if he doesn’t loosen up. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“We don’t have to go,” he repeats for the hundredth time.

“No, I want to. Marcel wouldn’t have asked us to be there if he didn’t want us there.”

“He’ll understand.”

“I’m sure he will, but we’re dressed. Come on, let’s do this.” I brush my hair through my fingers one more time.

Maybe we can dim the lights in the dining room.

Gio takes my hand and we walk downstairs together. “Damn, El, if you change your mind and decide you want the smarter brother, you know where to find me,” Gabe’s voice calls out from the foyer, at the bottom of the stairs.

“Fuck off before I stab you,” Gio grunts.

“Where’s Daisy?” I ask Gabe, and his grin immediately drops.

“Why would I know where she is?” he says over his shoulder as he stalks off towards the dining room.

“Guess they haven’t kissed and made up then,” I tell Gio, and he pins me with that glare of his.

“Not our business, Ellie.”

By the time we enter the dining room, everyone is already here. Gabe is just taking his seat, appearing in a far less chipper mood. Gio leads me to the head of the table—I always sit to his left—and Santo claims the chair to the right.

“Everyone, this is Zoe. Zoe, this is everyone,” Marcel says.

“Hi, I’m El. It’s so great to meet you,” I greet the girl with a small smile.

She stares at me with a frown spread across her face. “Hi. Zoe. Can you... ah... show me to the bathroom?” she asks me.

I look to Gio. I don’t know what to do. It’s a simple request. I mean, I should be able to show our guest where the bathroom is located. My heart starts to pound.

“I can show you,” Marcel chimes in.

“No, it’s fine. I can take her,” I say as I stand and make my way back around the table.

“You don’t have to do that, Ellie,” Gio tells me in a hushed tone.

“I want to.” I walk out with Zoe behind me. I’m silently counting the steps. If I keep counting, I won’t panic. I went to

the kitchen. I made coffee without him. I can escort someone to the bathroom too.

As soon as we turn the corner, Zoe steps up beside me. “I can get you out of here,” she whispers.

“Excuse me?” I ask, stopping in my tracks.

“I can get you out. You don’t have to stay here,” she says.

I take a step back. Away from her. “What are you talking about?” I glance over her shoulder, towards the dining room. I need Gio.

“It’s okay. I can help. Who did that to your face? Was it your husband? I can help you,” the girl tries again.

“You think my husband did this? To me?” I shake my head more vigorously than I intend. “He didn’t. He wouldn’t, and if you knew any of those men in there, you’d also know that none of them are capable of hurting a woman,” I tell her. “The bathroom is down the hall, third door on the left.” I point, pivot on my heel, and stomp back the way I came.

The fact that she thought Gio would ever raise a hand to me makes me unreasonably angry. I’m not sure if it’s misplaced or not. It probably is. She was trying to help. I know that. But I can’t stop the rage bubbling under the surface.

“What happened?” Gio asks the moment I return to my seat.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him.

Marcel immediately stands up and walks out. Everyone else at the table is silent.

Well, there goes that good first impression I was trying to make...

Chapter Forty-Five



“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” I ask Ellie. We’re starting therapy today.

“I’m ready,” she says.

I look her over. She wants to do this. For the last two weeks, she’s been following me around the house, sticking as close to my side as she possibly can. I’m not complaining. I love having her around. But that fear she has in her eyes... I don’t want that to be the reason.

She should feel safe in her own fucking home. It’s my fault that she doesn’t. I know that. But I’m going to do whatever it takes to help her heal from this. To help her sleep peacefully at night again without waking up screaming.

“If you want to leave at any point, just say the word and I’ll get you out of there.”

“What’s the word?” she asks with a small smirk.

“Platypus.”

“You remembered?” That smirk widens into a full grin. She made up a code the first time we went for dinner at her mum’s house. She wanted to be able to make a hasty escape should we need it.

“I remember everything, Ellie,” I tell her.

“Okay, come on. We can’t keep her waiting.”

“She’s paid by the hour. We can keep her waiting for as long as we want.” I take Ellie’s hand and lead her into the library. I figured it would be the room where we’re least likely to get interrupted. I’ve also instructed James that we’re not to be interrupted unless the house is on fire.

“Dr Fraser, thanks for coming. This is my wife, Eloise.” I shift my hand to the small of Ellie’s back. I’ve been corresponding with Dr Fraser via email, giving the woman a brief rundown of what happened. As much as I know anyway. Ellie hasn’t spoken about the attack, and whenever I’ve asked her about it, she shuts down.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” the doctor says.

I lead Ellie over to the sofa and sit down with her. There’s a coffee table between us and where the doctor is presently seated.

“Eloise, why don’t we start by you telling me what you want to get out of these sessions?” Dr Fraser asks.

“I... I want to get my life back,” Ellie says in a quiet voice, and my heart fucking breaks.

“Okay, tell me what’s been going on over the past two weeks, since the incident,” Dr Fraser says.

“The incident? I was raped. It wasn’t an incident,” Ellie replies with an undertone of annoyance.

This time, my heart stops in my chest. A fire burns inside me as a renewed rage tries to consume me. I know what happened, but hearing her say it aloud... it’s fucking hard. I squeeze her hand. She needs me here for this. So I’m going to have to fucking man up and listen to everything she has to say.

After an hour of talking and answering questions with the doctor, I carry a sobbing Ellie back up to the bedroom. I thought therapy was supposed to help people. All it seems to have done is made her feel worse.

“I’m sorry. I can find a different therapist,” I tell my wife as I cradle her against my chest.

“No. I like her,” she says, and I stall in my tracks.

“Ellie, you’re crying. You’re upset.”

“I know, but it’s going to happen.”

I walk towards the bed, lay Ellie in the centre, climb in beside her, and run a hand up and down her arm. “I want to take your pain away. I want to carry it for you,” I tell her.

“You can’t,” she says. “Do you think... do you think you’re ever going to want me again?”

“What do you mean?” I’m not sure what the fuck she’s asking me.

“Sexually. Are you ever going to want that?” she attempts to clarify before sitting upright to look at me.

“Ellie, that’s not something we need to rush in to doing. We have our whole lives ahead of us. I love you.”

“I know you love me, but do you still want me?”

“I want you, Ellie. But we have more important things to deal with right now, like making sure my wife isn’t curled up in bed crying,” I tell her and press a kiss to her forehead.

“Okay. I’m sorry. This is not how we should be starting out our marriage.”

“I emailed the travel agent. Told them we decided on Fiji,” I say, trying to steer the conversation into a more positive light. We’ve been going back and forth about honeymoon destinations for two weeks. Ellie couldn’t decide, but last night, she said Fiji was her final decision.

“Great. When are we going?”

“Whenever you want to go.” I shrug.

“Tomorrow?” she asks me.

“Tomorrow? Okay, let me make some calls and arrange the jet.”

“Are you sure it’s not too much? Too expensive?”

My brows furrow. “Do me a favour and log into your bank accounts.”

“Um... okay.” She picks up her phone and pulls up her banking app. Her eyes widen. “This is a mistake,” she says, turning the screen to show me her balance.

“That’s not a mistake, Ellie. Those numbers are correct.”

“Where did it all come from?” She looks at me, confused.

“I put it there,” I say simply.

“Why?”

“Because I know you don’t want to be dependent on anyone, but my money is your money, Ellie.”

“I don’t want your money, Gio. I just want you.”

“Too bad, ’cause you get both.”

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you too. So fucking much.”



“You’re going to Fiji?” Santo asks.

“That’s what I said,” I tell him.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“What about security? Who are you taking?” He looks flustered.

“No one. I’m taking my wife on a honeymoon.”

“You need to take security, at least James and Dan,” he says.

“Fine, but I need you to keep an eye on things around here. We’re only going to be gone for a week.”

“I’ll try not to burn the empire down while you’re gone.” Santo smirks.

“How are you doing?” I haven’t checked in with him much lately. I know what happened to Ellie brought his grief back to the surface.

“I’m coping.”

“I haven’t stopped looking for the answers. Just because we haven’t found them yet doesn’t mean we won’t.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing is going to bring Shelli back, and knowing why the asshole did what he did won’t make a difference,” Santo says.

“It might give you closure,” I remind him.

“Or it’ll open up a can of worms I don’t want to deal with.”

“It could,” I agree before adding, “Do me a favour? Keep an eye on Vin while I’m gone. He’s been oddly quiet the last few weeks.”

“Will do,” Santo says.

I clap a hand over my brother’s shoulder, before walking past him to make my way to the bedroom. Ellie was asleep when I left her. I’m usually back before she’s up. But when I enter the room, she’s not in the bed.

“Ellie?” I call out, and my heart pounds in my chest.

Where the fuck is she?

“In here,” her voice replies from the closet.

“What are you doing?” I ask, walking in behind her.

“Packing for our honeymoon.” She smiles and that light that’s been missing from her eyes the last few weeks shines. It’s dimmer, but it’s there. That’s a start.

“I can help.”

“It’s okay. I got this. It’s what wives do, Gio. They pack when you go on trips,” she tells me.

“Well, shit, if I’d known that, I would have found and married you years ago. All this time, I’ve been packing by myself.”

“Must have been hard. I don’t know how you ever survived without me.” She shakes her head.

“I don’t know either. Good thing I don’t have to be without you ever again.” I wrap my arms around my wife. My entire world. And my lips press against the top of her head.

“Okay, get out. You’re getting in my way. And I need to pack,” she says.

I walk back out of the closet and sit on the sofa on the other side of the room. I scroll through my phone for an hour before Ellie finally reappears. “You done?” I ask her.

“Yep. I think I got everything.” She nods.

I push to my feet and peer inside the closet. There are six suitcases on the floor. “Ellie, we’re going for a week.”

“I know... I should pack another bag, right? Just in case,” she says while chewing on the nails of her left hand.

“No. You should unpack at least four of the ones you have. What do we need all that shit for?” I ask her.

“Trust me, when we get there and you can’t find something you left behind, you’ll be thanking me,” Ellie says.

“If I don’t have something, I’ll just buy it.”

“That’s a waste of money, Gio. Why buy something you already have?”

“Because I can?”

Ellie shakes her head. “Come on, I don’t know if I’m going to be able to sleep tonight. I’m way too excited.” Then she takes my hand and leads me to the bed.

“If this is how excited you get the night before a trip, I’m going to take you around the world. We’re going to visit every city, every country,” I tell her.

“Mmm, deal,” she says, lying down and snuggling against me. Her arms wrap around my stomach and her head rests on my chest as my hand mindlessly runs through the strands of her hair.

When I finally feel her body relax, I close my eyes and let myself relax too. This is my heaven. Right here with my wife in my arms. There is no place on earth that will ever feel more right than this.

Epilogue

Eloise



Ten years later

If anyone would have told me this would be my life, I would have laughed in their faces. It's our tenth wedding anniversary and my husband asked me to get dressed and be ready by seven. Ready for what? I have no idea.

I would have been happy with a quiet night in. Just him, me, and our three little terrors. My children are De Bellises through and through. Our eldest, Aurelio, is eight years old while our daughters, Daniella and Rosie, are six and four respectively.

"I have a surprise for you," Gio says, walking up behind me.

“I hate surprises,” I huff. I don’t, but it’s become our thing. My husband loves to surprise me and I love to tell him how much I hate being surprised.

“Sure you do.” He takes my hand. “Come on.” Then he leads me outside, to the front of our home. We still live in the same house I sold him all those years ago. His brothers have all moved out, but we stayed. And I couldn’t think of a better place to raise a family.

All the kids are dressed to the nines and waiting by the front door with James. “What’s going on?” I ask Gio.

“It’s a surprise, Mum. Dad said we can’t tell you,” Aurelio says.

“That’s right. We don’t want to ruin the surprise.” My husband places the small of his hand on my back before Aurelio holds up a bunch of blue and white flowers.

“These are for you, Mum.”

“Thank you. They’re beautiful,” I tell him.

“Open mine, Mumma.” Rosie rushes forward with a small black box in her tiny hands. “It’s a ring. And pretty,” she says before I can even open it.

“Remind me not to tell that one anything important.” Gio laughs.

“Thank you, Rosie-baby.” I pop the lid and my eyes widen. She’s not wrong. It is pretty. It’s a princess-cut, pink-diamond solitaire. “It’s stunning.”

“And this too.” Daniella hands me another black velvet box.

“Thanks, Danni.” I open it to find a rose-gold chain with a pink-diamond pendant hanging from the centre. “Oh my god, Gio, it’s so beautiful.” I wrap my arms around my husband.

“Not even half as beautiful as you are,” he tells me.

“Ew, don’t kiss girls!” Aurelio scrunches up his face.

“But she’s my girl so I can kiss her,” Gio tells him.

“Kristie is my girlfriend. Mum said I’m not allowed to kiss her until I’m thirty.”

“Did she now?” Gio muses.

“Yep.” Aurelio nods, his expression serious.

“Well, you gotta listen to your mum. She’s the boss,” Gio tells our son before turning to me. “Come on, this isn’t the surprise.”

When everyone is packed into the back of the van, I turn to Gio. “What *is* the surprise?” I ask him.

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.” He shrugs.

“Have I told you lately how much I hate surprises,” I grumble as my eyes flick to my four-year-old. “Rosie-baby, did Daddy tell you where we’re going?”

She shakes her head.

“Come on, Ellie, I’m smarter than that.” Gio laughs.

Epilogue



The smile on my wife's face is everything. I live every day just to see it. I also thank God just as often. For her and our children. When Ellie got pregnant with Aurelio, I was fucking terrified.

I mean, what the fuck did I know about being a father?

The one I had wasn't a top example. I guess the bastard did teach me one thing, though. What *not* to fucking do to your kids. I had no concept of the real damage he caused all of us for years. Especially Vin. God, the old man really fucked that kid up.

He's doing okay now. But when I found out what our father did... what he made Vin do... I wanted to go and dig up the bastard's grave, bring 'em back to life, just so I could kill him again.

“Daddy, can I kiss boys when I’m thirty?” Daniella asks, shocking me out of the thoughts of my past and into the real terror of my future with daughters.

“Fuck no,” I growl.

“Language,” Ellie says, and Daniella turns back to me.

“Why not?”

“Because I said so. That’s why,” I tell her.

“But Aurelio is allowed,” she whines.

“You are not your brother. You are my little girl, and boys aren’t coming anywhere near you,” I remind my daughter.

“Oden is my boyfriend,” Rosie sings.

“Who the fuck is Oden?” I ask my four-year-old and then look to my wife, who is laughing at my obvious discomfort.

“He’s my boyfriend,” Rosie says.

“No, he’s a fucking D-E-A-D man is what he is,” I mutter under my breath.

“Stop overreacting. She’s four and so is Oden.” Ellie taps my chest with the back of her hand.

“Yeah, you know what four-year-old boys grow up to be? Men,” I grunt in response. “Rosie, boys are stinky and gross.”

“You’re a boy, Daddy, and you’re not stinky and gross,” Daniella says. “When I grow up, I’m gonna marry someone just like you, Daddy.”

The kids have been talking a lot about weddings and marriage for the last couple of days, knowing it was my and Ellie’s anniversary.

“We’re going to need a bigger armoury... and probably more sons,” I tell Ellie.

“I’m not birthing you anymore children,” she says. The car stops at the restaurant and I slide the door open. “Where are we?”

“Like I said, it’s a surprise,” I remind her.

Ellie unclips Rosie from her car seat and my daughter jumps into my arms. Aurelio and Daniella climb out and Ellie follows close behind them.

“It’s a party,” Rosie calls out.

“A party?” Ellie questions me.

“It’s not a party. Come on.” I grab my wife’s palm with my free hand and tug her forward.

When we enter the restaurant, Ellie stops in her tracks. Everyone is here. Friends, family, business associates. “Happy anniversary!” they shout as we enter.

“Oh my god!” Ellie says as I set Rosie down on her feet.

“Happy anniversary, Mrs De Bellis.” I turn my wife’s face to mine and claim her lips.

“Happy anniversary,” she repeats breathlessly. “I can’t believe you got everyone here.”

“For you, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do,” I tell her. And it’s the truth. I would go to the ends of the earth and beyond for this woman.

Want to know what went down at Gio and Eloise’s Honeymoon? Read the bonus [honeymoon scene here!](#)

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About Kylie Kent

Kylie made the leap from kindergarten teacher to romance author, living out her dream to deliver sexy, always and forever romances. She loves a happily ever after story with tons of built-in steam.

She currently resides in Sydney, Australia and when she is not dreaming up the latest romance, she can be found spending time with her three children and her husband of twenty years, her very own real life instant-love.

Kylie loves to hear from her readers; you can reach her at: author.kylie.kent@gmail.com

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