

A MONTAVIO BROTHERHOOD NOVEL

beloved

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BELOVED

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE NOVEL

MONTAVIO BROTHERHOOD

BOOK 3

JANE HENRY



Beloved

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SYNOPSIS

The moment I meet Ricco Montavio, my world tilts on its axis.

Hotter than hell and maddeningly dominant, he's suddenly in my world on the regular: in my massage studio, at my daughter's preschool, on my front porch, in my every waking thought...

Why me?

I'm a rule follower. A single mom just trying to make ends meet who was not looking to hook-up with anyone... much less a King of the Boston Underworld who makes his own rules.

Every fiber of my being screams at me to run.

But instead...

I kneel.

I submit.

I plummet headlong into a love affair with the most dangerous man I've ever met, a man who's clearly keeping secrets.

I know Ricco Montavio breaks people for a living.

I can only hope his secrets don't break me.

CHAPTER ONE

NUMBER 12

Ricco

TWILIGHT PAINTS the Boston skyline in shades of blue as I walk down the street toward Bella Notte. The smell of hotdogs, popcorn, and roasted nuts fills the air—the street vendors of the city of Boston scraping for a few more sales before they call it a night. To my left sits a kiosk with *Boston Strong* T-shirts, and to the right, a bunch of knock-off Red Sox ball caps. I breathe in the air, thick with the smell of exhaust, because there's always traffic in Boston. But damn, I have to admit, it feels good. I've missed the city. It's why I took the long way to the club.

I swipe my phone on and call my sister.

“Hi, Ricco,” Vivia says, her voice laced with humor. “If you’re wondering if Marco has somehow woken up or gotten gravely ill in the twenty minutes since your last call, the answer is no.”

I grunt and mutter something about just checking in.

My hair still damp from a shower, I run my fingers through it and walk as casually as I can. I don’t want attention.

I stretch my neck and flex my limbs, sore from today's workout. I pretend I’m not anxious about my son.

“Hey,” she says gently. “I know it’s the first time you’ve left him alone since—in a long time,” she amends. Why do people hesitate to say the name of the person who died?

“Since Martina died, yeah,” I say, sudden anger flaring in my chest. I turn the corner and start walking down the street where Bella Notte’s discreetly tucked in, nearly invisible to the untrained eye but clear enough for those that seek refuge within its walls.

There's a crowd outside of Bella Notte.

Fuck.

There's never a crowd outside.

“Thanks, Viv. I gotta go. Something’s up at the club.”

I unzip my hoodie, making sure that the tattoos along my neck and shoulders are visible. Sometimes, when people don't know who I am, a quick glance at the tats that declare me a Montavio is all it takes.

“Fuccck,” I mutter when I come into closer view of the club.

I’ll need more than the family crest.

I keep my eyes sharp, scanning Bella Notte’s illuminated entrance. The club’s exterior neon lights cast an eerie glow on the street, and a few people are loitering around, some puffing on cigarettes. My gaze narrows in on a guy who looks out of place. He's eyeing the entrance, checking his surroundings with a subtle twitch of his fingers, betraying his nerves as he faces off against my brother.

Hotheaded, loyal, and the guy you’d most want at your back in a fight, my youngest brother Timeo’s done it again. But damn if he hasn't been at the center of every single fucking altercation we've had in the past six months.

The air outside Bella Notte grows thicker with tension the closer I get. I'm on edge, the cool breeze doing nothing to ease the knot in my gut. My instincts never lie, and this guy doesn't pass the test.

"Well, maybe you should've kept a better fucking eye on her!"

Jesus.

I don't recognize the big guy Timeo’s snarling at but do note that even though Timeo’s tall and built, this guy’s no pushover. And he isn’t alone.

"I kept a good eye on her," he snarls back, advancing on Timeo. “She's the little shit that ran away.”

I’d bet half my kingdom the “little shit’s” Starla, and this asshole was supposed to be watching her.

I’d bet the other half that Timeo’s gonna cut this motherfucker.

Here we go.

I run.

A crowd surrounds the two as Timeo decks him.

Fists fly. Onlookers cheer and scream and leer. I zero in on Timeo. I'd knife a motherfucker to death before I'd let anyone hurt my brother.

Timeo's still standing and he's knocked three down when I get to him, but they're not giving up. These assholes came here looking for a fucking fight.

Shit. My first night back and I'm gonna get fucked up. My only job now is to make sure these motherfuckers end up more fucked up than I am.

I grab the biggest by the back of the shirt and haul him back. "Get off him," I growl. "Hit him again and you're fucking done."

I toss another one to the curb and grab Timeo by the arm. I start to shove him behind me when a piercing pain hits me across the back of my neck. I stifle a scream and go down.

Sons of bitches packed a pair of brass knuckles.

I come up swinging this time and nail the asshole who got me right in the jaw.

As he takes another step, I don't hesitate. Instinct takes over. I move swiftly, grabbing his arm and twisting it behind his back. But he's quicker than I anticipated, a gleaming knife suddenly in his hand, aimed for my gut.

Time slows. My heart races. I react, deflecting his blade with my forearm, the steel grazing my skin. Adrenaline surges through me as I shove him away, creating some distance between us.

But he's not done. He lunges again, a mix of desperation and fury in his eyes. I sidestep, my fist a blur as it lands a solid blow to his temple. He staggers, disoriented, stumbling back.

The world swirls, the sound of my breath echoing in my ears. He regains his footing, anger burning brighter now. His blade flashes in the dim light as he charges, aiming to end this with a deadly thrust.

I'm ready. I pivot, my forearm meeting his with a solid block. His knife scrapes against my skin again, a fiery reminder that this is life and death. The metallic tang of blood fills the air as my knuckles connect with his

cheekbone, the impact rattling him.

In seconds, my brothers have cleared the street so there's only two of us circling each other and no witnesses but family remaining.

"Fuck you," he growls as he rears back to hit me again. I dodge his blow and strike hard.

Falling back, his foot catches on an uneven patch of concrete, and before he can regain control, he crashes headfirst into a nearby cinder block.

The sickening thud fills the night air. He's instantly motionless, out cold. Dread pools in my gut as a pool of crimson forms around him, a chilling reminder of the thin line between survival and oblivion.

I catch my breath, my chest heaving as I wipe the sweat from my brow and survey the scene. The taste of danger lingers, a reminder that in this world, you're either the predator or the prey.

Fern, the resident bartender, appears by my side, eyes wide as she takes everything in. She glances at me, her voice barely a whisper. "You okay?"

I nod, my heart still racing. "Yeah. Just another night at Bella Notte."

We exchange a knowing look, the unspoken truth hanging in the air. In this world, we're the guardians of the night, the sentinels of the shadows. And tonight, the shadows cast a grim reminder that danger can strike from the most unexpected corners.

In my heart, I know what happened.

"It was self-defense," I say, anxiety gnawing at my gut. I've killed eleven men in my lifetime, and I remember the name and face of every fucking one of them.

I still hate the sight of blood. I hate the taste of violence.

And I hate it when Timeo's grim look and subtle nod confirm that I might have just hit number twelve.

Fuck.



"I'm not gonna start taking orders from my younger brother just because you ended up being the head of this family by default," I snap, frustration and anger lacing my words.

I let the heavy bar fall to the floor with a resounding thud, its vibrations traveling all the way to the mirrors lining the walls of our dimly lit studio. Sergio, my younger brother and Don of the Montavio family, rolls his eyes in exasperation. Timeo playfully feigns a punch at me, but I deflect it with practiced ease and respond with a quick jab that makes him wince and takes his breath away.

"Fuck," he mutters. "Upped your gym game, didn't you?"

Gino, our enforcer, lets out a chuckle while a couple of the other guys in the room shoot me nervous smiles. He observes me for a few prolonged seconds before shaking his head. "Good to see you coming back."

I turn my gaze away; there's no need to respond. The ache in my chest is a constant companion and I don't like the reminder.

"Fuck your gym game," Timeo comments dryly, picking up a jump rope from the floor. "I saw you doing a demo with Mandy Ministrani last week. Don't tell me you didn't use every muscle in your body for that."

Sergio snorts. I palm the jump rope mid-swing and yank it toward me. Timeo tumbles forward but quickly rights himself and comes up swinging. Two seconds later, we're jabbing at each other, and he's got the rope back.

"Been lifting behind my back?" I say, winded, as he flicks the rope at me and tries to trip me. I grab it and yank him toward me again, pinning him in a headlock. A year ago and I'd have kicked his scrawny ass from here to Bunker Hill, but he's come into his own. He won't beat me, but it'll be a good fight.

Timeo smiles, but there's a sadness behind it. "Been lifting for a year, bro."

I let him go. Everywhere I turn there's a reminder of my absence, what I've missed, and I fucking hate it.

I wanted to be a better man than that.

Timeo grunts, loads up a bar, and lays on the bench. I quietly spot him.

“I got it,” he says, straining under the weight but holding his own.

“So do I. Don’t you ever let me catch you lifting without a spotter.”

Another grunt, but he doesn’t talk back. Everyone in this place understands that Timeo’s rigorous workouts are a coping mechanism. Lots of us seek solace in the gym, channeling pain and frustration into physical exertion.

“Maybe I am back,” I mutter to Sergio, my glance sidelong and guarded. “And you know what that means.”

Sergio crosses his arms over his chest, the only one among us who shows no signs of exertion in the gym today. He’d probably been practicing yoga or some other kinda shit with his wife earlier, a thought that only fuels my simmering irritation. Now it’s his turn to grunt, because we both know this is a conversation that must take place privately.

I became the Don of this family when our older brother Nicollo died, but had to step down because my wife was sick. Sergio stepped in, and he’s been the acting head of this family since then. I won’t take that from him. I’ve got a kid with no mother and Sergio does his job well. And I’ll show the respect due to him as Don, but I’m not under his headship.

“All I’m saying is, we could use you at the club.”

“So this isn’t some sort of fucked-up matchmaking? And you know what happened the last time I was at the club.”

Sergio shakes his head. “Nothing happened at the club, Ricco,” he says quietly, reminding me that we made every move to erase that night from history.

“Just come. I’m down two men tonight, Ricco.”

“Two? Why two?”

“Those dumbasses both went to the same seafood restaurant after work and got food poisoning. We’ve got a big crowd coming in tonight.”

I can't tell if his plea is a thinly veiled excuse for getting me into the club or not. But I know I need a change of scenery. I've got a babysitter lined up, and I know it's true—I am back.

I'm already in, but it doesn't mean I'm not going to make the most of this situation.

“You got Sam Adams on tap?”

Sergio grins. “You know I do.”

God, I fucking love tap beer.

“It's a deal, as long as you don't need me to babysit,” I say, glancing at our little brother. Timeo, who stoically ignores me.

Timeo ignores me and finishes his set. I take his place but just to fuck with him, I add more weight to the bar.

“Show-off.”

“Fuck you.”

I start a set. Sergio takes out his phone and starts swiping as Timeo spots me.

“Any updates?”

He knows I'm talking about the guy I killed a week ago.

“Yeah. We settled with his wife.”

Wife.

A rush of pain and heat takes me off guard. Timeo grabs the bar.

“You okay?”

“I'm fine.”

I press again, pretending I wasn't affected by the knowledge that the man I killed was a married man.

“Kids?” I ask, issuing a silent prayer for something, anything, to give me a goddamn break.

“One. Little girl named Emmy.”

“Fuck.... Where do they live?”

“Ricco...”

I press again, not giving up. I have a right to this information. “Tell me.”

Sergio frowns and shares a glance with Timeo. “Ten miles from Bella Notte. Quiet, residential area. The wife’s a massage therapist and the kid’s in preschool. She’s got a good support system and she definitely doesn’t need you interfering right now.”

“Right.”

“Ricco,” Sergio says, more quietly this time, but there’s steel in his voice.

We both know... I’ve already said it, but don’t want to say it again out of respect...

I don’t take orders from anyone.



CHAPTER TWO

DREAM MAN

Dani

Three months later...

"Guess what I found in my purse today? A wet wipe from the rib place, two tampons that were obviously made into craft projects with Sharpies when someone wasn't paying attention, and a nifty little package of abandoned hopes and dreams."

I smile and readjust the phone to my ear as I open the door and enter my studio.

"Maybe we should go shopping for a new bag. It's bad juju, carrying around a bag filled with forgotten hopes and dreams."

"I knew that as soon as you started with the whole massage therapy thing you'd start talking like a spiritualist."

I shake my head and roll my eyes. "Honey, I've been talking like a spiritualist for years. Where have you been?"

"Hello? Deciphering gibberish from my toddler? Turns out he wanted to discuss the meaning of life and an existential crisis he was having over spilled milk."

Sarah loves to give me shit about things, but we both know that we wouldn't know what to do if we didn't have each other. As close as best friends can be, sisters are a whole other breed. They don't just understand your troubles, they get them. They've walked in your shoes. They know the wounds you carry from your past, and likely carry the same ones. They can borrow your clothes, steal your boyfriend, and give you shit about things that no one else in the universe will. But in the end, they've got your back like no one else does.

"Seriously, Dani. How's it going?" The real concern in her voice makes my throat tighten. I can handle things quite well until someone shows me an ounce of compassion or concern, or worst of all—pity.

Ah ah. Nope. I do not want to get all sentimental. I don't want to hear anything that even begins to resemble pity or sympathy.

If I'm honest, though... if I really, truly delve into the dark recesses of my mind that I only seem to access at three a.m. when my shields are down and I'm staring into nothingness, unable to sleep... my biggest struggle is the lack of guilt I have over my husband's death. I hate the word "widow." I'm tired of pretending that I'm not sad from grief, but rather from the certain feeling of failure.

"It's great," I say, though even I can hear the wobble in my voice. "I'm fine. I actually slept last night and got Emmy off to preschool without a hitch. If you call not wearing shoes or socks without a hitch, and you know I do."

"Of course. How's business?"

I stare at the empty office. "Business is fine," I lie. I'm too stubborn to admit that abandoning my anemic family law practice in favor of taking a large amount of the life insurance money that I got for my husband's death and putting it into opening my own massage therapy business was probably a bad idea. I'd had no idea that one of the largest chains of massage places was going to open up a fancy new location in the heart of Boston and offer a new deal that I couldn't possibly compete with.

I'd had no idea that scheduling my hours around school wouldn't be convenient for other people, and I definitely hadn't had any idea that the overhead costs would add up as quickly as they did.

"Honestly, business is... a little slow," I lie again.

It isn't slow, it's abysmal.

I swallow hard. "And I..."

I suddenly lose the ability to talk.

There's a man coming my way, only a few yards from where I am now.

No.

It can't be.

Because this isn't just any man. This is... *the* man. The man that I have conjured up in every fantasy I've had for the past year, ever since I stopped sleeping with my husband because he always smelled like another woman's perfume and even the best stain removers couldn't remove some other woman's lipstick from his work shirts.

This...this is the man that I...designed? Created?

Manifested?

Am I dreaming?

"Honey, are you okay?"

"No," I say, telling the truth for the first time in this conversation. Because my Dream Man just walked in that door.

I stare.

He's tall, almost imposing in stature, making me feel every deficit in my height of barely five feet. Italian heritage, because that olive complexion and Roman nose would be dead giveaways. Those eyes, a dark brown with flecks of gold like well-worn leather, eyes that are knowing but curious, intelligent but playful, hard but gentled by pain and so intense I fight the urge to run.

There's something about him that's vaguely familiar, but I can't quite figure it out. Another parent from school maybe?

I imagine his voice, masculine and a little husky, maybe even with the slightest hint of an Italian accent. He walks with confidence and grace, with the certainty of a man who doesn't just expect to be obeyed but requires it.

I swallow. The lines of his face say he's lived a life that hasn't been easy, but the lines around his eyes says he has a sense of humor. A five o'clock shadow graces his chin, his neck marked with ink. I'd bet anything he's got them in other places, too.

His faded Levis hug powerful hips and white tee contrasts against his dark skin.

Sarah's losing patience. "Hello? Dani? Girl, are you alright? If you don't start talking, I'm coming over."

"I'm fine, don't worry..." I pause because I need to enjoy this moment a little longer. It isn't every day you meet your fantasy come to life and any second, he's going to walk by my—

Oh. My. God.

Oh my God. Oh. My. *God*. He's looking at the window.

He's checking his phone, like he's...checking an address or something.

He's coming in.

Oh my fucking God, I'm going to lose my mind.

By some miracle, I keep my voice mostly steady. "Guess what? You manifested a client for me. I gotta go, babe." I hang up the phone and slide it professionally on my standing desk, then turn, ready to greet Mr. Dreamy.

He stands outside my door in all his sweltering, manly glory. I breathe in deeply and try to appear calm.

Instead of a highly professional little jingle, the door screams like a siren when he opens it, easily ten octaves too high. I gasp and he jumps.

"Jesus," he mutters.

My heart skips a beat. That *voice*, all deep and husky and sexy. My mouth goes dry.

Stay professional.

Stay professional.

"I'm so sorry about that godawful door. It's supposed to ring prettily like a bell or something."

What the hell am I saying?

His lips twitch and he scratches his chin. "Points for originality?"

"Sure, let's go with that," I smile. "Let's... talk about why you're here. I don't see that I have any upcoming appointments for you?"

With a casual glance around the shop, taking his time to linger on me, he

shrugs. “I would like to talk about the possibility of making an appointment.”

Oh, it is possible.

“Sure thing,” I say as professionally as possible even while trying not to imagine what he’d feel like under my hands. “What do you have in mind?”

Taking a step toward me, he shrugs, as he casually puts his hands in his pockets. Something about him, though – something intense that I can feel, vibrates right beneath his relaxed veneer. There’s absolutely nothing casual about this man. When he leans against the counter, I get a whiff of his scent. Manly. Virile. My female instincts hum in anticipation.

Yes.

I swallow.

“Do you allow walk-in appointments?” he asks.

I clear my throat. “I do. Yes, yes, of course. You want a massage, then.”

Do I seem too eager? Too desperate? Not just for a client, but for *this* client? I have to reel this back.

My heart does a somersault when he gives me the barest trace of a smile, his eyes crinkling around the edges. Turning to the front of the store, he cranes his neck. “I...didn’t know you offered any other services?”

“I can make you tea or coffee,” I blurt out, and immediately feel my cheeks flush pink. I clear my throat again and bring myself back to professionalism. “We can talk about your goal with a massage. To relieve tension, perhaps?”

I feel the sigh he releases deep in my bones. It’s the sigh of someone who’s bone-tired, world-weary.

God do I know what that’s like.

“Coffee,” he says with a nod. “Please.”

Five minutes later, we’re sitting in the tiny lobby – me, nestling a cup laced with cream and sugar, him, sipping a cup of straight black.

“It’s a slow day,” I say with a laugh, and don’t tell him that *every* day’s a

slow day. “So I have some time. Do you want to talk a little bit about what’s making you tense? It can help to relax you, which means you’ll benefit more fully from the massage.”

I take a sip of my coffee, grateful for something to do.

“Work’s been wearing on me,” he says, scrubbing a hand across his brow. “You know. Home life. Responsibilities. Things like that.”

Home life. I glance as casually as I can toward his left hand laying on the table in front of us.

No ring. Doesn’t mean he’s not married, but...

Does it matter if he’s married? You’re only going to give him a massage.

“I know exactly what you mean about work and home life. This job is only one of mine, a recent side gig. And it seems like the more I dig myself out of what needs to be done, the deeper the ditch can get.”

His chuckle makes my belly swoop. “Exactly. So you do take walk-ins? Because the more I talk to you, the more I’m ready to get that massage.”

A part of me feels guilty for wanting this, for rejoicing that I finally get a little thrill in my life when my husband’s only been gone for a few months. I quickly silence that thought and focus on what’s next.

He was gone long, long before that.

I realize I’m staring at him when he shifts and shoves his hands in his pockets. “I—”

I’ve lost my ability to speak.

I clear my throat and give myself the pep talk Sarah would give me if she were here.

You are not unable to speak. You are not unable to do anything. You’ve built this business from the ground up. You’re raising a child as a single mom and doing a damn good job with it. You’re not taking someone’s sloppy seconds anymore.

“I’m sorry,” I say seriously. “It’s waiting list only.” I gesture at the empty

room. “As you can see, we’re booked up all day long.”

“I’ll pay triple what he’s paying,” he says, going right along with my ruse and gesturing at the empty seats. Under his breath, he mutters, “Asshole’s not worth your time anyway.”

A little thrill courses through me at the casual glimpse of roughness, the hint of aggression. Raw masculine energy that makes my nerves tingle.

“Deal,” I say, standing tall and pulling my shoulders back. I slide into my professional persona, where I’m comfortable and in charge of shit. “What kind of massage are you looking for, sir? I can give you a menu.”

A shadow crosses his features so quickly I wonder if I imagined it.

This man’s entrance fills the studio with an energy I can’t ignore, and a thrill races down my spine. Our eyes meet, and an unspoken connection pulls me in—a force I have to steady myself against.

"I'm Dani," I offer, my voice steady despite the butterflies swirling within.

His lips curve into a faint smile, and his intense gaze holds mine. "Ricco. Ricco Montavio," he replies, not meeting my eyes. “And I’m not sure. I’ve never been massaged before. I’m feeling tight and sore.”

I nod. “You lift?”

Unless he’s personally building replicas of the Great Pyramids by hand, there’s no way this man looks that good and doesn’t lift.

“Yeah.”

Guiding him to the massage room, my curiosity deepens as I catch glimpses of the tattoos peeking from under his sleeves. What stories do they carry, I wonder—sacred secrets etched onto his skin?

“Here’s a pamphlet with all we have to offer. Please, take your time with your selection.”

It’s almost amusing trying to keep this professional, when I’m fully immersed in the thought of his naked skin against mine, his weight pressing me onto this very table, his—

I didn't know I was this desperate.

I pretend to tidy up the immaculate area while he looks over the menu.

“This one.”

I school my features and intentionally force my eyebrows back down when he points to “The Full Monty: Hot stones, massage oils, a full body experience created to smooth the body and soothe the mind.” Sarah made me put that one on and I never thought anyone would go for it.

It takes two hours and costs five hundred dollars.

We couldn't start with... a hand massage or something?

“Excellent,” I say in my professional voice. “I'm going to step out of the room for a moment. While I do, please undress to your level of comfort and lie face down on the table. There's a sheet you can use to cover yourself.”

Before I even leave the room, the hem of his tee's balled in his hands as he begins to lift it, revealing a few inches of tanned, muscled, beautifully honed abs.

Oh, dear God.

As Ricco pulls his shirt off, I walk outside the door and deep breathe for a few minutes. In through my nose, out through my mouth, like my therapist taught me.

I close my eyes and imagine the tattoos beckon, telling tales of his life's journey. I imagine I trace their lines with a gentle reverence, my fingers moving as if decoding a mystery.

A few minutes later, I knock on the door and shiver at the deep rumble of his voice. “All set.”

The room is dim and calm, as I've planned it. I like my clients to relax and engage in the full experience.

“This is a two-hour experience, Mr. Montavio.”

“Ricco. Call me Ricco. And I know, that's fine.”

I swallow and lick my lips. “Ricco.”

I turn my back to him. Warming the oil, I can feel his eyes on me, his anticipation palpable.

“Try to relax,” I say gently. “Let your body loosen.”

I glance over at the table. The sheet barely covers him, giving me a perfect view of the planes and contours of his muscled body, ink across his shoulders and back, a smattering of dark hair on his arms.

I begin the massage, my fingers dancing over his tattoos, mirroring his dominant presence. His muscles respond to my touch, a shiver running through him. The oil glistens on his tanned skin as I ply his taut muscles with my fingers.

His groans of approval fill the room.

“You’re tight,” I say in a gentle voice. “Especially in through your shoulders.” I run my hands along the breadth of his shoulders, relaying a silent prayer of thanks to the universe for sending me straight to second base with this Adonis. “It’s said that tension in the shoulders comes from carrying the weight of responsibility.”

“Yeah, sounds about right.”

I swallow.

“Some of my clients like to talk during their session. Others like to be silent. You can talk as much or as little as you’d like.”

I knead his shoulders, the oil warming between my fingers and his skin.

“I’m not much of a talker,” he begins. “But you’re easy to talk to.”

“Wait until you get some wine in me.”

I immediately wish I could take that back, until his deep chuckle reverberates in the room. I pretend the shiver that runs through me has to do with a chill in the air.

“Those tattoos,” I venture, keeping my voice down. “They tell a story, don’t they?”

There's a brief pause before he answers, "I do."

In silence, I continue the massage, reminding myself this is chaste and my desperation for male attention has nothing to do with Ricco and everything to do with my own struggles.

The exploration continues, and I imagine a connection forms. There's a pull between us, blurring the lines of separation.

Our conversation persists in soft murmurs, my curiosity growing with each touch. "Why so much tension?" When he doesn't answer at first, I realize what I'm doing and shake my head. "I am so sorry. I don't know what came over me. I don't invade my customers' private lives. I—"

"Dani, stop."

His voice is rough and commanding and so damn dominant, I'm putty in his hands. He's on the table beneath me and I'm standing above him, but it's perfectly clear who's the one in charge here, and a part of me thrills at that.

Desire hangs heavy in the air, an unspoken tension that can't be ignored. The massage unfolds, our connection deepening until boundaries seem almost nonexistent, replaced by an intoxicating attraction.

"I wasn't intentionally hiding anything from you." He lowers his voice. "It's that I'm trying to figure out where to begin."

I nod and walk to the side to gather the warmed stones for the next part of the massage.

"Why'd you stop?" he asks in a tone that makes me think he'll spank my ass if I don't pick up again soon.

"I'm just getting the stones." I don't know much about Ricco, but it's already clear to me that he's intense.

I like intense.

Here, in the studio, as my hands work their magic and the light smell of orange-tinged vanilla fills the air, as I become aware of his body relaxing under my touch, I find my groove. My hands begin to move as if orchestrated with a magician's wand. When I'm here in my studio, I'm not Dani

Martinelli, a curvy single mom who forgets to submit school lunch forms and has a work-life balance that's damn near wobbly, at best. I'm not depressed because of how incredibly exhausting it is to be a single mom with a very small support system, self-medicating with Ben and Jerry's and reality TV. I'm just... me. Dani.

"Is that too hot?" I ask, laying the steaming hot stones across his lower back.

"Feels fucking amazing," he groans. "What's next?"

What's next, indeed, handsome?

"You are welcome to personalized consultation, aromatherapy, and targeted muscle treatment if you'd like."

"Sounds perfect."

"All of it?" I ask, trying not to see his response as dollar signs, but as a struggling business owner, I'm tempted.

"All of it. Is this table heated?"

I want to say "duh, you're on it," but I don't. "It is. It has an integrated heating element which heats the table mildly as to enhance muscle relaxation. Do you like that?"

"Mmm. I do. And no personalization for now, this is perfect. You were right—the shoulders are my trouble area."

"Excellent."

I continue to massage in silence, and at one point I even note that he looks like he's fallen asleep. It isn't out of the ordinary for clients to sleep when on the table.

But then he shifts and stretches, lifting his muscled arms up over his head.

"Now we'll take a break, Mr. Montavio. You may have a cup of hot tea or snack, or just relax until it's time for the next step."

"I'm fine. Let's continue."

I open my mouth to argue, but I know instinctively he's not a man that likes

to argue.

Interesting.

I want to push a little.

“The experience can be heightened if you take regular breaks, Mr. Montavio.”

“I said I’m fine, Dani. And my name’s Ricco. My father was Mr. Montavio.”

Montavio...Montavio...why does that name ring a bell?

“Would you like a warmed towel to clean up with, then?”

“Please.”

It feels like a dream as I go through each move, each step of the process. My hands move as if they’re intuitively following the lines of his back and shoulders.

“Fuck, that’s good,” he says, still facing downward, his muscled, tattooed back relaxed under my ministrations. I feel his deep sigh of content down low in my belly. I swallow hard and lick my lips.

“Glad it’s helping,” I say softly. “You need to take care of yourself. When you have responsibilities, it matters.”

“Do you take care of yourself, Dani?”

Even though he isn’t looking at me, it’s almost as if he’s staring right at me, as if he can read my mind.

“I try,” I say with a self-deprecating snort that ends in a sigh. “Some days I do better than others.”

I pay particular attention as I use the warm towel on the oil on his back, then do another final round with the stones.

Too soon, our time together is over. I reluctantly withdraw my hands, my fingers lingering on his tattoos. Our eyes lock, and his hunger mirrors my own.

“That was fucking amazing.”

A deep thrum of something half erotic, half fear-laced excitement courses through me.

My heart beats faster. “Thank you.” I swallow so I can gather up the courage to do what I know has to come next. “May I book you a follow-up? It’s far more effective than a once-in-a-while session.”

Please book a follow-up.

“I’m definitely coming back, but I don’t know when.”

I do my best not to let my disappointment show. “You’re welcome to come back anytime.”

“Thank you.”

And then he’s gone. The door swings shut behind him, and I almost feel betrayed, like I wanted the door to hold him back before he left, likely never to return.



CHAPTER THREE

SECRET ADMIRER

Ricco

I KNEW I shouldn't have come. I knew that if Sergio or Timeo or any of the men of the Brotherhood knew what I was doing they'd do everything to stop me. Because now that I've met her... now that she's touched me with those gentle, sensual hands of hers ... now that I've seen her up close, I need to see her again.

I have the eye of a sniper, so I notice minute details. I notice things others don't.

I've been watching Dani now for a while. From a distance, of course. But I like to think I've gotten to know her.

I've seen the way she buries her head in her hands when she thinks no one is looking. The way she sings and dances in the kitchen when her daughter's tucked into bed, off-key and with abandon, kicking up her heels and crying freely with lyrics that move her.

I wanted to see her up close. I want to watch her up close when she tucks her hair behind her ear, nervously bites her lip, or even sighs and squeezes her eyes shut together. I wanted to see her in her element, and not just at her house where she wanders around aimlessly, watering her plants for the umpteenth time, putting toys away until there's not a single item out of place, washing dishes with military precision before loading them into her dishwasher, as if somehow, if everything is clean, and perfect, and flawless... maybe she'll have some control.

I've watched Dani as if my life depended on it, but one question remains: I need to know if she loved him. I need to know if I took the life of a man she gave her heart to.

Maybe it's self-torture. But I like the truth. I need the truth.

If I find out she did, I'm walking away and never coming back.

I look down at the bag of groceries in my hand. Peanut butter, some of those crackers she likes to eat that she only gets when they're on sale, probably because they're five bucks a box. Fresh blueberries from a farm stand

downtown. Double chocolate chip muffins, Irish butter, a wedge of Manchego cheese.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so precise with this particular bag because I don't want her to suspect anything.

I walk easily under the motion sensor on her porch, aware of the fact that my sweep of her house has shown she has zero video surveillance and hardly any safety measures in place.

All that happens is a flicker of a light before it goes off again, but I know she's dead asleep by now anyway, likely curled up in bed next to little Emmy.

I place the bag of groceries on the front porch. Stoop, when a sound catches my attention. The snap of a twig and a rustle of leaves. I quickly slink back into the shadows and look behind me.

I hold my breath, waiting. But no one comes. Half a minute later, a dog with no collar comes into view, sniffing around the porch. "Get the fuck out of here," I mutter. "That's not for you."

He stares at me belligerently. Jesus.

"Go," I repeat. I start toward him and he takes off.

"Is someone there?" I dive back into the shadows when she opens the door. My heartbeat stalls at the sight of her standing in a faded nightshirt, no bra, her full breasts barely covered. She looks so wholesome and gorgeous, I want to gather her up in my arms and kiss the bare top of each breast.

"Spotty, is that you again?" she asks. I stifle a snort. I guess Spotty is the dog. She takes a step onto the porch, and halts when her foot hits the bag.

"My gosh," she whispers. Is she surprised there's another grocery delivery? Is she scared that I'm able to come onto her porch without her ever hearing me? Or is it something else?

The light from behind her illuminates her hair, her face cast in shadow. But I know that signature move of hers, where she lifts her hand to cover her mouth.

She bends on one knee and gently goes through each item in the bag, tracing

them with the tip of her finger.

"I don't know who's out there!" she says, louder than I expect. I jump then hold my place in stillness. "These deliveries are becoming very personal, and I just want to say... thank you." She gathers the bag up in her arms, turns around and walks back in. But this time, the lock slides into place.

Good girl.

She shouldn't be happy that somebody is sneaking up on her porch, giving her groceries. She should be setting up fucking surveillance cameras, trying to figure out who's doing it. She's way too trusting, and ridiculously naïve.

I want to open that door back up and shake her.

Of course I don't, though, because it's only me. And I want her to have these groceries, and those gift cards I tucked into a card at the bottom of the bag.

I quietly tiptoe to the side of her house, so I can look in the kitchen window without being noticed.

She's unpacking her groceries, a gentle smile playing on her lips with each little item and box.

Worth it.

But when she gets to the gift cards, she swipes at her eyes, as if she's crying.

My heart surges as she buries her head in her arms and weeps. I know she's crying by the way her shoulders shake.

She needs to be held. Comforted. She needs to stop being so alone.

Is she mourning her husband?

I wish I had the answer.



CHAPTER FOUR

“GETTING TO KNOW YOU...”

Dani

DAYS PASS. I get a few more customers, and business is beginning to pick up. Reviews online are strong, and word of mouth is doing its thing.

But all day long, every time the doorbell blares...I wait for Ricco.

And he doesn't come.

I know I should be doing something else to bring new customers in, but a part of me is afraid they'll take up the time I want to devote to him. Plus, the last time he came in here, he gave me a tip so big it wouldn't matter if I got any new customers or not for a while.

But that's not why I want to see him.

Last night, someone dropped off groceries again. It was good stuff, imported cheese, English walnuts, snacks for Emmy, peanut butter.

I started imagining that the person who brought me these is like my fairy godmother.

I don't like pity, and can barely even stand sympathy, but this just feels... different.

I eat my lunch and check in on Emmy's school video cam. They have an option where I can see little snippets of them throughout the day. It makes me sad when Emmy looks sad, and it makes me sad when she looks happy, because I want to be the one that brings a smile to her face.

Yeah, I've got issues.

"Who do I have to kill to get a spot tonight?"

My body knows who it is instantly. I swallow and give him a coy smile. "No one. I reserved this slot for you."

Wait, was that too forward?

So much for playing hard to get. I don't want him to think I'm sitting around pining away for him, even if I am sitting around pining away for him,

because no one needs a big head and let's be honest, I hardly know the man.

"Thank you," he says, obviously touched. "I've been traveling for days, and just got home. The airplane wrecked my back because we had such a long delay in Philly. Can you do your magic?"

"I can absolutely do my magic. Go on in and lay on the table, please. You know the routine."

When he turns to me, his eyes are smoldering, his grave face serious. "I do. I'll go strip."

A flare of arousal throbs in my core.

Yikes.

He walks past me, his shoulder so close to mine that I can feel his body heat. I tell myself all the things I should—why I can't be interested in him, why it's too much. That I'm a single mother and a widow.

"Come on in," Ricco says from the other side of the door. "I am suitably naked. Wait, can I say that?"

I snort to myself and shake my head.

"You can't. Take it back."

He gives me a sidelong look. "You want me to get dressed again?"

"Wise guy," I say with a wink. "This will go much better if you don't."

If I want to get to know more about Ricco, I need to start asking some questions. "Are you in a chatty mood today?" I ask.

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"Oh good. The more I know about a client, the better I can serve them."

"Uh huh."

I know it's probably not a good sign that when he comes in here, my heart throbs, and my spirits rise. I have never in my life felt this way about a man.

"What can I do for you today?" I ask, as I take my position beside him and

lay my hands on his shoulders. A powerful force of electric energy surges through my palms and winds me. I swallow and blink, pretending that didn't happen.

Did he feel that, too?

"Wish I could do the Full Monty again, but just a basic massage today. Going to go pick up my son from preschool."

His son.

"Oh wow, you have a kid too."

My heart races even faster. His kid! Oh, dear God, he has a child! He's a dad. I pretend to be professional, even though I'm definitely not.

"I do. My wife died of cancer a few years back."

My belly tightens. I swallow the knot in my throat.

"I'm so sorry to hear that. My husband also died fairly recently."

He stiffens. "I'm sorry to hear that, too."

Did he wonder? I need to change the subject, but he beats me to it.

"So, tell me about your daughter."

"Emmy's four. Started preschool this week. It's not the first time she's gone, but it's the first time in... a while I put her back in class. She loves it."

"But you miss her."

"I do." I run my fingers up and down his tight muscles, focusing on his shoulders again.

"I understand."

He does?

"It's hard to do this alone. I'm in the same boat."

No, no, no. This is getting way too personal. I do not need to know that Ricco is a single dad.

“Are you? I’m sorry.”

"Don't feel sorry for me," he says, while I work the tight muscles of his neck. "We only got married because our families needed us to. She was a good mother, but we weren't lovers. Martina was my friend and nothing more."

Wait, what? In the modern day, who marries because their families needed them to? How odd.

They weren't lovers?

It fills me with relief that he says he wasn't in love with his wife while at the same time something in the back of my mind shouts a warning.

From the very minute I first laid eyes on Ricco, I knew that he had a criminal vibe. I've been trying to imagine how I could take pictures of his tattoos so that I could look them up, as if maybe one of them is the Latin symbol for criminal?

Jesus. But I haven't been able to do any sleuthing. The truth is, I want to keep him as my dream man. I don't want to shatter any illusions.

Ricco's still face down on the table when he asks, "And you? Were you in love?"

His body tenses beneath my hands.

"At one point, I was," I say simply. I don't know him well enough to tell him any more. To tell him the love between me and my husband had died a long time ago.

"Did you marry for your family, too?"

I laughed. "No. My family couldn't have cared less. I married because I thought I loved him, but he was a lot more in love with money, power, and himself than anything or anyone else. He wouldn't travel, worked all day every day, and wouldn't spend a penny of his goddamn money."

"God, I fucking hate that."

"Same."

I massage down the length of his back, tracing the edges of his tattoo.

Wishing I had the boldness to ask him more.

"So, tell me. If you could travel anywhere, where would you go?"

"All over the world," I answer quickly, because I've thought about this a million times. "I want to take a cruise on the Mediterranean, ski the Swiss Alps, ride a boat in Venice, eat sushi in Tokyo and climb the Andes in Peru. I want to travel everywhere."

"You know how to ski?"

"Well, no, but.... I mean, there are lessons, right?"

His shoulders shake with his low chuckle.

"Sounds adventurous."

"Easy on paper, isn't it?"

"Yup. Do you like outdoor activities?"

I shrug. "I mean, does chasing a child who escaped the playground count as an outdoor activity?"

"Of course," he says with a grimace that tells me he knows this pain all too well. "One could argue it's an Olympic sport. What about hiking, biking, things like that?" he asks.

"I'm not sure you noticed, Ricco, but I am not in the best shape."

He turns his head and snaps his eyes to mine. "You shouldn't say such things about yourself."

Heat pinks my cheeks. "I'm only stating the truth."

I pause with my fingers still on his back, his eyes boring a hole in mine.

"You shouldn't say things like that about yourself. You're curvy. Stunning. Sexy."

Curvy.

Stunning.

Sexy.

Wait, what?

I need to change the subject. I'm glad he's turned his face back down because my cheeks are on fire.

But I can't think of a single thing to say. I focus instead on his back and shoulders.

"You're so tight," I whisper. "You're carrying even more than the last time you came in here, Ricco."

When he doesn't respond, I continue the massage. I rub oil in my hands and spread it over his bare back and down his ripped arms. I let the warmed, scented oil seep deep into his skin. I relish the way he relaxes under my touch.

"Why Venice?"

"I've read it's one of the top ten places to tour in all of Italy. I love the adventure of it, of traveling by boat instead of traditional ways. Plus, I heard it's beautiful."

"It is."

"You've been?"

"I've been all over Italy. I only just got back a short while ago."

"I've been right here." I shift my focus to his lower back next. "I've never left New England. The furthest I've ever gone from home is Vermont."

"Wow."

"Yeah." I shrug. "I'm ready to spread my wings a little. Maybe learn to fly."

"Literally or figuratively?"

I smile to myself. "Both."

"You deserve both."

Can a man hit on a woman just by sending her emotional-understanding

vibes? Because I am so there right now with him.

I swallow. “Thank you. So do you.”

There go those cheeks again.

My phone vibrates with a text.

“Ugh, I’m sorry. I usually silence that when I’m with a client.”

“You’re a mom. Makes sense you wouldn’t. Go ahead, take it.”

I lift my phone and check my messages. I blink. I stare at the message from Sarah and try to process it.

I found the name of the club where Nick died.

Club? It wasn’t a club, though. He got into a fight outside the train station.

That’s what they told you. I got more details. Can you meet me for lunch?

Name the time and place.

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah,” I say with a smile, forcing my lips together so I don’t betray what’s really going on. Sarah found out more information about Nick’s death. I may not have loved my husband, but I deserve to know the truth of it. My daughter lost her father. I’m killing myself as a single mom without a partner, doing it all on my own, and even though I can, it doesn’t mean I should have to.

“Everything’s fine,” I lie. “Now where were we?”

An hour later, Ricco’s gone. I’ve washed my hands, but the scent of warm vanilla still lingers. I can still visualize his tanned skin beneath my hands, still hear that rumble of a voice that glides through me like melted butter.

Sarah sits across from me with a chicken Caesar salad that looks big enough to feed a frat party. She’s cross-legged on the chair, her fork poised to dive in.

“You gonna help me eat this thing?”

“I feel it’s my duty and responsibility,” I say with a serious nod. I grab a second fork. “First, tell me where he was.”

Sarah gives me a smile. “The place is called Bella Notte. It’s a sex club owned by the Boston Italian mafia.”

I drop the fork, my appetite suddenly gone. *Sex club*. Where people... probably do kinky things. Uninhibited. On display. Freely.

I swallow.

“How do I get in?”

Sarah shakes her head. “Is there anything that I can say that will sway you?”

I pretend to think about it, tapping my chin thoughtfully. “Uh, no.”

She sighs. “Babe, if that’s what you want, you’ll have to call Jason.”



CHAPTER FIVE

THE FAVOR

Dani

"JASON," I say when he answers, my voice tight with resolve. "I need a favor."

My old friend, a successful attorney who works in a private firm, is silent for a moment. His connections extend well beyond the court room. "Hey, Dani, what's going on?"

"I need an alias," I explain, my fingers tapping nervously on the edge of the dresser. "And I need a way into a club..."

"What club?"

I swallow and lick my lips before I answer. "Bella Notte."

"Bella Notte?" Jason's surprise is palpable. "Why the hell would you want to get into *that* place?"

My grip on the phone tightens. "That's where Nick died. I need to investigate."

The line crackles with tension before Jason sighs. "Listen, you know that case is closed. You know they have eyewitnesses that said he was drunk, tripped, and it was a freak accident. Daniella, he hit his head on the concrete, nothing more."

"And you know as well as I do that I'm not that stupid."

Nick was a lying, cheating jerk, but he wasn't the kind to get fall-over drunk. If he was anything, he was graceful. The man didn't have a toenail a millimeter too long.

Jason curses. "Daniella, this is dangerous. I can't be party to you doing anything that involves the Montavio family."

Wait a minute. The Montavio family. There's that name again.

My skin prickles. I swallow. "Did you say... Montavio?"

No.

“Yeah, Dani, they own that place and a few others in Boston. You don’t want to fuck around with them.”

I close my eyes and draw in a breath.

I have, though. I’ve already taken one of them as my client.

If I go, will I get to see Ricco?

How would he respond to me being there?

“You don’t have to be involved. All I’m asking is for you to do me a favor and if you can’t do it, I’ll move on.”

“Jesus Christ, Dani.”

“You know you can... c’mon, Jay.”

“Fine. I can. But are you sure about this, Daniella?”

My heart pounds in my chest, but there's no turning back now. "I'm sure. Please, Jason, I need your help."

"Alright, alright," he concedes after a beat. "Give me a few hours. I'll get you what you need. But please promise me you'll be careful, because those guys are fucking psychos."

"I promise," I say, my voice unwavering, my heart set on the path ahead.

Jason knocks on the door at half past ten with everything I need. Twenty-nine years old with impeccable taste in clothes and a flawless complexion, Jason’s as beautiful as he is intelligent.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” I say with a smile as I gesture him in. I keep my voice low, so we don’t wake Emmy. “You got a new boyfriend or something?”

Jason bites his lip and raises his eyebrows. I squeal.

“Jay! You don’t!”

“I do I do I doooo,” he says in a singsong voice. “Do you remember that piano teacher at the elementary school I told you about?”

I step into the bathroom, open a tube of lip gloss, and slide it across my lips.
“The one who plays baseball in those tight pants?”

He nods soberly. “The very same.”

“No!”

“Yes! So go get your shit done and come back, girl. The night is young and we’re meeting for breakfast.”

Hours later, standing outside of Bella Notte, I take a deep breath, my heart racing in my chest. I’m draped in a new identity, a borrowed confidence that barely conceals my trepidation.

“Can I help you?”

The bouncers eye me skeptically, but I push through the nerves, raising my chin and taking a step forward. I hold up the fake ID with a trembling hand, hoping I don’t get caught. What would they do?

But they check a clipboard and nod at my name.

“Welcome back, Sasha. Front three rooms only tonight, please, the rest are reserved for a private party.”

“Of course,” I say brightly.

We will see about that.

When the doors open, the pulse of music washes over me, mingling with the low hum of conversation. Inside, the world feels both unfamiliar and electric. Every fiber of my being is on high alert as I scan the crowd, but it’s not like any of the evidence will be obvious.

Jason’s parting words echo in my mind.

“The Montavio family owns and runs Bella Notte, which means that whatever happens there is essentially outside of the law. Rumor has it the owner, Sergio, has strict safety protocols in place, but if something bad happens to you, there’s nothing I can do to help,” Jason warned.

How nice.

As I weave through the crowd, the dim lights casting shadows that seem to harbor secrets, I know that this is just the beginning. My resolve hardens with every step I take, every beat of the music that resonates with the rhythm of my determined heart. My journey into the heart of darkness has begun, and I can only hope that my quest will lead me to the answers I so desperately seek.

Family law doesn't hold a candle to real-life sleuth work.

Go undercover at the swankiest private sex club in New England? Don't mind if I do.

I look around the club, not exactly sure what I'm looking for, but I know that I need to take note of as much as I can.

This definitely isn't what I was expecting.

"Hey, gorgeous." I look up to see a punky kind of girl with purple streaks in her hair and a beautiful sequined tube top peering at me. "You new here?" She keeps her head to the side and gives me a smile.

So much for blending in.

"No," I lie. "It's just been a while."

Been a while since what, Dani? Been a while since you've been anywhere near good sex?

Yeah, that.

"Name's Quinn, yours?"

This is an exclusive sex club in the heart of Boston. And we're just exchanging names?

A brief moment of panic. Am I using my real name?

First name, yes. Screw "Sasha Olivieri" and Jason's fake ID. Using it would mean that if someone called me by that name, I wouldn't recognize it. That would blow my cover. Last name, though... "Olivieri" is nice...

"Dani," I say. "Nice to meet you... "

"Quinn?" A deeper, masculine voice comes from behind us, and we both turn to look. A stunningly handsome man, of obvious Italian descent, stands behind us with his hands anchored on his hips. "I've been looking for you."

He's obviously displeased, and she's obviously... tickled? Why does she look so happy that he's not happy?

"And you just think you found me," she says with a waggle of her eyebrows, before she turns and runs.

He curses under his breath, but I catch the glint of a smile on his lips. Oh. A game of cat and mouse, then.

Maybe I'll like it here.

I close my eyes and mentally shake my head at myself. I can't like it here. What the hell am I thinking? I'm here to find out shit. I need to know who killed my husband and left my daughter fatherless.

I'm not here to have fun, I'm not here to enjoy myself, and I'm absolutely not here to make friends.

I walk with confidence to the bar and wave my hand at the bartender. I need some liquid courage.

The bartender is a pretty redhead wearing a fitted T-shirt and ripped jeans. I noticed the clientele is in various forms of casual, sexy, and obvious BDSM attire. Some wear black and latex, some wear formal attire, and others are dressed as if they're in a Broadway show.

God, I wish Jason was here. He has such a flare for making different seem normal.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asks brightly.

I read over all of the club member requirements with a fine-tooth comb, noting every single rule and bylaw, and I know for a fact that all admitted members are allowed one drink apiece. I don't know if these rules are new, but a brief explanation made it clear: no one gets drunk at Bella Notte. No one does anything that blurs the lines of consent and safety.

I need to make this a good one.

"Long Island iced tea, please, with a wedge of lemon." All the alcohol and no dilution, please.

I take my drink to the corner of the club that's vacant and hidden. I tell myself that no one notices I'm here. But I know that if Ricco is here, he'll find me. He has a sharp eye, and I have a feeling he doesn't let anyone out of his sight. I don't know if I want to see him or not, and I'm battling guilt because I think I might be more curious about Ricco's role here than finding out who killed my husband.

Nick died three months ago. Ricco said he's only recently returned... but even if he wasn't here, maybe he knows who was?

I stand within the tall arched doorway to the main area of the club, my heart racing as I survey the unconventional environment before me. The air is thick with a heavy mix of desire and anticipation, and something else... something I can't quite put my finger on. It isn't quite joy, it isn't quite happiness, it's something more like a deep sense of belonging. The throbbing beat of the music doesn't quite mask the sounds of conversation and laughter echoing off the walls. A shiver runs down my spine, a mixture of apprehension and determination coursing through me. Will I find out more details about next steps?

Despite the blonde wig, glasses, and shoes with lifts that make me taller than I've ever been, I still feel like myself. I still fear someone will know who I am.

I make my way further into the club, careful to only go in the places well marked for visitors so I don't draw attention to myself. My eyes take in scenes that would normally leave me blushing. Couples dancing sensually, their bodies entwined together and moving in rhythm with the seductive music that fills the air. Couples openly kissing and engaging in displays of affection that would've made me flush even when I was in college. My cheeks heat as the nerves in my body awaken. I've been without good sex for so long, I've almost convinced myself that I am asexual.

Ha.

Until Ricco walked into my studio and brought what was dormant back to life.

The scent of candles and incense wafts through the air, intermingling with the unmistakable scent of desire. There's no way any club in Boston allows candles to be lit, but then I realize there are diffusers, and flameless candles in sconces. My gaze remains focused as I discreetly observe the clubs' patrons, searching for any hint of information, anything that might shed light on Nick's mysterious death.

I hear his voice before I see him. I turn away from the sound of that deep vibration with a husky, masculine edge to it.

"I'm proud of you," he says. Instant jealousy floods me. Who is he proud of?

Why is no one ever proud of me?

I risk a sidelong glance toward the sound of Ricco's voice.

My gaze locks onto a figure that sets my heart to stuttering. I know that tall, dark-haired man, that air of confidence and authority, that dominating presence. I swallow, hard, torn between my professional objective and the lure of my feelings. My mind races, and I'm battling feelings of guilt and raw, animalistic desire. What is Ricco going to do when he sees me here?

I take a step back. Oh my God. Why has it never occurred to me that he isn't single? He's a client, no more, no less, a client with the sexiest voice I've ever heard. But I'm lonely and needy and realize I must've let my imagination get the best of me.

My throat tightens, and tears blur my vision. I didn't even cry when I buried Nick. What is going on with me? Ricco leans in, talking to a beautiful, stunning redhead. He smiles and puts his arm around her shoulders in an almost... friendly way.

Please tell me you're just friends. Please.

As I watch him with her, they pull apart.

"Vivia!" somebody next to me yells out. A large man, who looks a lot like Ricco, gestures to her from the doorway. The redhead waves and walks over to him.

Ricco's eyes meet mine. I quickly look away.

Will he know who I am in disguise? Will he recognize me?

I don't want to risk it. I turn away but can see him stalking my way. I don't know if I want a confrontation with Ricco right now; I need to get out of here. I don't want to deal with the tug-of-war between my attraction to Ricco and my need for answers. The lines between my competing personal desires and professional obligations blur, leaving me confused and conflicted.

I need to get out of here.

But I can't.

I don't know what kinds of strings Jason pulled for me to get in here and I may never be able to get back in. I need to find what I'm looking for, and then get the hell out of here.

I step out through a door and down a narrow hallway.

“Hey!”

There's no way he recognizes me. I don't look anything like myself.

Why doesn't he go track down the redhead and leave me the hell alone?

I make my way back to the main area, where people are drinking and eating food. My stomach rumbles. In my effort to make it here tonight, I completely forgot dinner, unless a few spoons of Emmy's leftovers count.

I wouldn't think a club like this serves food, but it looks like I'm wrong. There are menus on every table.

“May I take your order?”

I open my mouth to order when a loud voice behind me speaks over me. Husky and masculine and just the slightest touch pissed, I know exactly who it is.

"I'll have a street tab of truth, followed by a side of honesty, and polished off with a good dose of what the hell."

The waitress's eyes go wide, and I stifle a groan.

“Well,” I say with a forced laugh. “Hope y'all give that to him for free,

because I wouldn't pay for that kind of order."

The waitress looks from me to him and back again. "I, uhm....so I'll be over by the bar if you need me, just flag me down."

She runs.

I turn to face Ricco and feign ignorance. "Can I help you, sir?"

Narrowing his eyes at me, he pulls out a chair and stares.

"No, but you can tell me what the hell you're doing here... *Dani*."

I swallow hard. "The same as you. And do you ask every guest that question?"

His eyes narrow even more. "Of course. And I can assure you, you are not here for the same reasons I am."

I give Ricco a tight smile. "I have every right to be here. And this isn't a very good welcome to a brand-new member."

"My family owns this club. I'm head of fucking security. I know every single person that steps foot into this club, and if you think for one minute that I don't know you are not a member here, think again."

Again, a flash of panic shudders through me when I think about the fact my husband died in the club owned by Ricco's family.

"Well, you might not be able to check the most recent updates."

"I don't give a fuck about that. You're out of here."

I glare at him. Excuse me? Indignation flares through me. "You can't tell me to leave!"

His brows rise. "I command security. I absolutely can."

Oooh. He commands security. Hot.

Wait!

"No. You can't make me leave. I have a right to be here. I have... reasons. I want —"

I suddenly stop, realizing we have a bit of an audience.

I am so tired of my cheeks flushing red.

Ricco's lips curl upward. "I fucking dare you to finish that sentence. Go ahead, baby. Tell me what you want."

"Privacy and respect," I say, not knowing until I say it out loud how true it is. I don't state everything else I want, but I mentally scream it until I feel as if I can barely hold it back any longer.

I want to be cherished.

I want to feel sexy.

I want to be loved.

His eyes smolder, and I can tell he wants to say something, but he doesn't. For some reason I don't quite understand, Ricco's a walking contradiction just like me.

"Anyway," I say, trying to keep my voice light and breezy. Time to turn these tables around. "I thought you were with somebody tonight. You shouldn't even be sitting at the table with me."

He stares at me and blinks. "With somebody? What the fuck are you talking about?"

How could I have ever thought this man was my dream man? He has a potty mouth, a jealous streak, and I don't quite know if I can trust him.

"You were with a woman in that..." That room that smelled like sex and sin, and everything I've been craving.

His brows snap together, and his lips press into a thin line. "I wasn't with anybody. Did you see me talking to a redhead?"

I look away and my voice drops an octave. I can't hide the way this makes me feel like shit. "Yes, I did. And now I suppose you're going to tell me she didn't mean anything to you." As if that isn't predictable.

He crosses his arms over his chest. "No, I'm not gonna lie to you and tell you that she doesn't mean anything to me. She means everything to me."

Opening my mouth, on the edge of indignation, I don't even know what to tell him, when he finishes the sentence. "I love my sister. I value family above all else."

"Oh," I say in an even lower voice.

His... sister.

"Oh," he repeats.

I look down at my hands. I don't know what to do with myself. I want to leave, before I've found out a single thing I came here for. I want to go hide, where no one can see me. Instead, I'm fidgeting nervously.

"How did you know who I was?" I ask quietly. I absentmindedly fiddle with the white skin where my wedding band used to lie. It's still marked.

"Sweetheart," Ricco says, leaning in so close I can smell his cologne and the strong, masculine scent of him. "I'd know those eyes if you stared at me across a solar system."

Oh. Oh, my God.

"How would you?" I ask curiously. "When we're together you're face down on the table."

"Because they're unforgettable. Come here," he says, leaning on his forearms. "The singles are here tonight and no one else gets to claim you."

My heart thunders.

Come here?

I lean in closer to him. "I... think we're... crossing therapist-client boundaries."

He reaches for my hair and weaves his fingers through it at the nape of my neck. "You crossed them first by coming in here," he says, his voice low and seductive. "Now, you're mine."



CHAPTER SIX

“IT’S COMPLICATED”

Ricco

I'M hard at the first touch of her silky hair entwined around my fist.

My pulse races watching her swallow and blink, and when she sinks her teeth into her lower lip, I want to lick that place she bites so badly I salivate.

"*Perfection*, Mr. Montavio," purrs a female voice behind me. "Perhaps you'd do us the honor of a demonstration with your partner?"

I release Dani as if she were on fire and whip my head around.

Madame Beau, our guest speaker and educator for all things sex-related and most notably BDSM-themed at Bella Notte, stands behind me.

"Oh, no," Dani says with a nervous laugh as she pushes to her feet. "I... I don't know about that. I have to go home."

But I can tell by the way she squirms and the way she looks at me that she wants this. She's in complete denial about how much she wants it.

"What kind of demonstration did you have in mind?"

Dani's jaw drops and she shakes her head.

"Your technique at holding her attention rapt while you pull her hair. Measured pain and attention, her eyes on you," Madame Beau says with a twisted smile. "It's..." She kisses her fingertips. "*Chef's kiss*."

"You want him to dominate me?" Dani says, her eyes wide and expressive as her mouth parts in shock. "*Seriously?*"

But she wants it. I'm no fool. She wouldn't have come in here if she didn't. No one walks into Bella Notte for the hell of it.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. She isn't ready yet. It's her first night here." Dani narrows her eyes at me when I bait her.

Madame Beau's eyes light up with excitement.

Dani is the last person I should want anywhere near Bella Notte. I have

secrets here, secrets that I don't want her of all people to find out. And yet here she stands, in all her innocent, stunning beauty, taking my breath away. Fact is, there's nobody in the world I'd rather have here than Dani. I want to call her bluff.

"She needs more time. She's too uncomfortable with a public display," I say, fully aware of what an asshole I sound like.

Dani's eyes predictably flash at me. "Says who?"

Atta girl. That's what I want to see.

I shove my hands in my pockets, trying to appear casual when the situation is anything but. The tension between us crackles like a live wire, and Madame Beau smiles benevolently at both of us, as if she knows we're playing a game of cat and mouse, and she is all the happier to be a spectator.

"When's the demo?" Dani asks, lifting her chin defiantly. Madame Beau smiles at her. "Tomorrow evening. Seven p.m. The dance hall."

A momentary look of panic flashes in Dani's eyes before she swallows. "I can do it," she says, giving me a challenging look now. "If you can."

If I can. Funny.

"I would love that. Sign me up."

Madame Beau claps her hands in delight and walks away.

Dani and I stare at each other across the short distance.

"I'll need to get a babysitter," she says in a little voice, and I wonder if she regrets what she's just agreed to do.

"So will I. In fact, that's why my sister Vivia was here. She's been babysitting for me so I could get back here and help Sergio out."

"Since you came back to work?"

"Yeah."

Fuck. What am I doing? I can't let myself lie to this woman but telling her the truth would push her away for sure.

“It's complicated, the two of us coming here, isn't it?”

So much more than you know.

I grit my teeth. “I wish the demonstration was tonight.”

"What is that supposed to mean?" she says, her hand at her throat absentmindedly, a sure sign of nerves if I've ever seen one. “Do you mean you want to dominate me?”

Fucking hell yes, I want to dominate her.

I shake my head. "Nah, it's just that they serve really good pizza here."

She laughs out loud, shaking her head at me.

"You're a terrible liar, Ricco," she says adorably.

A sharp pang of guilt hits me right in the solar plexus.

Oh, honey. If you only knew.

I'm an excellent liar.



CHAPTER SEVEN

I. WANT. HIM.

Dani

WHEN I GET HOME, Jason wants all the juicy details. I feel like I'm betraying him because I can't tell him much of anything.

I don't know what this is with Ricco. I don't know *who* he is. All I know is my thoughts and feelings are starting to be consumed by thoughts of him.

I tell Jason what I can.

"You're right, the Montavio brothers definitely own it and... and I'm starting to wonder if maybe it *was* just an accident."

I feel as if I'm betraying my family, betraying my daughter for wanting to give up the chase so quickly. But my gut instinct says that digging deeper into this is going to give me answers I may not want.

There was another bag of groceries on my front steps when I arrived. Jason delights in the little package of artisan handmade crackers, the roasted peanuts, and the wedges of aged cheese. I find a bottle in the shape of a princess filled with juice and a bag of Emmy's favorite popcorn.

I sit at the table with Jason, eating crackers and cheese with a glass of wine.

"Who's your fairy godmother?" he asks with a twinkle in his eye.

"I have no idea. Probably somebody that knew me at work, or maybe a neighbor? I dunno. I guess it's well-intentioned because they give us food that Emmy likes, and gift cards. I'm feeling it's just someone trying to be kind and generous."

Jason puts his cracker down and stares thoughtfully. "You know I don't like to think of things with a negative mindset, because I don't want to attribute ill intentions to people, but..." His voice trails off. "At the very least, we should put up some surveillance cameras, don't you think?"

"Sounds expensive," I say with a grimace.

Jason snorts, rolling his eyes at me. "Dani, do you have any idea how much it costs to get into Bella Notte?"

I shake my head with a grimace.

"Do I want to know?"

"You do not. Let's just say, surveillance cameras are definitely within the budget, and I will have them for you tomorrow."

A part of me doesn't want to know who's leaving these things for us. A part of me doesn't want to know a lot of things, because it's nice to assume others do the things they do for the right reasons. Sometimes it's better not to know the truth of things because if you do, you might crumple beneath the weight of it.

I swallow a lump in my throat with another bite of cheese and cracker.

"So can you... babysit tomorrow again by chance? I swear I'll bake you that banana bread you like with the walnuts and caramelized bananas..."

Jason shakes his head. "Babe, I'm sorry. I wish I could, but I've got tickets for a concert."

Dates and concerts and *plans*. I'm not jealous at all.

"Oh no worries, I'll figure it out."

Wait. Do *I* have a date?

What am I doing?

I have to figure it out. Because yeah... I do have a date myself.

Early the next morning, Emmy climbs into bed with me and steals all the blankets. I snuggle up to her and hold her against my chest, her curly blonde hair askew. She's so still and quiet when she rests, so peaceful. Nothing like the inquisitive, precocious little girl she is when she's awake.

I text Sarah.

Any chance you can babysit tonight?

The response comes almost instantaneously.

Of course! Spend an evening with my favorite little four-year-old? Don't mind if I do.

I'm distracted in the morning drop-off line at Emmy's preschool. They have it set up so that parents can't walk up to the school building with the kids. Too many tearjerker moments from kids and their parents. So a teacher's assistant comes to the car and helps the kids get into the school. Emmy waves her hand at me. "Don't forget tomorrow's the parent coffee!"

Parent *what*? I stifle a groan.

I quickly take out my phone and do a search in my email for *parent coffee*.

There it is, right there, plain as day.

Please join us tomorrow morning for an early morning drop off coffee date! Coffee and donuts will be served. Come and mingle with our parents and teachers.

Fan-fucking-tastic. Mingle? I don't want to mingle with people I don't know. That sounds like torture.

Donuts will only add more curves to my curves and I don't need that, and too much coffee makes me jumpy.

Do it for Emmy.

I grit my teeth when I remember that grin across her face as she reminded me about parent coffee.

It's fine, it'll be fine.

But now is the time when I need to compartmentalize. This is when I have to temporarily shift out of mom mode and into work mode because I want this business to work, goddammit. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before I pull a protein bar from my bag and unwrap it, taking a big bite. Chewing methodically, barely tasting it, I scroll through my emails.

Oh. Huh. I have notices for appointments in twelve different time slots. My heart picks up a bit.

I've got twelve clients! How did that happen?

This is what I need, what I've hoped for.

I've been dreaming of this since I opened the studio, my inbox being flooded with appointments people have made online. And now... it is.

I look at the client names on the forms.

Ricco Montavio

Ricco Montavio

Ricco Montavio

He... He booked *every appointment all day*.

My heart flutters as I park my car and enter my studio. He'll be here any moment...and for the rest of the day?

And then tonight, I'll leave Emmy at Sarah's and...head into Bella Notte.

What am I doing here?

I pause in the doorway, bracing against a sudden deluge of emotion. Guilt and fear plague me, and I feel nauseous.

I glance at the time.

Ten minutes.

I call Sarah.

"Babe, what's up?"

"Can you do a super quick emergency three-way call?" I ask, hiding in the corner of my studio as if even the plants might hear this.

"With Jason?" she whispers.

"Yes," I whisper back.

"Of course."

One minute later, I'm slumped against the wall, my heart pounding as my sister and bestie get ready to hear me out.

“Alright girl, let’s hear it. Spill. By my calculations, I have seven minutes until my first meeting.”

I’ve already told them the tiniest bit about Ricco, and now I share that he’s booked me all day long and they are, of course, extremely eager to hear more.

“I just—I don’t know what I’m doing. He’s dangerous, I know that much,” I say, my voice shaking. “His family owns this club, and you know what that means. They’re... I don’t know, mafia or something.”

Sarah snorts. “Everyone’s mafia in Boston.”

My eyes go wide. “I’m not!”

“And this, darling, is why *you’re* the good sister.”

“Sarah,” I groan, staring at the clock on the wall. Not much time at all now, and he’ll be here. “Have *you* ever seen someone in the mafia?”

“Of *course* I have. Jesus, next thing you know you’ll be asking me if I’m still a virgin.”

“You have a child,” I say sensibly.

“So did the Virgin Mary,” she responds.

Jason groans. “I’m not a churchgoer and even I’m bracing so I don’t get struck by lightning. Okay, alright girls, *focus*. Ricco Montavio booked Dani for the day, after they met up at the club last night. He might be dangerous, but he manages to make that work for him in all the good ways. He pays good attention to Dani, and obviously wants to see more of her.”

I chew my lip. “Well, when you put it that way—you make this sound doable.”

“Doable? Of fucking *course* it’s doable, sweetheart!” I can practically see Jason shaking his head on the other end of the phone. “Listen, Dani. You feel guilty because your husband died. A husband who didn’t love you and who *cheated* on you.”

“The dad to my daughter,” I remind him with a tremor in my voice. “And she

didn't deserve that."

"If we start talking about shit that happened to us that shouldn't have, we'll be here all day," Jason retorts. "Dani, we're talking about *you* now. You have a massage studio. It's literally one of those things on your *vision board*. You've got *clients*. Your daughter is happy and healthy and so are you. Oh, and you've got the most stunningly gorgeous hair I've ever seen in my life."

Sarah giggles. "One of those things is not like the other—"

"Oh, hush, bitch, you know I'm obsessed with that hair."

He's not the only one.

I remember the fire in Ricco's eyes when he wrapped his hand around my hair.

The door blares obnoxiously and all the air goes out of the room. Ricco enters, dressed—*oh my God*—for the first time since I've met him, in *dress clothes*, as if he's stepping foot into an office, and I swear I didn't know until right this second that the man could look any hotter. He grimaces and gestures to the door. "I'm fixing that damn thing before the sun sets tonight."

I give him a little wave and point to the phone before I hold up a finger. "Just a sec," I mouth, and in a panic wonder if that looked like I said *just sex*.

Dear God.

My heart flutters. "Thanks so much, Mrs. Amesbury, I'll check the calendar and get back to you later this afternoon. Yes, of course."

Sarah giggles.

Jason hisses into the phone, "Hot Pocket's arrived, I see. Knock his socks, his briefs, and anything else he might have on him *off*, and I want every detail later. *Go*. For fuck's sake, Dani, you deserve earth-shattering orgasms and happiness. *Love you*."

I disconnect the call and do my best to make sure my cheeks don't look flushed, which probably doesn't work at all.

"Why, hello, if it isn't my"—I glance at the emails— "nine o'clock, ten

o'clock... all-day client." I put my phone down, cross my arms on my chest, and look up at him. "What's that about?"

Ricco shrugs, so damn sexy in his button-down shirt, all rippled muscles and grace and masculinity.

"I wanted to see you. We have some practice to do before tonight. You know I paid for every one of those appointments."

"Of course," I say, opening up the computer to mark him as here. "I see —"

I see a fifty percent tip on each appointment. My heartstrings tug.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I lifted hard yesterday, and my shoulders are tight as fuck. You've got your work cut out for you."

My heart flutters as I step into the dimly lit massage room, my fingers brushing against the soft silk curtains. A mixture of nervous excitement and anticipation swirls in my stomach. Little does he know, I'm just as eager for that as he is.

I hit "Play" on my phone's music app and start a diffuser. The room is filled with the soothing scent of lavender, and gentle strains of instrumental background music waft from the Bluetooth speakers. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. The rustling of the curtains signals his presence, and there he is, sitting on the massage table, unbuttoning his shirt.

"I'll be right back," I murmur.

Shrugging out of his shirt, his skin is bathed in the warm amber light. Our eyes meet. "I'll be here."

I step out of the room, completely aware of the fact that Ricco's getting naked on the other side of that door.

That tonight, we're doing a demo at Bella Notte.

That I, in the crass words of Jason... *deserve earth-shattering orgasms and... happiness.*

Happiness, dammit.

I knock gently on the door.

His voice is gruff and husky. “Yeah.”

The sheet’s over his naked form, his muscled arms over his head in languid perfection. I want to explore his body. I want to explore all of him.

Tipping his head to the side, he stares at me.

I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks, but I hold his gaze with a newfound boldness.

Starting with practiced professionalism, I pour warm, fragrant oil into my palms, rubbing them together to create a comforting warmth. My hands make contact with his broad shoulders, and I work on the knots and tension with practiced ease. A low, appreciative hum escapes Ricco's lips, sending a rush of satisfaction through me.

“Fuck, that feels so good. Am I still carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders?” he playfully jokes, his voice a deep, velvety rumble that sends delicious shivers down my spine.

“I do believe it’s now the solar system,” I say with mock concern, as I continue to work my magic. I relish his every groan. I savor the warm feel of his skin beneath my hands.

Continuing the rhythmic touch, I move down his back with fluid motions. Yet, as my hands glide lower, closer to the small of his back, I can't ignore the electric connection between us. It's as if the air is charged, thick with an undeniable energy.

At the small of his back, I let my touch linger a fraction longer than necessary. I pause, my fingertips nearly to his perfect ass. I span the breadth of his waist.

“How’s that?” I whisper. “Tell me if it’s too much.”

“You’re not even close to too much,” he groans. Emboldened, I trace the contours of his muscles as they tense and relax beneath my fingertips. Working my way back up, his breath catches when my fingers graze the nape of his neck, eliciting a shiver that reverberates through him. It echoes across

my own skin, his energy matching mine.

His eyes flutter open. Our eyes lock again, the intensity in his gaze fanning a need deep within me. The room feels warmer, the music a seductive backdrop to the growing tension. With a newfound confidence, I let my fingers trail along his jawline, my touch feather light. I massage his shoulders and do what I've longed to do, exploring every perfect masculine inch of him until my own body teems with need and my breath is hoarse.

"Is this still considered a massage?" Ricco's voice is husky, desire lacing every word.

Earth-shattering orgasms and happiness.

I've lived my whole life in fear.

I've started to believe that men are untrustworthy, and I can't ever be intimate again.

No more.

No more.

Leaning in, my lips brush against his ear. My own voice heavy with longing, I murmur, "As long as we're off the clock, it's whatever we want it to be." I do have at have at least a *semblance* of professionalism.

Ricco's arm reaches out, pulling me closer.

"Don't!" I protest. "I'm—too—I'm not—a small girl, Ricco, I'm—"

His palm slaps my ass, hard. My breath hisses out.

"You're perfect."

Our lips meet. I sigh, relishing the feel of his strong arms holding me. His mouth a contradiction of gentle strength. Time seems to stand still as we lose ourselves in the intoxicating sensation of our mouths moving against each other's, a symphony of longing and need. I moan at the feel of his hands on my body, unapologetic and bold. He rolls over onto his back and arranges me on top of him.

His hardened length presses against me as he laces his fingers at the nape of

my neck.

“You’re so beautiful, Dani,” he whispers. “So fucking beautiful.”

I try to silence my inner critic, the one that tells me he’s a widower and I’m a widow, that we’re on the rebound or whatever you call it, that we should be cautious and sensible and responsible.

I want to dismiss his compliment. I want to tell him I’m too heavy, my skincare routine sucks, and my tousled hair deserves more than a finger comb. I open my mouth and catch a glimpse of the intensity of his expression. My own shoulders relax at the sight.

“Thank you.”

With a surge of daring I never knew I possessed, I straddle him, my fingers tracing a path down his chest. His breathing turns ragged, matching the wild rhythm of my own heart. The boundaries that once separated therapist from client have vanished, leaving behind only the fierce hunger we’ve both been suppressing.

I. Want. Him.

“Baby,” he whispers. “Come here.”

I bend my mouth toward him. The smell of the massage oil and his masculine scent wash over me. My eyes flutter closed.

My phone blares.

“No. NO no no no NO,” I groan.

I half expect him to tell me to ignore it, like any man hard as a rock on the verge of sex might say. But Ricco’s a parent, too, with a surprising depth of understanding.

“You need to take that, don’t you?”

“I’ll be quick,” I say with a groan. “I promise.”

“It’s all good, babe.” He winks at me. “You’ll have plenty of time for your next client, I promise.”

I reach for my phone and quickly answer it, hoping my voice doesn't sound as breathy as it sounds to my own ears. "Hello?"

"I'm so sorry to bother you. Is this Emmy's mom?"

My heartbeat spikes. "It is."

"It's the school nurse. Emmy says her tummy hurts."

Relief she's okay floods through me. I swallow and close my eyes, nodding at the phone. "I'm on my way."



CHAPTER EIGHT

“YOU DESERVE BETTER”

Ricco

I CAN TELL by the look on her face that something's changed and she needs to go.

"Everything alright?"

"It's Emmy," she says, shaking her head. "I have to get her at school. *Dammit.*"

I sit up. "Is she okay?"

I've watched her little girl, with the same wide blue eyes and freckled cheeks as Dani's. She's full of energy and questions but sweet and tender. Like her mama.

I've watched her as I berated myself for taking this kid's father from her. A fucking bottle of juice doesn't even come close to making up for it. I could give her my kingdom and every penny in the bank and still fall miles short.

"She says her belly hurts." Dani bites her lip.

"Poor kid. I'll go with you to get her."

"I don't—that won't be—"

"You want me to sit here in your studio with a raging hard-on while you fight Boston traffic on your own? That doesn't seem fair at all."

"For whom?" she says with a laugh.

I wink at her as I take the towel she hands me and clean myself up. "I'm starving, too. Let's get something to eat, okay?"

"I'll refund you for today's—"

"Woman, stop it." I don't bother to hide the irritation in my voice. "Stop the self-deprecation and bullshit, or tonight's demonstration will have the additional benefit of a punishment scene."

Dani blinks, staring at me.

“I’m just trying to be professional.”

“Fuck professional.” I adjust myself with a groan and zip up my pants. “Let’s go.”

Things between me and Dani were starting to sizzle, the heat building up like a damn wildfire. I’d already decided I’d push that second massage table over and take her right here, right now.

Cockblocked by a fucking school nurse.

“Did you drive in?”

“Yep.”

“You drive... a Range Rover. In Boston?”

I open the SUV’s door for her. “I do. What did you expect?”

“Something different. Tesla, maybe? Porsche... something small and sleek.”

“Best safety ratings,” I mumble, jerking my thumb to the car seat in the back.

“Ahh. And where’s your son today?”

“School. My sister’s picking him up.”

“Your sister,” she says with a grimace. “I’m... sorry about that misunderstanding.”

After a moment, she lightens the mood by asking, “So why the fancy getup today?”

I chuckle, grateful for the change in topic. “Business meeting in town.”

Her curiosity is genuine, and I find myself smirking. Despite my rough edges, there’s something about her that makes me want to open up. But I can’t let myself get carried away. This thing between us shouldn’t be happening and we both know it.

Yet, as much as I tell myself that, the fire between us just burns hotter. It’s like I’m being drawn into a storm I can’t escape, even if I know damn well I

should.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be driving her. I shouldn't be imagining how I'll get Dani alone tonight and remind her that she isn't just a single mom whose needs come second to everyone and everything around her...but that she's a woman who deserves to be *worshipped*.

"Address?"

I shake my head when she gives it to me. Pretending this is just a coincidence, that I didn't enroll my son in the same school as her daughter on purpose.

"Wow. Marco goes there, too."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Well, then," she says with an adorable smile. "You know exactly how to get there, don't you?"

"I do."

And I further know that tomorrow's parent coffee day, and that Dani and I will both be there.

"Tell me about Marco," Dani says in an inquiring voice.

My face softens. "He's three years old," I say, a proud glint in my eye. "He's got these eyes, just like..." I pause, cruising to a stop at a stoplight.

"Like his mom's?" she asks gently.

"Yeah." I swallow. "Like his mom's. Big and bright, you can't help but get lost in them."

Dani leans in, interested. "Sounds adorable."

I nod, my smile growing wider. I love that she isn't threatened by the mention of Marco's mother. "And he's got these dimples, one on each side when he grins. Makes your heart melt, really."

She chuckles quietly. "I can imagine."

"His eyes, though," I continue. "They're this bright shade of blue, like the sky on a clear day. And those lashes... they're dark as coal. He'll be a heartbreaker one day."

"Like his dad?" she asks teasingly.

I chuckle. "Yeah, like his dad."

Dani's eyes seem to sparkle, captivated by the picture I'm painting. "He sounds like quite a charmer."

The light turns green. "He's got this olive skin, a bit on the darker side. Takes after my side of the family there."

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"I had three brothers and one sister. My oldest brother's deceased. You saw Vivia. Sergio and Timeo are younger."

"I'm sorry to hear about your brother." Her eyes are sympathetic. "I have one sister and she's my best friend."

I reach for her hand and squeeze it.

"Well now. Olive skin and blue eyes, that's quite a combination," she remarks, a hint of admiration in her tone.

"He's a bundle of energy," I say with a chuckle, shaking my head affectionately. "Always curious about everything around him. You can see those gears turning in his head as he figures things out."

"He's going to be a little explorer," Dani adds, her enthusiasm evident.

"Definitely. He's into dinosaurs and trucks, can't get enough of them," I say, a fondness in my voice. "But he's got this thoughtful side too. Sometimes, he just sits quietly, observing, lost in his own little world."

Dani smiles, curiosity shining in her eyes. "I can't wait to meet him. What else did he inherit from your family?"

She shifts her gaze away, and it pings my curiosity. What does she know

about my family?

"He loves food. *Loves* it. I haven't found a single thing he won't eat. Put anything in front of him, and he'll gobble it up without a fuss."

She groans. "Oh teach me your ways. My daughter subsists on chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese, despite my best efforts."

"I can't take credit. The kid was born with the appetite of a truck driver."

We pull up to the school. "I'd ask you to tell me about Emmy, but something tells me I'm going to see for myself."

"Yup."

Ten minutes later, Emmy's chattering away in the back seat, thankfully the right size to fit into Marco's car seat.

"Your tummy hurts but not so much you don't have room for chicken nuggets?"

"Yes," Emmy says seriously. "My tummy never hurts for chicken nuggets."

We bring Emmy home and get her situated with a show, then Dani makes coffee.

"You hungry?" she asks.

"I could go for some lunch. I'll order something?"

She waves her hand at me and rolls her eyes. "Yeah, no way are you ordering takeout while sitting in my home. I'll make you something to eat. Do you eat anything, like your son?"

I grin at her. "Anything but calamari."

I've only seen Dani's home from a distance; it's an entirely different experience being inside it.

Every doubt I have about being anywhere near Dani dissipates in the cheerful, handcrafted interior of Emmy and Dani's home. It's peaceful in here, welcoming, and I feel as if I belong.

I didn't even feel this way in my family home growing up. This is so different. The cleanliness, that much I knew. No, her eye for decorations and interior decor is simple, it's just enough. An oversized chair with a hand-crocheted blanket draped over the side. Overstuffed pillows tossed haphazardly on the couch. Stunning glass vases mingled with handcrafted children's artwork. Her house feels more like a home than any place I've ever been in. I almost feel guilty for the utterly masculine and simplistic home that I've made for Marco.

I sit on a barstool, watching Dani in the kitchen. She dices up greens and slices cooked chicken, then tosses them together with baby tomatoes and cucumbers. "When I grew up, we had pre-washed iceberg with low-fat Italian dressing. I distinctly remember the first time I had a salad with actual greens that weren't pre-washed and stuffed into a cheap plastic bowl..." I chuckle at the memory. "It was topped with fresh-made salad dressing with actual ingredients—nothing fabricated in some food lab in Nebraska. God, I was a goner after that, I tell ya."

Dani pulls out a lemon and squeezes it a little bit, rolling it between her beautiful hands. She cups it for a moment in her palms, likely warming it, before she slices it and squeezes fresh lemon juice over our salad. Next comes freshly ground pepper and a dash of sea salt.

"My mother was a perfectionist, so she didn't like to even make her kitchen dirty. She would microwave her vegetables, and sometimes use the crockpot for meat. We used paper plates and napkins, and disposable utensils, so every day the regular dishes and the cabinets would stay clean. My mother was a good mom, but the whole food thing... not so much. What about you?"

Something tells me my upbringing was very different from hers.

"We had a private chef," I tell her with a shrug. "My parents had a lot of money. My mom hated to cook, and my dad was never home. We ate really well, but it was a cold and sterile environment."

She nods, as if she understands. I wonder if she does. "Where did you grow up?"

"Right here, just outside of Boston."

She places the two bowls of salad and a loaf of crusty bread on the table, alongside a little crock of butter. "Sit," I tell her as she turns and begins loading the dishwasher.

I can see the hesitation in her face. "What is it?"

She shrugs. "I was just wondering when the last time I sat down to have a meal was." She laughs. "I pretty much live on Emmy's leftovers, protein bars, and occasionally some takeout, while standing over the kitchen sink."

"You deserve better than that, Dani."

Her eyes grow a little sad and she shrugs, wiping down the counter. "Maybe."

I reach for her hand and tug her into the chair across from me. "Not maybe."

Everything in me continues to warn me that this is a bad idea. Every time she opens her mouth, every time she looks at me, every time I breathe, every time she touches me... A little bit of my resolve crumbles.

I can almost justify what we're doing. Almost.

But not entirely.

Emmy falls asleep after her show, leaving me and Dani alone. Dani tucks her quietly into bed and joins me in the living room.

"I have a few more clients this afternoon," she begins with a sly smile.

"Your client unfortunately has to get to another meeting before tonight. So maybe you can actually take a little time for yourself for once," I suggest.

I stand from the couch, and I want to gather her in my arms. I want to kiss the pretty pink flush on each cheek. I want to kiss her forehead. I want to taste her.

I do none of those things. "Thank you for lunch."

She doesn't trust me yet. There's a magic in her massage studio, and it feels very different here where I'm on her turf, in her home, with the child of the man that I killed sleeping in the other room.



CHAPTER NINE

THE DEMONSTRATION

Dani

STANDING in the doorway with Ricco, I feel like it's the end of a date and now it's time to kiss.

Or not.

I'm smart enough to know that what we're doing is dangerous. I'm smart enough to know that allowing him into my home, doing... life with him, is probably more dangerous than anything.

I bite my lip. "We didn't get to... practice," I say, leaning back against the doorframe, because if I stand outside with him and talk about practicing what we're going to do tonight, I'm not sure how to handle that. I'm not even sure what it is we *are* doing tonight.

He gives me the kind of grin that makes his eyes crinkle around the edges. I have to remind myself that he's a dangerous man. Because right now, he's making my heart do all sorts of fluttery things, and I'm about to pretend that he's a good man. That he doesn't belong to the Montavio family. That he's not a criminal who's hiding things from me and I know it.

I'm pretending that this isn't an accident waiting to happen. That my Prince Charming has arrived, my dream man come to earth.

"Come early."

"I'm not sure if I can. I'll have to see when Sarah is free."

"Who's Sarah?"

"My sister. She's watching Emmy tonight."

Reaching for my hand, he strokes his thumb along the back of it, a natural move that makes my whole body settle, as if the universe pauses for the smallest fraction of a second to say... *This. Pay attention. It matters.*

I swallow and get my shit together. He's talking, and I haven't heard a word he's said.

“If you can come early, definitely do so. If not, I'm going to send you a voice message to review. I don't want you to be taken off guard, and I want you to be completely comfortable with tonight's demo. If you're not, we're not going ahead with it, and that's okay.”

Okay, all right. This is a little crazy, but I can move forward with this understanding. "Thank you.”

I want to go with him. I want to take Emmy and get in the car and drive to the school and pick up little Marco and meet him.

As soon as I have that thought, I wonder where it came from. What a strange thing to want. Just because Ricco looks like my dream man, just because I like being around him and he obviously likes being around me, just because he's good with my daughter... Just because he makes me feel alive...

No, it's not just because of any of those things, it's because of all of those things. Damn it, those things matter.

I lay in the bed next to Emmy after Ricco leaves. She turns around and puts her legs on either side of me and buries her head against my neck. I hold her, and stifle the need to cry, because this moment is so precious. Because so many emotions have risen to the surface, and I don't know how to sort them. Because this moment in time is special and my heart knows things are about to change.

Because I'm nervous about tonight, because I know in my heart that, after tonight, I can't go back to the way things were.

With Nick, we lived a parallel existence, and the lines of our lives never crossed. With Ricco, they're already entwined, entangled, and complicated.

And I don't know if I want it any other way.

Later that night, I'm ready to go to Sarah's, and I have everything I need in my duffel bag.

I don't want Sarah to see me in the clothes that I'm planning on wearing, or the makeup, or the hair or anything.

I feel like I have two personalities right now—the crazy one where I am

heading to a sex club for a demonstration and the sane but admittedly boring “mom by day” one.

But when Emmy and I get to Sarah’s, she takes one look at the bag, and one look at my yoga pants and ratty tee, and shakes her head.

“Girl... What the hell are you doing?” she says in a heated whisper.

"I have all my stuff in the bag," I whisper back. "Don't worry."

She narrows her eyes at me. “Show me.”

With a groan, I unzip the bag and show her a pair of ripped jeans and a pretty white button-down peasant-style top.

“Nope. Nope. Nah-ah.”

Sarah grabs me by the hand and yanks me into her room while the kids play.

“Sarah,” I begin, apprehensive and nervous as fuck.

“Trust me, sis.” She yanks open her closet and starts digging in the back. “Good thing we wear the same size because we don’t have time to shop. Let’s see....” Clothes fly over her shoulder, building a veritable mountain of fabric behind her. “This is perfect. And this.”

I don’t even see what she folds up and tucks into my bag. “You have to go. Look at the time! If you get there late, you might get *spanked*,” she says with mock seriousness.

I remember the slap to my ass earlier and stare at her.

“Go,” she says, pushing me toward the door. “And I promise if he spansks you, you’ll like it. Oh, and Dani? Pictures when you get there or it didn't happen.”

I grin then choke on a snort before snickering out loud, and it feels like something inside me breaks open. A squeal finally takes over and I laugh so hard I have tears in my eyes. Sarah starts laughing, too, and before I know it, the two of us are convulsed in hilarity.

"What's so funny?" Emmy asks from the other room. I don't even know how to answer her.

“I think Mama just needed to laugh,” I tell her, wiping at my eyes. Sarah reaches her pinkie to mine and tugs.

“I pinky swear you’ll get pictures,” I say in a whisper. “Because it’s definitely happening.”

Sarah fist-pumps and does a little jig.

I do exactly what I say I’m going to do. I get to the club, and I enter the club. I look for Ricco but don’t see him. Giving up on finding him for now, I head to the women’s locker room, or... whatever they call this room where women get dressed?

The girl I saw the other day is here. “Hey!” she says cheerfully. “Dani, right?”

“Yes. Quinn?”

“The one and only. What are you up to tonight?”

“I am... Uh... I’m doing a demo with Ricco.”

Quinn’s jaw drops. “With Ricco? Are you really? That’s so exciting! Wow, you must be really good at this.”

I laugh nervously. “I don’t know what I’m doing at all.” I point to my duffel bag. “Um, all my stuff’s in there. I didn’t want my daughter to see.”

Quinn claps her hands. “Oh, my God, I love you. Let me help!”

In a sort of fog laced with nervous excitement, I undress right there in front of her. I strip to my bra and undies and ball my dowdy clothes in the bottom of the bag.

“Here we gooooo,” she says, pulling out the stack of clothes that Sarah gave me. I swallow as she unfolds a high-waisted skirt and sexy, off-the-shoulder lace top in a feminine heather pink. “Oh, I love this,” she says, pulling out a sparkling pair of heels. “And these wedges are to die for!”

“My sister packed for me,” I say, almost apologetically.

“Girl. Listen, someone’s gotta pack for us sometimes. It’s all good. Now get your ass in these clothes before I call Ricco and tell on you.” She winks,

reminding me of what Sarah said about me enjoying a spanking.

What on earth is this demo going to encompass tonight? What am I in for?

I tug on the skirt, and for some weird reason, I forget about my flabby belly and the dimples on my thighs. Here, I'm someone else, and I don't care what anyone else thinks.

I'm sexy.

I'm beautiful.

I pull on the top next and try to tug it up to cover my shoulders, but Quinn slaps my hands away. "Nope, you don't touch those!" She gives me an appraising look and grins. "Gorgeous. Now, makeup and hair. You got your shit in there?"

I nod.

"Close your eyes and let me do it."

"I can do my own makeup," I protest, but she shakes her head and steals my makeup bag from my hand.

"Of course you can. Or I can and give you a little bit of an upgrade." She winks at me.

What do I have to lose. "Alright," I say, hiding a grimace. "Let's do it." I close my eyes and lift my face. I let her poke and prod and do her thing until she finally announces, "Ta da! Now, babe, time to look at yourself in the mirror."

She spins me around and faces me toward a full-length mirror. "Look at you," she whispers. "You're stunning."

I stare at myself.

Sarah's impulses were right. The high-waisted skirt and tight, revealing top emphasize my hourglass figure, my full breasts, and my curvy hips. The makeup highlights my high cheekbones and wide eyes framed in long lashes, my glossy pink lips completing the look. Then Quinn's hands are in my hair, and she's helping me style it.

I blink, staring at myself when we're done. *Who* is this woman?

"Okay, there's some really nice mirrors here."

"Girl, it's not the mirrors. You're beautiful. Look at you."

"She is so gorgeous," somebody says in a Boston accent. I look over my shoulder to see a woman with breasts that are as big as her head walking in the room. Her lips are highlighted in bright red lipstick, and she's wearing a sequined top and a little tiny skirt that barely covers her ass. How do people function in clothes like that? Still, she's beautiful.

The woman extends her hand, her long, manicured fingernails a matching red. "Flo, doll. Pleased to meet you. Are you the girl demonstrating with Ricco Montavio tonight?"

I swallow and nod. "That's me."

"Oh, good," she says before she stifles a bit of a nervous look. "Because he's... well, he's outside the door waiting for you."

I fly into instant panic mode.

"I... I'm not ready." I shake my head. "I can't. I've never done this before."

Quinn takes both of my hands in hers and gives me an earnest look. "Everyone has a first time."

"Yup," Flo says, snapping a huge wad of minty gum I can smell from where I'm standing. "Every artist. Every musician. Every teacher or performer or dancer. Everyone has a first time. But the experts, doll, those are the ones that keep going."

"And," Quinn agrees, nodding, "it's Ricco. He's one of the, ah... *good ones*. Trust me."

One of the good ones.

One of the good men? One of the good Montavio brothers? One of the good Dominants?

One of the good what?

There's a loud knock at the door and Ricco's voice rumbles through. "Is Sasha in there?"

Goddammit, why'd I have to go and take that name?

"Yes!" I shout, as Flo and Quinn look excitedly at me.

"Ricco can be tough, like any of the Montavios," Quinn explains. "I'll tell you my story one of these days. But he also has a gentle streak."

"Yup," Flo says, nodding her head so her hair bounces around like a spring, her Boston accent thick and strong. "It's because he's a father."

That he is.

My knees practically knocking together, I head to the door and open it. Ricco stands on the other side, only a few paces away. He's... smoldering. Dressed in all black, the color emphasizing his strength and breadth, he's freshly showered with damp hair, his eyes as black as coal.

"Hi," I say nervously, tugging at a lock of my hair. I hold my head up high and try to remember I'm sexy and single and I'm not alone here tonight.

Ricco stares at me and shakes his head. "How dare you look so fucking gorgeous?" Leaning closer to me, his fingers lace around the back of my neck. "I can't believe we agreed to demo. I don't ever go back on my word, but tonight..." His voice trails off. "Tonight, I want you all to myself. We'll do our demo. But for us, it will only be the beginning. When do you have to be home?"

"I..." I swallow. "Emmy's at Sarah's for the night," I whisper, nervous anticipation weaving through me. My belly dips and I'm a little lightheaded. I swoon, and he reaches for me.

"You okay?"

"I'm nervous," I say honestly, my voice trembling. "I'm so nervous, Ricco."

"Just trust me, Dani," he whispers in my ear. "Can you trust me?"

I think before I answer. Of course I trust him. "If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't be here," I tell him. Not in this getup. Not ready to do a

demonstration. Nope.

I try to reel my mind back from the purpose of my visit to Bella Notte to begin with. I have to blend in as one of them, and if I do, I'll be more certain to get the answers that I need.

Another familiar thrill of anticipation runs through me as Ricco leads me through the swanky, stunning club, my hand engulfed in his as if we're meant to be together. I wobble a bit on the chunky wedges, but he effortlessly steadies me.

"You're new," he says in a stern voice I've only heard a touch of before now. "If you weren't, I'd punish you for being late."

Okay, so that's a thing here, I guess?

"Oh really?" I ask, curiosity flooding me. "I'm usually on time, but I am curious what that's all about..."

I've heard stories of wild things that happen at sex clubs, and the thought of me being one of the people doing them makes my heart quicken. Ricco, however, is cool and confident, totally in control, and his composure helps me maintain my own.

"We're heading to a VIP demo room."

VIP.

"I've never been a VIP," I say nervously.

I stare at the decadent room when we enter. It's wrapped in opulence, lavish and intimate. The room is designed with meticulous attention to detail, a mix of contemporary luxury and classic sophistication. The subdued lighting casts the room in soft, warm light, although a few spotlights, strategically placed in a few notable places, remind me that we'll be on display. The walls are a deep, velvety shade of maroon. Mirrored panels in intricate frames line the walls, and even though I'm immediately uneasy about my reflection staring back at me from every angle, it helps that the mirrors allow me to see Ricco as well. His hand on the small of my back. His warm reassurance beside me.

There's seating around us that doesn't obscure the demonstration area, but

it's vacant.

The focal point of the room is absolutely the demo area. A leather couch. A bench of sorts. Upholstered armchairs. Clearly this is a space that can accommodate a variety of demonstrations. I swallow nervously and lick my lips when I notice a bed in the furthest corner of the room, partially hidden behind velvety drapes. Oh. My. God.

When he steps further into the room, my pulse races.

We're alone.

"We're... doing a demonstration alone?" I ask, my voice sounding distant because of the pounding of my pulse in my ears.

Ricco turns to face me. "You're so nervous, baby," he says gently, stroking his finger along my chin.

Is that part of the act?

I lick my lips and swallow. I can only nod.

His gaze is heavy and intense. "We don't have to do this."

But I do. I can't step into this place where I've never been and back off now.

I have to be one of them.

I must fit in.

But more than anything, I need to know I faced this and survived. No, not survived—thrived.

"I want to. I want to do this."

Ricco holds my gaze for a few seconds before he bends his mouth to mine. His lips brush mine with tenderness, a warm reminder of his near-proximity and the attraction between us.

"Good girl," he says warmly. "You're a good girl, Daniella."

It's the first time he's used my full name. I can't help melting against him.

"To answer your question, yes. We'll be alone here in this room, but beyond

those mirrored walls, we have onlookers. That way we have the illusion of privacy, and we'll feel comfortable being ourselves, but with the knowledge that we're being watched at the back of our minds. You *can* do this," he says, his voice low and soothing.

I take a deep breath and nod. His confidence and encouragement make me feel as if a weight's been lifted. When he leans in again, this time he presses his lips to my forehead. I close my eyes and sigh, the tension in my body melting away.

Ricco steps back. "Let's begin."

We haven't begun yet?

I love that I don't know when the demonstration begins and how much of this is real. I can frame any of my reactions in the context of the demo.

Hand in hand, he leads me to the demo area in the center of the room.

"I'm going to demonstrate your submission to me," he says. "But first, I want to make sure you understand exactly what I expect from you." Ricco's using his authoritative voice, the one that exudes confidence. His Dom voice.

Gah. Oh my God, I love it. I want to hear it again.

I nod, my mouth dry. He cups my chin and tilts my head up so I'm staring into his eyes.

"I want you to do everything I tell you, without question," he says. "If you disobey, you will be punished. Do you understand?"

"Um, kind of?" I respond honestly. "I... sort of understand the concept of punishment but I've definitely never experienced it so I'm not... I'm not sure... I'm not sure what to expect."

"Understood." He smiles and drops my hand. Stepping back, he unclasps his belt.

My heart leaps into my throat. I watch, fascinated, as he loops it around my wrists.

"Kneel, please."

Okay, that I can do. Tied up like this, I have to concentrate, but I do it.

He smiles. "Good. Just like that."

Without thinking, I incline my head, bowing in... submission. I feel him kneel beside me and wrap an arm around me. I lean into his warmth and bask in his nearness.

"I'm so proud of you," he whispers. "You did so well."

When he kisses me, this time I kiss him back and relish his low hum of approval before he pulls away. I look into his eyes, and I lose a bit of any reserve I was holding onto. A part of me yearns so badly for this.

With a finger under my chin, he locks his gaze on mine. "Remember, Dani. If you disobey, I'll have to punish you." My heart skips a beat. "But if you obey my commands, I'll reward you. Do you understand?"

I swallow and lick my lips. "I do."

He caresses my cheek. "Good, just like that," he says, as he arranges me in a submissive posture, my head bowed as I kneel, my hair cascading around me like a veil.

"When I tug your hair, pay attention, yes. But it can also be stress relief. A reminder." His voice hardens. "A warning."

While I may be kneeling, I feel like a queen. I'm shocked at the apparent contradiction, but I know with complete certainty... *I chose this.*

I'm willingly giving this man my submission, my trust. And his gentle touches and words of approval tell me he cherishes what I am willing to give.

"Now I am going to show you what it feels like to submit to me. I want you to trust me and let go of your fears."

I nod as I let Ricco's words wash over me. His hand rests on the small of my back, and the tension slowly ebbs out of my body. I close my eyes when he tugs my hair, a thrill of pleasure and pain quickly giving way to arousal. My mind begins to clear. All my doubts and fears and worries become faded and blurred as I focus on nothing more than his fingers and the nerve endings that

seem to be directly connecting the two of us.

I lose myself to his praise and correction, a tingle of pleasure rushing through me with his words of approval and a thrill of fear-laced arousal when he threatens punishment. My body thrums with need and trembles with anticipation as he coaxes me with his hands in my hair, easing me into this. I don't even realize I'm fully kneeling before him until he caresses my cheek and praises me.

"I've never seen anyone do that more beautifully."

Is that part of the demo or does he truly believe that?

"Such a good girl," he murmurs. "You've earned my trust and a reward for being such a good girl." Leaning in, he whispers in my ear. "But I have my limits for what happens in public."

I'd completely forgotten that people were watching. I'd completely forgotten who I am. I'm intoxicated with his instructions and this strange contradiction of submission and power. And I'm more than a little distracted by what it means to be rewarded.

What will he do?

I thank him with a smile, unsure of how to proceed.

"A submissive who grants you his or her full trust should be rewarded," Ricco says in a louder voice, reminding me of those others who are watching us. "Not everyone can submit. A Dominant should cherish the gift of his or her submissive partner's submission." He takes my bound hands and lifts me to my feet. My legs tingle with nerves as the blood rushes through them. I shiver a little, feeling as though I'm coming out of a dream world.

I thank him with a shy smile.

And he's barely even touched me...



CHAPTER TEN

PLEASURE DOM

Dani

I FEEL DRUNK AND ALIVE, and so excited my nerves are on fire.

I walk with him as if I'm on a cloud, floating. My body's tingling, and I'm so aroused that I can't think beyond the pounding need that thrums through me. I want him, and I know that he wants me, too.

I swallow the lump in my throat because I don't remember what it's like being wanted. I can hardly breathe.

Couples of all shapes and sizes brush past us, whispering low words of approval and admiration.

"Thank you," Ricco says, nodding as we walk by everyone but don't stop to talk to anyone. I'm grateful for once that I don't have to respond, that the burden of any socialization is on him. I tuck my head against his shoulder and allow myself to be led.

And it's so fucking *nice*. To not have to think, to decide, to orchestrate and plan, to just... let him take care of me.

I'm aware of the respect the others here show him as we walk, voices reverent and respectful when they address him. Ricco is a man people admire and respect.

Hell, I have to admit I admire and respect him myself. It's hard not to.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Here." Ricco presses his thumb against a panel, and a lock disengages with a muted *snick*. Opening the door, he gestures for me to enter.

Laughter bubbles up inside me. "It's... what *is* this place?"

With a casual shrug that belies the look of pride on his face, he gestures to the room.

"My private room," he says quietly. "Dani, I want you to know something before we enter. I've never brought anyone here before."

There's an elephant in the room we haven't discussed. And even though I don't want to throw cold water on anything that's happening here, I have to admit... I don't want to proceed without my questions being answered.

"You told me once that you and your wife married because of your family. So, when you say no one's come here you mean..."

Ricco's jaw hardens, but he doesn't shy away from the truth. "Martina never set foot in Bella Notte," he says quietly, shutting the door behind us. We're immediately submersed in complete quiet, as if the room is cocooned in a bubble. "She was my best friend, Dani. The mother of my son. But we were not lovers."

My heart breaks a little. I know how painful it is to be in a loveless marriage, even if his was more friendly than mine was. He still denied his own needs.

He continues. "Anyway, the club opened up long after Martina became sick and was diagnosed, so she wouldn't have come here no matter what."

My conflicting emotions are starting to strangle me. On the one hand, I'm thrilled that I'm not "replacing" his wife or anything weird like that. I know that Ricco has probably lived many lives before I met him. We haven't gotten too much into his past, but I know that he's loyal to his family and he married Martina out of loyalty.

I even know that he saw his marriage to her through until the bitter end, until she succumbed to illness.

I'm starting to feel a little guilty that I haven't been totally honest with him. He doesn't really know why I'm here. He doesn't know anything about my husband. All he knows is that I'm a widow.

I don't know if I can continue to look for the answers I was hoping to find here, not when I'm with Ricco.

"You look troubled."

I plaster a smile on my face because I love being with Ricco. I love feeling like a woman. And I don't want to pretend that I'm here for any other reason anymore.

"I have... conflicting emotions."

"I understand." I can tell he has conflicting emotions of his own, though I have no idea what they are.

"It takes a lot to submit. It takes a lot of courage. And sometimes you have to battle that voice in your head telling you that it isn't right. I know all about that, too."

"Ricco, I..."

My fears finally choke me, and I don't know what else to say. Fortunately, I don't have to say anything, because the next moment, his mouth is on mine, his hands tangled in my hair. Once again, that familiar tug sends awareness and excitement tingling all through my body. But now we're alone, blissfully alone, and I have nowhere else to be tonight.

I am his first lover, and Ricco is my dream man, and that's all I need to know.

He lays me on the bed. And I'm vaguely aware of a few interesting facts about this room.

First, this bed is on a platform. Not sure why, but something tells me I'm going to find out. Second, there's a waterfall in here, lending an atmosphere that's exotic, and private, because the sound of the waterfall drowns out anything else outside this door.

Third, this is a sex club. This is Ricco's private room *at a sex club*. And he's never brought anyone in here before.

Why does he have a private room in a sex club?

"So, tell me," I say, as he guides the edge of my blouse up and spans my waist with his strong, powerful hands. I push through with the need to ask questions when all I want to do is live in the moment, savor every second he's worshipping me.

"Yeah?" he says, his mouth up to my ear. I shiver when he nibbles my earlobe and licks the shell of my ear. My eyes flutter closed, and I stifle a moan. A strange sensation skates down my spine.

"When you said that you'd punish me," I say, barely recognizing my own

voice. "What does that mean?"

And why does it make my pulse race?

"Could mean I take you over my knee," he says in a husky voice that makes me shiver again.

Over his knee.

I like the sound of that.

But it's punishment...

"Would it be the kind of punishment that I would want to avoid?"

He begins to palm my breasts, the fullness of them pressed up against his rough, calloused, warm hands.

"In part, yes. Have you ever been spanked?"

I shake my head and bite my lip, trying not to choke. My voice sounds high and reedy. "Uh, no."

He palms my ass. "We could try it."

A part of me wants to, and a part of me doesn't. I want to know what else is at stake here.

"I definitely want to try that at one point." I choose my words carefully. "But is there..." How do I say this?

And then his mouth is at my waist, and I'm so self-conscious that I pull my shirt down. His eyes smolder at me again.

When he speaks, his voice is hard and sharp. "Leave that alone. Now."

I narrow my eyes at him. He asked if I trusted him, and I do, but I do not recall giving him permission to tell me what to do. That said, we're at a sex club, I've submitted to him, and I want to know what it's like to be dominated. I thrust my chin out, nerves nearly strangling me.

"No."

Something gleams in his eyes. Excitement? Anger? Challenge?

“If you disobey me, I’ll spank you, Dani,” he reminds, his eyes practically begging me to do exactly that.

“Are there like...contracts? Safe words?” I ask, swallowing and licking my lips. “What if I don’t like it?”

“What if you do?”

Heat suffuses my limbs, and my skin tingles.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he beckons me over to him. “Come here, Dani.”

I could tell him no.

Or I could go to him and see what happens next.

I’m walking to him on shaking legs, warring with myself about what is going to happen. Will he spank me now? Do I want him to? How much of this do I need to consent to before I’m alright with how this will play out?

When I reach him, he drags me onto his knee.

"Here at the club, we have a concept called consensual nonconsent."

"Well that sounds like a contradiction."

"It is and it isn't. It means that in our relationship, you consent to being dominated. Punished, if think you deserve it. You agree, but in the moment of a scene, you don't have to."

I blink. “Uh. What?”

“Like this,” he says in my ear. “When we’re in a scene? Your safe word is *daddy*.”

Can I safeword a safeword?

I like my lips and whisper, “Okay.”

“Stand up, please.”

A test. This must be a test. Am I ready?

“No.” I try to put some force behind my voice but I’m too excited.

Clucking his tongue, Ricco shakes his head at me. “Such a bad girl. I told you what happens if you disobey me.”

Before I can reply, I’m belly down over his knee, my limbs flailing.

A line of fire lights up my ass. What the hell is that? I look over my shoulder to see him holding his belt in a loop. *Gah!*

It hurts, but in a way that makes me crave more. Another strike, followed by another three hard smacks of his belt on my ass. I'm still clothed, but that doesn't seem to matter, because this hurts *just fine*.

"So that's a punishment?" I ask, breathless and trying to think of the quickest way to dive off his lap and out of his reach, while also wanting to shake myself for being a scaredy-cat.

"One of them," he says sternly. "Talk back to me again and we'll see how you like it on your bare ass." He's holding my gaze with a sidelong look as he threads his belt back around his waist. I'm immediately aware of the fact that he's hard as fuck, and I love that I... well, that I did that to him.

“You like... discipline?” I ask, not sure what to think.

A certain, firm nod. *Hot.*

“Absolutely.”

I scramble up the bed, aware of every nerve ending in my scorched butt.

“And, uh... so what might another punishment... be?”

"Another punishment could be an orgasm denial, making you ask for permission," he says, his gaze fiery and intense, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt he's enjoying the hell out of these potential scenarios. "Role playing."

“Like... you’re a professor and I’m a naughty student?” I ask, biting my lip. Now that could be fun.

“Exactly.”

“Go on,” I say, waving my hand as if this is all normal and understandable and I’m not screaming my head off internally.

“Sensory deprivation or play, like a gag, or blindfold. Collaring with a leash. Kneeling. Restraints...”

I stop breathing at the “leash” thing.

“We, uh, may need to talk about some of those,” I say in a voice that miraculously doesn’t betray my rapid heartbeat.

He gives me a lopsided grin, and that doesn’t help.

"Noted."

I scratch my nose casually, and manage to almost poke my eye, my hands are shaking that badly. "Hey, wait."

He waits patiently.

I open my mouth to say something else but completely lose my train of thought. I close it and open it again, flailing for some thought to grasp onto, when Ricco’s gaze softens.

"Dani, what we do here is completely up to you. We can take this as far as you want or not. I don't do any of this without your consent."

Good. That's what I needed to hear. Okay, alright then.

"I may need to think about that." I need more time.

He threads his belt back around his waist and sits me upright. "Good. And while you think about that, let's discuss your reward."

Ooh. Now those I like, without question. I haven’t had someone “reward” me since I was a child.

“Sometimes, your reward will be sexual.” He's gesturing to something in the center of the room that I didn't notice before.

"What is that thing?"

"That’s a Sybian." It looks like a saddle or something.

"Uh...?"

I kind of feel like I've walked into a foreign land and don't know English isn't spoken. Now what?

"Come here, and I'll show you."

Trembling, I walk over to him. It looks intimidating but I'm curious.

When I reach him, he helps me straddle it just like it *is* a saddle. I'm already shaking with nerves and aroused as hell, so the first vibration that hits my pussy makes me scream.

"Ayyy!"

Ricco chuckles and keeps me in place with a hand on my lower back. "Relax, baby. Ease into it," he whispers in my ear. I close my eyes as vibrating sensations make me tremble and quake, and I'm so close to climax already I'm panting and tense.

"Let go, baby," he murmurs. "Here, you have nothing to worry about. It's just me. It's just us. Let yourself go and take your reward."

I'm hardly aware of the actual mechanics of what's happening but I do know this is like a dildo on steroids and my body knows exactly what to do.

I buck at the first spasm of pleasure. Ricco palms my breasts and fingers my nipples, and I scream as my body's wracked in pleasure.

I'm coming down from the first high when a second one comes on its heels. I'm whimpering as my eyes close and I slump over. Ricco holds me up, whispering sweet nothings in my ear I can barely comprehend.

"You want another, babe?"

That, I hear.

"I—I don't know if I—"

Euphoria crashes through me again, this time sweeter and more intense than the last, the climax lasting so long I'm panting at the end.

"When we were in the demonstration room," he whispers, "did you like to be

on display?" He asks this while he fingers me, his thumbs scraping over my nipples, and my body thrums with need and arousal. I've lost count of how many times I've climaxed.

"Actually, I completely forgot that anybody was watching," I say in a strangled voice, because I need to come again. And I didn't even know my body could go through this.

"I forgot that other people could see what was happening in the room," I say honestly, my eyelids fluttering closed as he lifts me off the device and onto his lap before bending me backward on the bed in a way I didn't even know my body could move. "Give me access to that pussy," he says in a guttural growl. I feel so sexy, so alive, as he runs his mouth down the length of my body and kisses my sex. I shudder at the first touch of his tongue on my clit, and I'm so close to release again already.

"Uh, so how many orgasms can a woman have a night?" I ask.

"I'm not sure that we've actually reached a conclusion in that study," he says. "Based on my research, it's at least eighty or a hundred."

No shit. "*What?* We don't have time for that," I say quickly.

"Do you know what a Pleasure Dom is, baby?"

Uh uh. "Remember? I know pretty much nothing about this whole world."

"It means that I love to pleasure you. It means that I get your submission by dominating you and you coming for me. It means that sex fuels the power exchange between us."

"So punishing me would be making me come? I don't get it."

"Be a good girl, and you don't need to."

Ooh. Sexy. And then he stops talking because his mouth is at my pussy, and I am on the edge of climaxing again. The first shudder of orgasm rips through me, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm climaxing again, on his mouth this time. Oh fuck, it feels good. But I don't just want this anymore. Every orgasm that ripples through me makes me crave more of him.

I want Ricco inside me. Not just next to me, not just making me come, but

inside me in a way that only he can be.

"Ricco..." I say, still breathing rapidly from the last orgasm. "Please."

"Please what, baby?"

"I want you inside me."

I've never had sex with a guy so soon after meeting him.

There are a lot of things I've never done before, but here we are.

"You want me in you?" Ricco asks, his eyebrows rising to the heavens.

"Really?"

"Of course I do."

"Not gonna go there for myself tonight. But I wanted that for you." He holds me against him. "You think on this. And if your answer is still yes tomorrow, when you're not drunk on whatever you're drunk on tonight, then we'll talk. For now, I want to come home with you. My sister's watching Marco. Sarah's watching Emmy. Let me come home with you."

"Of course."

When we arrive at my place, we're kissing as soon as we hit the threshold. He lifts me and carries me to my bedroom, our mouths interlocked.

"What's your normal routine at night?"

"Uh... fall asleep, still clothed, my makeup on, next to Emmy?"

He grins, and I love seeing him grin. The fierceness that surrounds him melts and nothing is left but the hot Italian sex bomb in front of me.

"Tell me what your ideal nighttime routine would be."

"Oh God, my ideal? On Planet Euphoria? Let's see... I drink a nice cup of hot tea or maybe like a glass of wine or mixed drink or something to just relax at the end of the day. I'd wear some cute pajamas. Maybe watch a show, scroll the internet, read a book. Color, draw, something relaxing. Then I'd maybe take a shower because I don't have time in the morning for that, do like an actual skin care routine that grown-ups do with like, toner and

moisturizer and stuff and then I'd brush my teeth and brush my hair. And then I'd lay down and go to sleep and actually sleep all night."

Why does that sound even better than sex?

"Then let's do it."

"Let's do it?"

"Let's get you ready for bed."

He strips out of his clothes and jerks his head toward the bathroom. With a smile playing at my lips, I strip out of mine. He's seen me naked now, and it feels damn good to have him look at me approvingly. When I'm down to my underwear, my bra off, I walk to my dresser and open the drawer. Everything's neatly arranged, with a pretty pair of pajamas at the very top.

"Let me." Ricco reaches around me, takes them out and holds them in his big, strong hands, as he sits on the edge of the bed.

"Come here."

I walk over to him, and he dresses me. At first, I think it might make me feel like a child but it doesn't. I feel much different. I feel so much stronger. This is amazing. He pulls the pajama shirt down over my head and helps me step into the matching pair of shorts, and when I'm done, he gives my ass a little smack. "Adorable. Go get ready." I walk to the bathroom, take out my contacts, and wash my face. I moisturize it, put a little dry shampoo in my hair and give it a brush. I floss my teeth and use mouthwash. It feels luxurious to do all these little things that I sometimes neglect.

When I leave the bathroom, he enters, and I don't know what he does, but a few minutes later, he comes out, looking fresh and clean, ready for bed.

I could get used to this.

He climbs into bed next to me. "In you go," he says, tucking the blanket around me.

I close my eyes. I did nothing I was supposed to do tonight. I indulged in my fantasies and I... *went there* with Ricco.

And I still don't even really know who he is.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THAT ROLLING PIN?”

Dani

I LIKE the feel of Ricco beside me when I snuggle down in the covers to sleep. I'm not sure what I expected after that hot time in the club, but I didn't expect this. Cuddles. Sleep. The strong, warm presence of him beside me. I totally thought we'd come back to the house and have sex. But no. We lie in my bed, and I'm so tired, I'm half asleep before he joins me. The events of the day have really worn me out, and he looks wiped out, too. I do want more than this, but not now. Not right away.

I'm still giddy from what happened at the club tonight. I will replay the memory of submitting to him over and over and over again. I roll over and cuddle up to him with a yawn.

"You know... I'm curious what else could happen at the club," I say, my eyes closed.

"And I'm curious about showing you."

His hands thread through my hair again. I think he's obsessed. But God, it feels so good as he tugs his fingers through my long, thick hair. It feels so right as he tucks the blanket around me. Sarah and Jason have texted, but I send them a really quick response because I'm so tired.

Amazing. Will tell you later.

The next morning, I wake up to the smell of coffee. I open one eye and see nothing but rumpled sheets beside me. I wonder if Ricco's still here.

Something sounds like it's banging. There's a loud thump, followed by two angry male voices.

Shit! What the hell? I jump out of bed. Wait, is that Jason's voice?

No.

I haven't put my contacts in, my hair is all over the place, and I am running into the kitchen as quickly as I can because... is that Jason in there? Jason doesn't stand a chance against Ricco, and if Ricco hurts my best friend, I'm

gonna hurt *him*.

"What's going on in here?" I scream as soon as I enter the room. They're facing off against each other. Ricco's standing in the kitchen wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. He's stunning, I might add.

He's also brandishing my rolling pin, and Jason's holding a tube of aluminum foil. What the fuck are they doing?

"Guys. Guys! What's going on in here?" I repeat. I throw my hands up like I'm refereeing a match.

Jason glares, and my normally very happy bestie doesn't glare very often.

"It's *him*. He's the one that's been sneaking up on your porch." I stare at Jason, trying to figure out what the hell he's talking about. I blink and rub my eyes. Am I still sleeping?

"What the hell are you talking about, Jay?"

Jason narrows his eyes on Ricco and doesn't take them off him. "Those groceries on your porch? I put up surveillance cameras. Guess what. I caught him, red-handed. The creep! He's been watching you. Then he puts out these bags of groceries like he's trying to get in your good graces or something."

I turn and stare at Ricco. "Is that true?"

"Maybe. And what the hell is this guy doing just walking into your house? And putting up cameras? You got an ex I don't know about?"

Jason and I burst out laughing. "Oh honey, I am way more likely to date you than I am to date her." Ricco narrows his eyes on Jason, obviously not taking that for the compliment it is.

"Boys, put your stupid weapons down and listen to me. God! And Ricco, maybe go get some clothes on." I glare, giving them my best stern mom look. "I'm waiting."

"I am not leaving you alone with him," Ricco growls.

"Same!" Jason retorts.

I sigh. "You two are both pissing me off right about now." I wrap my arms

around myself. “Ricco, what the *hell* were you doing putting things on my porch? And Jason, who the hell told you it was okay to put up surveillance cameras?”

Ricco works his jaw. “Good question.”

I point a finger at him. “I asked you first!”

Ricco blows out a breath. “I heard rumors at the school. Knew your husband died. Wanted to do something nice, but I didn’t even know you, so dropping shit off you could use seemed like a good idea. Didn’t know this asshole was snooping. Since when is it a crime to buy groceries? Jesus.”

Jason’s pretty face contorts in anger. “I put up the cameras because she’s my friend and I worried about some asshole stalking her.” Jason rolls his eyes for dramatic effect. “Nice to know my concerns were unfounded.”

I sit down and rub my temples. “Someone get my coffee, please. I can’t think straight. And you two better call a truce. Because this shit’s *not* going down.”

"Language with Emmy," Jason says, giving me a withering look.

"She's with Sarah."

"Oh, right."

"Is someone going to explain to me why this man is in your house?" Ricco asks me. "And why he was doing surveillance on your porch? Who the hell is he? And why haven't you told me about him?"

"Ricco, this is Jason. Jason is my best friend. He gets a little overprotective of me, okay? He's also very gay and very taken and very not into me. There's nothing going on between the two of us, and if there was, I would've told you."

Ricco finally puts the rolling pin down.

A few minutes later, the men have called a truce, and we're sitting at the table with cups of coffee and warmed blueberry muffins. Well, Jason and I are. Ricco mutters something about macros and protein, and not eating breakfast.

My phone beeps with an alarm at the same time as Ricco’s does.

Oh my God. “Ricco...”

“Parent coffee,” he says with a groan. “We gotta go. *Now.*”



CHAPTER TWELVE

BOYFRIEND? STALKER?

Ricco

"I'M DRIVING," Dani says. She's standing in front of me, wearing nothing but sweats, her hair pulled up in a messy bun, but she did slide some kind of glossy lipstick on her lips, and she looks beautiful. As always.

"Like fuck you're driving. You're nervous and all high-strung."

"And pissed at you."

"Pissed at *me*? Why?"

"Because you trespassed! You snuck around and didn't tell me. You can't do that, Ricco. The rest of the world doesn't operate like that."

I grumble under my breath.

"And I know, I know, you're probably used to high-speed chases or whatever the fuck," she says cryptically, giving Jason a weird look.

He laughs and reaches for the keys. "Get in my car, lovebirds. I'm driving."

I grumble, but I let him. If Jason drives, then I get to sit in the back with Dani.

"And no make-out sessions in the back of my car," he says with a grimace. "That is so not cute."

Doesn't mean I can't tug her hair and squeeze the top of her sexy thigh.

"I'm so not cool with you stalking me like that," Dani says in a whisper in the back of the car. "I don't want you to think you're off the hook."

"Listen, I didn't do anything," I tell her with a sigh, even as the lie behind those words eats at me. I didn't mean her *harm* though. "I wanted to help and didn't want to freak you out."

"Did it ever occur to you that I'd be freaked out anyway?"

I scratch my jaw. "Well, yeah."

She sighs and shakes her head. "I feel like I should be so super pissed at you right now. But I think it's also, in some weird Bizarro-world fashion...well, kind of sweet. Only because you weren't actually stalking me."

How long has Marco been going to this preschool?" Dani says after we seat ourselves in the back of Jason's car.

I don't look at her but answer honestly but simply.

"This is his first year."

"You said he's three?"

I nod. He's one year younger than her little girl.

"I asked around, they said it was the best preschool in the area." I shrug. It isn't exactly a lie, but I don't share that her having Emmy there had anything to do with the move.

I've got to hand it to Jason. He's a damn good driver. He navigates the congested city streets with ease, driving just fast enough to push it, but not so fast that it's dangerous. In the back of the car, I avoid the "makeout sesh," but rest my hand dangerously high at the top of Dani's thigh. I let my fingers graze too high because I love the way her cheeks flush pink.

"You look adorable in sweats, honey."

"Shit!" She smacks her forehead with a resounding slap.

"No smacking yourself. The only one who gets to smack you is me when you're over my knee and getting spanked."

"Ricco," she hisses. "Are you even serious right now?"

"Deadly serious. Why did you smack your head?"

"Because I didn't mean to come here in sweatpants, that's why. I got too... distracted." She frowns. "You shouldn't be so hot."

"I can work on that..."

"Well, maybe later," she says, adorably grumpy. I pinch her thigh, and when she tosses her head back with a little yelp, I tug a lock of her hair.

"We're almost there," Jason says, "and no making out and that includes whatever that kinky shit is you're doing back there."

We're obviously some of the last people here, but that doesn't matter. The point is, we've arrived. I get out of the car and open her door for her. "You look beautiful," I say, something I will never get tired of telling her. She doesn't have to have fancy clothes on. Or fuck it, any clothes on. Dani is a beautiful woman.

"Thanks. You look hot, as always," she says with a sigh. "Why do men look hotter in sweats than women?"

"Debatable."

"Not debatable, sweetie," Jason mutters. "Fact."

Emmy's waiting for us, her hand shading her eyes as she scans the lot. Her face lights up when she sees the two of us.

Marco's class is behind hers, led by a teacher's aide. They have a table set up with large metal pots of coffee, Styrofoam cups, and trays of baked goods.

"Was I supposed to bring something?" Dani says with a grimace. "God, I can't remember anything."

"I think the parent-teacher group brought all the stuff. And Dani, that's enough."

"Enough what?"

I put my mouth to her ear. "Do you remember what it felt like when I took my belt to your ass?"

She chokes.

"Do you remember what your reward felt like?"

She bites her lip. "I can't even believe you're saying this right here," she mutters.

I smile at her. "Just trying to get you to see that you're a lot more than a mom who occasionally doesn't have things perfect."

“*Stop*,” she says with a smile and a whisper.

“Stop what?”

But she only shakes her head, gets up on her tiptoes, and kisses my cheek before Emmy side-tackles her.

Dani grabs me so she doesn’t fall and shakes her head. “Hey, sweetie.”

Emmy leaps up and wraps her legs around Dani’s belly. Dani holds her little girl tight, just as Marco appears.

“Daddy!” Marco comes running toward me, a construction paper dinosaur in one hand and a paper airplane in the other.

“Hey, buddy, those are awesome. Which one’s mine?”

He laughs and dodges my tickle. “They’re mine!”

I tousle his hair. “Marco, this is Dani. Dani, meet my son, Marco.”

I try not to read into this. I don’t want to get ahead of myself or start imagining shit, but... this feels significant. We aren’t just lovers anymore but revealing larger parts of who we really are.

"You have pretty hair," Marco says.

Dani smiles and winks at me. She knows I share his opinion. She introduces me to Emmy, then tells Marco, "You speak very well for a three-year-old."

"So do I," Emmy says, with a little flash of temper. Her brows pull together. Ah, feisty like her mom.

"You're not three," Dani says. "You're four."

Emmy’s face breaks out into a grin. "Perfect."

Jason joins us after parking the car, and we sit on the lawn, coffee, bottles of water, and a plate of food between the five of us, eating mini muffins and donut holes. Emmy shows us a drawing that she made, and Marco blows bubbles. It's only a short visit, but it feels nice. Being with Marco, Dani, and Emmy like this feels like... family, and in a way that I've never had with my brothers.

As if summoned, my phone rings. I look at the screen, and silence it.

Rule number one of the Montavio Brotherhood is that you don't ever silence a call from Sergio, but today Sergio can go fuck himself.

"Everything okay?" Dani asks.

"Fine," I say, although I'm not really sure it's true. Sergio doesn't like when I hang up on him.

My phone predictably blows up with texts.

Sergio:

Take my fucking call dickhead.

I grunt under my breath and reply.

I'm busy.

Next, Timeo starts pinging me.

Fucknuts, you are in so much trouble... Sergio's gonna killll
you.

What the fuck is this about?

I ignore both texts and slide my phone into my pocket.

Twenty minutes later, the teachers start herding the kids together to go back inside.

"You should come over for dinner," Emmy says, her wide eyes bright with expectation. "My Mama cooks good."

"Oh, yeah?" Dani says. "If you think that, then why don't you eat any of it?"

Emmy makes a little face. "I mean grown-ups like it."

"I like food," Marco says. Dani's eyes dance at me over their heads.

"I need to get to my studio soon," she says. I stand and stretch. Marco reaches for my hand. I bend and lift him, cuddling him against my chest.

"I gotta go, too."

"Uncle Timmy?"

Before I turn around, there's a notable shift in the atmosphere with the other parents. People stop talking, and everyone's staring behind me. Oh Jesus.

Dani's eyes go wide.

Here? Now?

"Maybe he wanted some donut holes," I say through gritted teeth.

"That's your... brother?" Dani says. I need to know exactly how much she knows. How much does she know about my family? How much does she know about what I do? God. What the fuck am I getting myself into? What am I getting Dani into?

Why are they here?

Marco wriggles down and takes a running leap at Timeo who catches him mid-air. Sergio stands beside them, looking more furious than I can remember seeing him look in years.

Fuuuckk.

Marco's teacher comes up to me, a stack of papers in her hand, and freezes when she sees the Montavio family arranged on the front lawn of the preschool. Goddammit.

"For you," she says, obviously flustered. "At your convenience, of course."

"Thank you." I sigh and turn to Dani. "I'll call you later."

She blinks and looks as if I slapped her. I feel like an asshole, but I need to talk to them before I introduce her, and we're already causing a spectacle here. I squeeze her hand. "I promise."

I lean in toward Sergio. "Did you guys have to come in here like this? I would've gotten back to you."

"Would you, though?" he says, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Yeah, I'm here for parent coffee at Marco's school. Jesus. Do you guys have to announce who we are to everybody?"

"Do *you*, brother?" Sergio says.

I give Marco a kiss on the cheek. "I gotta go, bud."

To his credit, Jason stands, brushes crumbs off his lap, and reaches a well-manicured hand toward Sergio.

"Are you *the* Sergio Montavio?" he says with utter grace. "I have heard so much about you. And Marco? I heard that you have some artwork to show Uncle Jason. Why don't you come and show me. Emmy, I have been dying for a nice, cold, refreshing glass of apple juice. Maybe you can show Uncle Jason where the apple juice is before your teacher puts it away."

"I don't like apple juice," Emmy says with a frown.

"Show me what else they have!" Jason says, not missing a beat. The two kids happily clamor after him, and Sergio raises an eyebrow at me.

He doesn't even deserve my response right now.

"Dani, these are my brothers, Sergio and Timeo. We'll talk later. I need to find out why they came here."

She doesn't say another word as I walk away.

Back in the car, Sergio shuts and locks the doors with a furious *bang*.

Timeo gives me an impish warning smirk. God I'd love to smack it right off his face.

I ignore his look. He's not the only one pissed off.

"Why the *fuck* did you two make a scene like that?" I hiss, my temper rising.

"I seriously don't want to die right now," Timeo says. "So, I need you two assholes to keep your tempers in check, because when you get mad, you start speeding, and the next thing you know, we're gonna crash into some fucking delivery truck."

"I'm not crashing into anything," Sergio snaps. "Talk to *him*. He's good at

crashing shit, isn't he?"

"Don't pull that bullshit on me," I say to Sergio.

Timeo shakes his head. "I'm glad the children are safely back at school," he says stoically.

"Me too," Sergio says. "Interesting, isn't it, Timeo?"

"Serg, don't pull me into this bullshit. I've got my own shit to deal with, you know."

Sergio shrugs angrily. "Only that this wasn't the preschool Marco went to last week. We moved heaven and earth to save your ass. You fucked up, and we covered everything for you. Every fucking thing. Short of waving a magician's wand, we arranged everything so that you weren't there that night. You weren't there at the scene of the crime. You weren't at the club when he died, you were magically still in Europe."

I blow out a breath.

"And then here she is. Some frumpy chick wearing gray sweatpants and there goes your dumbass... dick first, brain second, just like always."

"You fucking asshole," I growl. "You say one more fucking thing about her, Serg, and I'll kick your fucking ass."

"See?" Sergio jerks his thumb at me, looking in the rearview mirror at Timeo.

Timeo scratches his nose. "God, you are such a moron, Ricco. That was a test, bro. You, uh, failed."

A test?

"Yeah, I knew that if you cared about her, you'd get pissed if I made fun of her."

Jesus Christ.

Sergio goes stone cold. "Spill. And I mean fucking everything."

I blow out a breath.

It's time.

"I felt guilty because of what I did. So, I started bringing her shit. Food, groceries, gift cards. Left it anonymously on her porch."

Sergio narrows his eyes. "Abso-fucking-lutely great. Go on," he says, taking the turns at a dangerous clip.

"Holy fuck, Serg. Did you learn fucking nothing from the accident with Mario?" Timeo scolds him from the back. Years ago, Sergio and Mario were in a massive accident and they both almost died. Ever since then, Sergio typically drives a little safer than this.

I continue. "I wanted to get to know her a little better. So fucking sue me. Unlike some people I know, I married someone because my family expected me to. I didn't have the luxury of waiting for some hot-ass chick from the farm to just randomly wander into my sex club and start cooking for me, Sergio."

Sergio doesn't respond. "I felt guilty. It was my fault her husband's dead. I wanted to bring something back to her. She opened a massage studio. I went in."

"So, you thought it was a good fucking idea to do a demonstration at our club... with *her*? Fucking brilliant, Ricco. What the actual *fuck* were you thinking? Don't you know what's at stake here?"

"I do, but I told you, I'm older than you are, and I don't take fucking orders from you."

"And you don't fucking defy me and put everything at risk, either! Maybe if you don't take orders from me, I don't fucking try to save your life."

"Guys, guys," Timeo says from the back seat. "First, you're both talking out of your asses. Second, *Jesus*, Ricco. Third, we did everything to cover your ass, Ricco, you know we did."

I stare out the window. "It isn't personal. I didn't set out to fuck any of you over."

We drive through traffic for a long, silent minute.

"So... what's so special about her?" Sergio asks. "I want to know."

I scrub a hand down my face, not responding at first. "She's nothing like the women in our family. She's nothing like the women we grew up with."

I don't know how to explain it to them.

How do I tell them that she makes me feel alive? There's a chemistry between us I can't put my finger on. Since the first time she touched me on the massage table, the first time our energies collided... I can already see her... she's such a good mom to Emmy. Marco needs a mama, too.

"I'm a man with a kid," I say, shaking my head. "I'm not marriageable in our family. In our circles, no woman would wanna be with me."

"I didn't ask you about you," Sergio says. "With everything you're putting on the line, I wanna know why *she's* fucking worth it."

"She's... She's real. There's something about her, something real I've never known with a woman before. Martina wasn't cold, you know that. But she was just my friend. No more, no less. There was never a spark there. No connection." I close my eyes for a second because it makes me feel guilty even admitting this out loud.

"You were good to her, bro," Timeo says from the back. I don't respond to him.

"Every woman I've met in our circle is beautiful and elegant. But all they want is money and power." And I don't need to tell my brothers what arranged marriages do to families. Martina married me so her family wouldn't disown her. I married her for the same reason—money and power.

"Dani's a good mom. She's... nurturing and selfless. She's intelligent, and hard-working. She's capable. She could be my companion, Sergio."

"She could come visit you in prison. I hear that on family day at MCI-Cedar Junction they serve apple juice and donut holes," Timeo chirps over my shoulder.

I go on as if I didn't hear a word he said. "She's fucking curvy and sexy as hell. She's confident and authentic."

But I know what really drives me to her is something I can't quite put into words, not to them anyway. Dani's life is such a contrast to mine, offering me a glimpse of normalcy. Like parent coffee day for Christ's sake.

Dani gives me the only thing I thought I'd lost forever—a chance at redemption.

I killed her husband. I don't fucking care if it was an accident, the least I can do is provide for her. Provide for her daughter. And maybe a part of me is acting selfishly, but maybe a part of me isn't.

"I'm done, Sergio. I don't want a fuck toy. I don't want to use someone to advance my career or give me greater authority in our business. I want a fucking partner. I want a woman that doesn't get bent out of shape because our kid wakes up sick in the middle of the night or she gets stretch marks from bearing my child. I want something and someone normal and wholesome."

"Who knew?" Timeo says, shaking his head. "He wants someone he can love. This fucking dipshit thinks he's in a fucking Disney fairy princess story."

Timeo ducks his head just in time to miss the fist I throw at him.

He should talk. He's been hot for Sergio's wife's baby sister Starla for years—a girl who's as wholesome as Cheerios and apple pie and way too young for him to boot.

"You want to be Prince Charming?" Sergio says.

"No, man," I say, looking out the window again, because it isn't until I say it out loud that I realize the truth. "I want to be *me*. Ricco Montavio. Father to Marco. Husband. Brother. Normal. Me."

Sergio groans and comes to a stop at a red light. With a weariness in his shoulders, he slumps down in his seat and turns to face me. "You couldn't find this with anybody else in the fucking universe?"

I don't respond. Because I didn't tell him the real reason.

Sergio's not done though.

"You know, providing for her won't bring him back. And from what I've

heard, from what we've investigated? That asshole wasn't worth it."

"She deserves better, Serg."

"So, when are you gonna tell her?"

Tell her? Is he out of his fucking mind? I look at him. I look in the rearview mirror and Timeo looks back at me with the biggest shit-eating grin I've ever seen.

"You gotta tell her, Ricco."

"No, I don't. You said it never happened. I wasn't here." I clench my jaw and will the traffic light to change. "I'm here *now*."

The light turns green, and Sergio guns the engine.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“COME WITH ME”

Dani

I TEXT RICCO. No reply.

I go to my shop and look at my empty calendar. A few clients come in, likely spurred on by all the good reviews Ricco left on my site. I'm trying to focus on my work, but I'm distracted. I shoot him a text late in the afternoon.

Is everything okay?

No response. Have I ignored all the warning signs? What is it about him that I'm really into, anyway?

And then I remember the way he was with my daughter. I remember the way he sat cross-legged on the blanket on the grass, and how Marco climbed into his lap. How easily he snuggled in and how Ricco held him.

I remember how hot it was being with him at the club, and I know there's so much more to Ricco Montavio than meets the eye.

Three hours later, I'm about to close the shop early, well before I have to pick Emmy up from school. I hang my head because I'm tired and I'm discouraged. Standing at the reception desk, I'm pondering how for once in my life I'd felt as if I was getting somewhere only to have Ricco pull the rug out from under me with his dismissal and then... the door swings open.

Ricco steps in.

I stare, unsure of what to say.

"I have to go to Italy."

I swallow, hard, and nod. "Okay. Alright."

"I'm taking Marco. He'll stay with family. I have some business meetings that I have to attend. They're urgent."

I nod again. "I'll miss you."

And then he crosses the space between us and I'm in his arms. He lifts me

and this time I don't protest. Ever since I had Emmy, I've been self-conscious about my weight and Nick's jerk comments didn't help. Now, it feels strange to mute that part of myself, the critic in my head that wants to tell me I'm not good enough.

But when I'm with Ricco, I am beautiful. I am stunning. I am all woman.

His mouth is on mine, and our tongues tangle. His fingers are in my hair, where they fucking belong. His hands move down to my ass, and then he's backing me into the massage room. Our motions are frantic, his hands scrambling for my bra strap, mine going for his shirt, tugging it off. Something happened today. For both of us.

"I want to fuck you," he says in my ear. "I want to take you. Right here. Right here in your studio so every time you open it you remember. I don't want you to forget me when I'm gone."

"How could I forget you?" I say, my voice trembling with emotion. He kisses me again, then pulls his mouth away long enough to touch his forehead to mine. I don't know why he looks as if he's trying to compose himself, but there's definitely something else going on here.

"The Montavio family... we're cousins to the Rossis."

Cold shivers through me. The Rossis. *Fuck*. "The Rossis on the North Shore?"

He nods. "The very same."

Romeo Rossi is the most feared man in New England, and for good reason.

"I'm loyal to Romeo. My family pays allegiance to them, we're under the same umbrella."

I figured this would be the case, and yet somehow hearing him say it makes it seem so much more real.

"I do things that would put me in jail, Dani, and I don't fucking regret them. Do you understand that?"

I nod and lick my lips. "I do now."

"I haven't fucked you yet, not because I don't want to, but because I don't fuck casually, Daniella." His eyes burn into mine with a ferocity that takes my breath away. "Because once I do, I will own you. I don't do fucking casual."

"You don't do fucking *casual*, or you don't do casual *fucking*?" I ask him, which gets me a little turn of his lips before he shakes his head, spins me around, and bends me over my massage table. His hand cracks against my ass so hard it takes my breath away. I giggle, and squirm, because he turns me on so much.

"You're such a fresh girl," he says. "But a good girl, too. What's a fresh, good girl like you deserve?"

I brace myself on the table and feel like a model. "Your cock, obviously."

The sound of his deep, manly chuckle makes my nipples harden. God, he's so fucking sexy.

"I'm on birth control," I tell him encouragingly.

"We're still using a condom. I want you to know you can trust me."

I close my eyes as the weight of everything that's happened presses in on me. "I trust you, Ricco."

I choke back emotions as he lifts me onto the table, positioning me on my knees, and tugs my jeans down. My body screams for more, my pussy aching to be filled by him. The crinkling of a condom wrapper being opened competes with the sound of our heavy breathing. The table shifts as he climbs up behind me, his hot hands all over me, his cock at my entrance.

I plant my hands on the table. At the first thrust of his cock inside me I moan and lean back into him, feeling like the sexiest woman alive. Every one of my nerves seems filled by him, as if my body was built to accommodate his. As if we were poured from the same mold, made for each other.

Pleasure shivers through me as he builds a rhythm with each perfect thrust. His hands tangle in my hair and I scream as he pulls, pleasure suffusing my limbs. "Oh, God," I groan, my pussy clenching his cock. My breasts tingle and my pussy tightens, my pulse racing as I get closer to the edge of bliss.

“Come, Dani,” he growls in my ear as he bites the lobe. My pleasure peaks and crashes as he groans his own pleasure out loud.

I’ve never come like this before, on my knees with a cock in me. I brace myself as pleasure paralyzes me, every nerve frayed and wracked with euphoria.

Ricco slumps on the table and drags me, sweaty and messy, onto his chest. My eyes flutter closed at the feel of his lips on my forehead. I lace my fingers through his.

"When do you go?"

He sighs, and I notice how his shoulders sag, even as he holds me against him.

"I leave tonight. Marco will sleep on the plane, and we’ll wake up in Italy."

I think about Emmy, I think about my job. I think about Sarah, and my promise to myself, the promise that seems so far away right now, to investigate Bella Notte and find out what actually happened to Nick. But except for my family, I don't want any of the rest of that now.

"So you're related to the Rossis."

He gives me a curious look and nods. "Yeah."

"I guess that means you're rich."

He gives me a smile and that makes him look almost boyish. "Yeah," he repeats, obviously wondering where I'm going with this.

I wave my hand in the air. "I don't need your money."

He laughs and chucks a thumb under my chin. "I know you don't." There’s a pause, and he seems to be thinking something through before he continues. “Come with me, Dani. I want you there.”

I blink. “Me?”

“You and Emmy. Come to Italy with me.”

Come to Italy?

It's a brief statement, a bold move, and I hold my breath and think of my options.

"You want me to go with you?" My voice is tremulous. Disbelieving.

Italy?

"Daniella." He cups my cheek, holding my gaze. "I want you to come with me and Marco."

I lick my lips. "I'd...I'd like that."

His mouth is on mine. The kiss is at once bruising, punishing, and I make a low sound deep in my throat, aroused beyond measure at the possessive touch.

"God, have no idea what that means to me. Go home and pack your bags."

Everything happens so fast, I can barely keep up.

Who am I? What am I doing? I'm not the kind of person that makes impulsive decisions like this, but the thought of him gone for who knows how long... The thought of being alone with him in Italy, away from the shop and away from Bella Notte, away from my home and his, away from the memories and ghosts, is so compelling. In a place that's new, maybe even exotic. I don't even know what part of Italy we're going to.

When I pull up to my house with Emmy, my sister's waiting for me there, thank God.

"Okay, so obviously you need to bring your thongs." Sarah stands in front of my closet with a stern look of disapproval on her face. She shakes her head. "Why do you keep doing this to me, Dani?"

"Nobody's doing anything to you."

"You keep putting me in these positions where I need to make a decision on your clothing that is less than ideal," she says tightly. "Obviously we need to make a trip to Victoria's Secret."

I snort-cough, "Overpriced."

She shakes her head. "You're dating a rich mafia guy. He can afford a couple

of overpriced lacy things."

"I'm not having him buy my underwear for me! I don't care if he's a gazillionaire."

She turns and narrows one eye at me while quirking a brow. "Hundred bucks says you come home with Italian lingerie."

I guffaw and shake my head. "Who do you think I am? I'm not coming home with Italian lingerie!"

"You so are. And I know exactly who you are. You are someone who's smitten with an Italian hottie. A *dangerous* Italian hottie. A badass Italian hottie."

My mouth goes dry and I swallow, because this is so totally true.

"Sarah, what am I doing?" I whisper. She turns, faces me, and grabs me by the shoulders. She looks deeply into my eyes, and her own water with intensity.

"Daniella Martinelli, you are the best damn mother I know, and you've suffered more than any woman of your age should suffer. You made a mistake and married a jerk, and now by some crazy stroke of luck, that jerk has died."

"Sarah!"

She waves her hand, dismissing anything I may protest. "There is no universe that's going to strike me dead with lightning because I said it was a good stroke of luck that your cheating, jerk-off of a husband died and left you some life insurance. Yeah, maybe he only had that life insurance because he happened to have a good employer. Who the fuck cares?"

But I know what's really holding me back. I'm getting in way too deep with a man I hardly know.

"Babe. You said he's your dream man. You've manifested him out of thin air."

"That's not possible."

"For once, will you stop thinking with your head?"

I throw my hands up in the air. "What am I supposed to be thinking with?"

"Your heart. Your emotions. Your dreams."

"That doesn't even make sense. And that sounds like terrible advice."

"Dani, Ricco cares about you. I don't give a flying fuck if he decides he's going to open up a casino in the middle of the ocean, or whatever the fuck he's going to... trade... like guns or whatever. He likes you. He's going to take care of you and protect you. Is he kind to Emmy too?" I nod. "That's what matters," she continues. "You're a smart woman and a great mom. You wouldn't be with him if you knew this wasn't right."

I bite my lip. "I don't know. I just don't know."

"Dani, you asked him to take you with him to *Italy*. Pack your bags and fucking go. You don't have to marry the guy, but can you please do me the honor of getting some real Italian gelato and pizza? Pleeese?"

Ten minutes later, Emmy's and my bags are packed, and I've got us ready to go. There's a knock at the door. "Who is it?"

"Your driver, ma'am. Mr. Montavio sent us to get you, your daughter, and your bags."

My phone buzzes with a text. I quickly look at it and feel Sarah tightening beside me.

Open the text from Ricco.

I had to talk to Sergio and make sure that everything is set for us to go. I sent two of my best guys to bring you and Emmy to the airport. Wait for me there, I'll come as soon as I can.

"They're his men."

"Of fucking course they are," she says under her breath. "I hope they're hot too."

Sarah opens the door, throws her shoulders back, and flashes her dazzling smile at two of the hottest guys I've ever seen. Neither one of them flinches

or even blinks.

"Which one of you is Daniella?"

I raise my hand.

Now they're paying attention to my sister. Of course. Neither one of them would look at me once they knew that I was Ricco's. They probably value their lives a little more than that.

It feels real, as I watch them carry my bags and Emmy's outside. I lock up the house and take Emmy's little hand. She rubs her eyes sleepily, but grins when I tell her we're going on a plane.

"We're going flying. Way, way up in the air."

I must be crazy.

"I love this for you," Sarah says, her eyes misty as she squeezes me in a tight hug. "Finally, some fucking adventure. You deserve this."

"We'll see about that."

We walk down the front sidewalk, the air pregnant with the smell of rain and the chill that comes with evening. A long, gleaming black luxury car waits for us. I'm surprised to see, though I shouldn't be, there's a car seat already installed in the car.

The ride to the airport is quick, with no traffic this time of night. And when we arrive there, another car is waiting.

I hold my breath, as if I've been waiting for this moment. The door opens, and Ricco steps out. I melt as soon as his tall, muscular physique, chiseled jawline, smoldering eyes, and dark, tousled hair appear. His confident stance and untamed charm capture my heart. And I know I made the right choice.

He gathers me in his arms, kissing me briefly on the lips.

"This is the smallest plane I've ever seen," I say in a panic.

"It's one of the safest planes you've ever seen," Ricco explains patiently. "It's private. That's the only reason why it's small. I promise, once you get inside, you'll be fine." And he's right. It's beautiful and well-appointed in here, and

Marco's already strapped into his car seat, waving at us. There are little bottles of apple juice and lollipops for the kids to suck so their ears don't hurt as we increase altitude. There's even a young woman, dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, sitting next to Marco.

"This is Penny. She's coming with us. She's Marco's nanny."

Oh, wow. He really did think of everything.

"And now she's Emmy's nanny, too. For the trip anyway."

We get the kids situated, and their excitement quickly wears off once the plane is in the air. Penny reads some stories as the hum of the engines lulls them off to sleep.

"Come with me," Ricco says, now that things have settled down.

He takes me to the back of the plane, close enough so that I can still see the kids and Penny from where I am. Her head lolls to the side, and she's dead asleep. But we're far enough away that we have a little privacy. "I can't believe you're here with me," he says with a shy smile. Ricco gestures for me to join him. "Have a seat."

I sit next to him. "I can't believe I'm here either. Was Sergio, like, okay with this?"

"I don't fucking care what Sergio's okay with," Ricco says, adjusting his seat. Well then, that answers that question. Dammit.

"What's Sergio's problem anyway?"

"You have to understand, in my family we don't date for fun."

"Okay, so...."

"My sister Vivia is married to one of the Rossis, one not related by blood. I married Martina because my family needed me. She and I made the best of it, but there was never any romantic love involved."

"Right. And Timeo?"

"He's too young to be forced into marriage right now, but within the next couple of years, he'll have to make a choice. And for reasons I won't get into,

it'll be a complicated one."

It pains me to ask the next question, but I have to. "So is there someone Sergio would rather you... marry?"

Ricco sighs and shakes his head. "Eventually, yeah. He's only giving me time because Martina died, and I had to take care of Marco. But when he makes his decision, it will be final, and it will almost surely be to someone that will benefit the family."

My heart falls. "And I... don't, do I?"

Ricco reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "In a way, you do. In my family we have rules that pre-date any of this. And the rules state that a married man is one of the most powerful in the group. Marriage alone will put me in a better position."

"And if you get married..."

"It strengthens my family again."

"But it's, like, a better decision if you marry someone who's mafia-affiliated?" I hate the thought of him with another woman. I hate the thought that I'm not enough for his family.

"Yeah. An ally is best, a rival family is always a possibility depending on how things are going at the time, but almost certainly a neutral family will be considered."

"Right." My throat feels tight, but he shakes his head, grabs me, and yanks me onto his lap so that I'm facing him.

"Good thing we're not flying coach," I quip.

"Is that another comment about your weight?" he asks sternly, reminding me about his promise to spank my ass for mentioning that.

"No, just the seat space," I lie. Of course it was a comment about my weight. But I know better than to say that out loud. "If we were flying coach, I'd be wedged in the seat on top of you for the rest of our lives."

He smiles. "Nice try." He sobers. "I want you to understand something, Dani.

I married once for my family. I gave up a position of leadership for my family." He frames my face with his hands. "I am *not* giving you up for my family."

I lean in and kiss him. "I appreciate that," I say as politely as I can, hoping against hope that this doesn't mean he's going to run afoul of his brothers in some catastrophic way. I can feel him grin against my mouth when I kiss him again.

Behind me, there's a sharp cry. I look up quickly to see if Emmy is alright, but she's fast asleep, leaning on Penny's arm. Marco, however, is beginning to cry. I climb off Ricco, and he stands up, walking across to Marco.

"You okay, buddy?" he asks gently. And there I go again, melting into a puddle of Dani-goo when my stern gangster guy morphs into daddy mode. So cute. So hot. My feminine instincts scream, *this one*.

"My ears hurt," Marco says. Ricco reaches for a bottle of juice and opens it up. "Here, drink."

Macro frowns. "I don't like apple juice."

"That's all we have," Ricco says with a grimace, because both of us are aware that even super-powered mobsters can't make a toddler drink or eat anything he says he hates.

"You have to swallow, buddy," Ricco tries. "If you don't, it's gonna hurt your ears." He offers him a lollipop, but Marco shakes his head, tears streaking his cheeks.

I open Emmy's bag. "I was saving this special treat, but I think that you deserve this for being such a brave boy for your daddy."

I pull out a package of licorice, the red kind that's in twists. "Twist it into a bracelet, slide it onto your wrist, and then, when your ears hurt, you chew it and swallow it. Like this."

A few minutes later, Marco is happily sitting, chomping on his candy and swallowing, no more complaints about his ears hurting.

Once Marco's calm and sleeping, I sit back down with Ricco.

“Thanks for that.”

I yawn widely. “Of course.”

In silence, he puts an arm around my shoulders. Nestled against him, I fall asleep, not rousing until Ricco gently taps my shoulder.

"We're here babe."

I go to Emmy, and Ricco gets Marco. Penny takes both kids once we exit the plane and straps them in the car seats. They're exhausted, so they fall right back to sleep.

I hope I'm doing the right thing. This is my little girl. He's a dangerous man.

Sarah's words ring in my ears. She doesn't seem to think I'm making a mistake. Jason doesn't either. And they are my most trusted confidants.

The logical side of me says he's not safe.

But Nick was, and look how that turned out.

"I still can't believe you're here with me." Ricco holds my hand.

I think about what he said, about marrying for his family. It's such a different code of ethics and values, it makes me more than a little uneasy. But I don't want that life for him, either. Based on what he's told me, he was faithful to his wife. Maybe he wasn't in love with her, maybe they were just friends like he said. But it definitely seems as if he was good to her.

I wish I was back at Bella Notte, and not for the reasons why I went there to begin with. I want to ask different questions.

As the kids and Penny doze, I want more answers. “What does your family look for in a partner?”

"Loyalty. Dependability. I guess most would also say things like trustworthiness, understanding, support, too. But these are unique circumstances. My family would also demand someone who could be extremely discreet, and adaptable. They'd also need to be able to navigate very difficult situations."

Maybe it should concern me that we're not talking about dating anymore but

about marriage. But then again, we are previously married people with kids. I'm not here to casually date, and he probably isn't either.

"Sergio met Eden under...well, strange circumstances," he says. "She escaped a cult and hid in Bella Notte. She thought it was a hotel. He found her 'sleeping in his bed,' made her his head chef, and the rest is history." My eyebrows rise.

"A cult."

"Yeah. A real cult. Before you think he's a total asshole, you should know he was engaged to be married to a family connection at the time. I mean obviously, he's my brother. But... you know what I mean."

"I do." I smile to myself. "He fell in love with Eden."

"Something like that. It made sense at the time, and we all agreed."

"And if you hadn't?"

"In that case, Sergio would've gotten his way and told us we could go fuck ourselves, because he's the boss."

"Interesting. Do you worry about Marco?"

"Of course I do," he says. "What parent wouldn't? He talks about Martina, but not much. He barely remembers her. And I do the best I can to be a good dad to him, but I'm not a mother."

I wonder for a minute if he is thinking of me as someone who could become Marco's mother. Would I be that wrong for Ricco? I like the fact that the man I'm interested in also has a child.

"I worry, too. I didn't love my husband. Not anymore, anyway. We fell out of love a long time ago. But he was a good dad sometimes, in spite of being a complete jerk."

I pause as Ricco reaches into Marco's bag and pulls out a little blanket. He tucks it around him. Then he takes out a second one for me so I can tuck in Emmy.

"Thank you, you thought of everything."

"I'm a dad. That's what we do. It's my job."

Not every dad. Some people are so invested in their own needs, they don't think of their child's. But we won't talk about those people. They're gone.

"So where are we staying?"

"My family owns a lot of property here. The Rossis own even more. There's a vineyard, a boutique hotel, and a few family homes. But I've chosen what you might call the rustic retreat."

"Oh, rustic retreat." I pretend to be thinking. "Hmm. Do you have any idea how much fun we can have in a barn?"

His gaze heats. "I do and I think you'll like it there. It'll give you a real taste of authentic Tuscan life, without forcing you into close proximity to my family."

"Bella Notte puts me in close proximity to your family," I say logically.

"Yeah, about that." He narrows his eyes. "I don't love the idea of you going back there."

Shit. That's a bad idea. "Hey, you can't stop me from going there." I promised myself that I would look for details. I promised myself that I would get justice.

I also promised myself that I wouldn't set myself up for heartbreak.

"You shouldn't worry too much about other people taking advantage of me or corrupting me. I mean, I'll be with you."

He grits his teeth. "That's not what I'm worried about."

"Oh yeah? Then what are you worried about?" I don't buy it. I think that's exactly why he's worried.

"I wanna keep you for myself. I don't like the idea of other people looking at you. It's complicated."

"You're just jealous as hell. That's not complicated at all."

"It is, though. It isn't just that I'm jealous. I want you to stay safe, and Bella

Notte gets intense. We have rivals, Dani, we have *enemies*. And our enemies aren't easy."

"Fine, but I was just trying to get used to it."

No, that wasn't all I was trying to do. But I obviously can't tell him what else there is.

"We're almost there." There's a large iron gate in front of us; it inches open with the push of a button, revealing a winding, rocky dirt road so long I cannot see its end. We begin to drive down the road, shaking a little from side to side. Thankfully, the kids are still exhausted and asleep.

"This is one of the biggest places that we own, but I think you're gonna like it, because it's simple, and clean, and detached from everything. A real retreat."

"How are you going about the business you came here for?"

"I have to travel every morning, but I'll be home as soon as I can every day. I promise."

I sigh and blow out a breath, but I know this is one of the tradeoffs. I know it.

Actually, we seem like a real team as we carry our bags and lead our kids into the house.

I'm exhausted, and so is he, but we get the kids situated first, getting them ready for bed. They easily tuck themselves under the blankets because they are still half asleep. Ricco bends down and kisses the top of Marco's head.

Emmy is going to love her room. All white, with pink pillows by a vanity. And mine is adjacent to hers, a door adjoining the two rooms.

Ricco kisses my cheek. "Rest well. I'll see you in the morning."

I kiss him back. Tuck Emmy's blanket around her shoulders. Then flop on the bed and reach for my phone.

I text Sarah and Jason.

It's beautiful here. We're going to enjoy ourselves, I know it.
And, guys?

I bite my lip.

I think I'm in love.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RUSTIC RETREAT

Ricco

WE'VE ONLY BEEN HERE one day, and I already know that I'm falling for Daniella. If I were someone who made reckless decisions, I would ask her to marry me right now. Then I'd give her the goddamn universe.

The kids wake way, way too early that first morning. When I half stumble to the kitchen, my eyes bleary from lack of sleep, I find Dani sitting at the little kitchen table with the kids. She holds a cup of hot coffee, her hair all messy, wearing an old T-shirt and a pair of cotton shorts.

I imagine I'm looking into my future. A future I never imagined allowing myself to have, but I want it so badly I can taste it.

"I told Penny she could sleep in," Dani says, "and I made you coffee." I love the adorable way her cheeks dimple when she smiles at me. The way her casual clothes are snug against her curves. The way her messy hair still looks sexy as fuck.

The sun has long since risen over the horizon that overlooks our courtyard. The vineyards in the distance smell of ripe grapes, and the sun-scorched fields look warm to the touch even from here.

Emmy sits at the table, swinging her legs from side to side.

"It's so pretty," she says. I wink at Dani and tuck a little bit of her hair behind her ear.

"Yes, she is," I whisper to her. Smiling shyly at me, she scoots her chair back as Marco starts to squirm and pull at the buckle holding him in his high chair when he sees me.

He fusses when she tries to help him, and as I'm reaching for him my phone rings.

"Go ahead, take it," Dani says. "I'll hold him."

"Thank you. He likes to drink milk in the morning," I tell her before leaving the kitchen, scrubbing a hand over my face when I see it's Sergio. Fuck.

Sergio normally only ever has a conference call with the rest of the men of the Brotherhood back at Bella Notte, bringing everyone up to speed no matter where they're traveling or stationed. It's usually at 11:00 a.m. Boston time. This time, it's only him and Timeo, and it's 1:00 a.m. in Boston. I'm screwed.

His eyes flash at me and he looks like he wants to hit something. "You took her to fucking Tuscany?"

I scowl into the phone, then take a quick glance at a stained glass window that I know overlooks a paved walkway that leads to the vineyard. I'll take the kids and Dani there later. "She has a name, dipshit. And she's safer by my side. Safer than at Bella fucking Notte."

Sergio blows out an angry breath and shoves his hands through his hair. "Is there anything I can do to talk sense into you?" He leans in closer to the phone, glaring at me, and drops his voice. "And how the fuck am I supposed to get any respect from my men when my own brothers don't do what I tell them?"

"Hey! That doesn't have to be plural. I've been a perfect saint over here," Timeo says. I can even see him holding his hands up in the air over the phone.

"For what? Like a fucking day?" I mutter. "Let me polish your goddamn halo, princess. And listen, no one needs to know anything about Dani, Sergio. Is that why you called?"

His jaw tenses and he points an irate finger at me. "You better marry her."

I groan and shake my head. "What is that supposed to mean? You're going from 'don't go anywhere near her' all the way to marriage?"

Sergio steepled his fingers, every bit the Don who rules Boston. "You know exactly what that means. If you marry her, she can't back out when she finds out what you did."

A flash of anger surges through me, like red-hot fire. I want to break something. My nostrils flare as I clench my fists. "I will not blackmail her."

"Oh yeah? Then what do you want to do, smart guy?"

"Here we go again," Timeo mutters.

"Drink a cup of coffee and have breakfast with my kid. That's what I wanna do. Is there something else you need to tell me? Cuz I'm hanging up."

"Not now."

I disconnect the call. Fuck him.

I'm fuming when I return to the kitchen, but my anger almost instantly dissolves at the first sight of my son nestled on Dani's lap. I release a breath.

Marco has a sippy cup of milk, and his head rests on Dani's shoulder. Her arm is around him, so he's nestled in the crook of her arm. Emmy is happily singing her ABCs, munching on a muffin and some sliced melon. Outside, our landscaper is starting up the lawnmower. It's so domestic. So simple.

"Everything good?" Dani asks.

"Yeah. Fine," I lie. I can't tell her any of this and I hate that. "I'm starving, need some coffee. You find what you need?"

Dani smiles. "And then some. Ricco, this place is gorgeous. It's like this blend of rustic meets charming, like freshly brewed coffee in a handcrafted mug. It's a retreat, nestled right here in the hills."

I take a seat across from her. "It is, yeah."

"I took a look this morning, in the thirty seconds or so I had before the kids woke up," she says, her voice still a little husky and sleepy, but her eyes alight with delight. "There's a terra-cotta tiled roof," she says excitedly. "Like an actual postcard. Climbing vines, and that front door is stunning and probably weighs like three hundred pounds."

I sip my coffee. "Yeah, I love it here. And this coffee's fantastic. Hot, dark, and bitter." I wink at her. "Like my soul."

She snorts and rolls her eyes. "Don't flatter yourself." She sighs happily. "I would love cooking in a kitchen like this. The marble countertop—all these beautiful modern appliances, but it's so cozy with that fireplace and open shelves. This place should be featured in a magazine about modern farmhouses." She smiles and says in a narrator's voice, "This charming

Tuscan farmhouse blends old-world charm with modern comfort, a place where multiple generations create lasting memories.”

I take a deep breath, steadying myself against a surprising rush of emotion.

Multiple generations.

Marry her.

"Are you hungry?" Dani asks, bringing me back to the present.

I love that she isn't self-conscious, half-asleep and tousled like this. I wish I could freeze time. Keep her here with me. She brings such a sense of normalcy and stability to my life, and I don't want to give that up.

"Starving," I say. "But you have your hands full." Marco has a grip on her that tells me he's not letting her go anytime soon. "I'll make breakfast."

Normally we have a housekeeper, but I didn't want them to come when I was bringing guests...particularly these guests. The fewer people know Dani's here, the better.

Emmy sings us another song, and Dani joins in off-key, as I fry eggs and butter toast. By the time I'm done, Dani's watching me with a curious look on her face.

"You cut Marco's toast into triangles?" She smiles.

I shrug. "It's how he likes it. Do you want jam on it, buddy?"

Marco shakes his head, takes a bite of the toast, then spits it on the floor and throws the crust across the room.

"Hey! Marco, stop that." I lift him out of his high chair where Dani had settled him as I was finishing up and plating the food. "Clean that up, please."

The corner of Dani's lips quirks up.

Marco frowns, picks up the toast, and throws it into the sink. Penny stands in the doorway. "Um, maybe let's get dressed, Marco?"

I shake my head and clean up the crumbs. Dani's stifling a giggle.

"What's so funny?" I ask her. Emmy's digging into her eggs and toast.

Dani starts to laugh. "It's just that... You're like this tough guy. You don't even listen to Sergio Montavio, who is like the most notorious mobster in all of Boston. And yet your three-year-old son gets under your skin."

"He can be a little monster," I mutter. That only makes her laugh harder.

I narrow my eyes at her, but she's obviously tickled. "I know how to manage you," I say, giving her a serious look, and she just laughs again. I love that flush to her cheeks, though.

"How long do you have to work today?"

I run my hands through my hair. "Most of the day," I tell her. "I'll be back around dinnertime. Wish it could be sooner, but I have some negotiations I need to head."

Sergio sent me here for a reason. Our "negotiations" involve Martina's family, so it's in the Montavio family's best interest if I can use my clout.

"So you mean to tell me I have most of the day to explore the Tuscan countryside and this farmhouse, eat yummy food, and take a nap with Emmy?" Dani says, shaking her head. "How dare you."

I lean in and kiss her, a brief brush of my lips across hers that makes my heart clench. "I don't want to leave you," I whisper. "But yeah, baby. Enjoy your stay. I'll be back tonight." I kiss her cheek. "Behave yourself while I'm gone."

I get ready. I wish I could stay home. But at least they're here, safe and sound, and she'll be here to greet me when I get back.

"Ricco, someone's at the door," Dani says as I start to leave. I pause to look through the glass side panels that frame either side of the heavy wooden door.

"Appears to be beggars," I mutter. Passing through, most likely, as the locals would never approach a Montavio family home to beg.

Dani's gaze challenges me. "And what are you going to do about that?"

This is another test. Goddamn it, everywhere I turn, someone's testing me.

I turn to her with my hands on my hips, not sure how to respond. "I'm going to work, and I don't know them. My security team's going to run them off anyway. I was going to tell them to leave." When she frowns, I sigh. "What would you have me do?"

"See what they need, of course," she says. "It takes a lot of courage to go to somebody's front door to ask for things."

"Interesting."

I look again. One of them is an older man, missing a few front teeth. His clothes are ragged, but he has a young boy with him.

I open the door. "I'm sorry, sir," the little boy says. "We didn't know who you were. We'll leave right now." They turn to leave, and I notice the old man's eyes are focused on my forearm, on my Montavio Brotherhood tattoo. He knows we're mafia.

"No, it's fine," Dani says in Italian.

I turn to give her a funny look. "Since when do you know Italian?" I ask her in a whisper.

She holds up her phone. "Ah, since Google Translate helped me. It's remarkably clever." She turns back to them. "Can we help you?"

The very thrust of her chin and her hands on her hips defy me to make these people leave. I gotta hand it to her—she's got spunk.

"Just some food," the boy says nervously. "My mother is sick and hasn't been able to work. My grandfather's been sick too, since he came to live with us."

"Of course. Stay right there." Dani turns and walks right past me, as if I wasn't even there. I hear her rustling through the kitchen, and a minute later, she comes back with a bag filled with food. "Here," she says. "We have more than we need."

I reach for my wallet and take out some cash. "Here." The boy's eyes go wide when he sees the amount of money. It means nothing to me, but I feel like an asshole not helping, not when Dani's practically giving them the clothes off her back.

"Thank you. Thank you." They back away, and I give them a look that tells them that now it's time to go.

When they're gone, and the kids are in the backyard playing with Penny, I turn to face Dani.

"That was very noble of you and everything, but nobody comes to this door when I'm not home. Do you understand me? My security team's been instructed. No helping beggars or whatever the fuck. That was a one-time exception, Daniella."

She gives me a teasing little grin and captures her lips between her teeth. "Or what?" she asks. God, this girl's got too much spunk.

"You know exactly what. Don't test me, woman."

"Okay, fine. I'll hang out with Penny and the kids while you go do your manly mobster things. And I won't have any fun, or let anybody in, or go anywhere. Okay?"

Her eyes dance at me though. And I know that she's going to find plenty of ways to entertain herself.

"There's a pool out back."

"I saw!" She grins. "It's gorgeous! Does the hammock work? And those speakers, do you guys have parties here or something?"

"We do, especially by the barn in the summer."

"Oh," she says with a grin. "I forgot about that part." She gives me one of those looks that makes my heart pound. "The barn, the one that is far away from the kids and Penny." Twisting a lock of her hair, she smiles at me. "Exactly when do you have to leave?"

I don't need to be asked twice.

Ten minutes later, I'm laying her down in a bed of hay, meeting be fucked. I nuzzle my face in her gorgeous hair and worship her breasts with my mouth and hands until she's moaning and her nipples bud into hard little peaks. I lick them, one at a time, and she reaches for my belt.

“Jesus, Dani,” I whisper in her ear when she takes me out and palms my erection.

“Fuck me, Ricco,” she begs. “I want you in me. I want you close to me again.”

I take her right there, her legs wrapped around me as we bask in the sweet smell of hay and sunshine.

“I could have a lot of fun in this barn with you,” I say with the first thrust. I lay my hand at her neck and flex. Her eyes light up. “I could tie you up. Straddle you over that milking bench. Spank your ass, then fuck it while your hands are cuffed.”

“Yes,” she whispers, her eyes rolling back in her head as I fuck her hard, thrusting in and out, impaling her on my cock as her hips rise to meet mine. “It’s a date.”

She climaxes right before I do, and the sounds of her pleasure-laced moans spiral me into my own perfect climax. I hold her against me, the two of us panting and sated. We take a stolen moment to revel in each other, her head against my chest, her legs entwined with mine.

“I have to go,” I say on a sigh as we quickly dress. “But this was a really good fucking send-off.”

“Yes, sir, it was,” she says with a happy sigh.

I hold her to me. I kiss the top of her head and squeeze her hand. “Ricco, do you have any... farmhands or whatever?”

“My farm hands were just all over your body.”

“Oh, very funny,” she says, with a laugh. “But I swear I just saw somebody walk by that window...”

I’m up and at the door before she finishes her sentence. I see somebody, too, a shadow. I draw my gun, immediately alert. Her eyes widen at the sight of the pistol in my hand.

Did someone see us in here? What the fuck?

"Who's there?" I shout. "Show yourself."

Footsteps approach, and a large shadow of a figure comes into view before I recognize Adriano, a man of the Brotherhood. Likely sent here by Sergio.

"What the fuck are you doing creeping around back there?" I ask, shaking my head. I'm grateful Dani's dressed. "Get in here. Jesus, you're lucky I didn't shoot you. Adriano, this is Dani."

Adriano scowls, the grumpy motherfucker. "Nice to meet you," he lies. It's obvious he isn't happy to meet her at all.

Yeah, we'll be talking alone, later.

"I didn't know you guys got in yet. Sergio told me to come over. He wants me to attend the negotiations, says that you're the best at it, and he wants me to learn from you." He gives Dani a funny look. "I didn't know we had company."

"Dani's with me," I snap, holding back from the need to deck him. "So Sergio sent you here?"

I'm gonna fucking kill him.

"I was nearby. I was heading home after a trip, and I told him I'd check in."

"Fucking check in? As if I need a babysitter?"

"Relax. You haven't been here in a while. It makes sense that he wants a little hand-holding. So just relax, buddy."

That's not why he's here, and he and I both know it.

"I was just heading back in," Dani says. Penny and the kids are back in the yard when they see us. They wave excitedly to Dani, who waves back. "See you later?" she asks. I nod and kiss her cheek before she trots off to meet them.

As soon as she's gone, I whirl on Adriano.

"Now tell me why the fuck you're here."

He holds his hands up in the air. "What the fuck is your problem, Ricco?" he

says.

"Dani isn't gonna threaten anything for us," I tell him, shaking my head.

"Ricco, your beef's with Serg, not me," Adriano says. "Nobody's been in this house for a while. Housekeeping came by, they brought groceries, and I'm just here to make sure everything's okay." He shrugs his shoulders. "I have a question, though." There's steel in his voice. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I don't owe you an explanation."

"Yeah, but anybody else in your position would." He shakes his head and turns to go.

"Keep your fucking opinions to yourself." Jesus, who does he think he is?

Adriano turns around, his eyes sparking at me. When my grandfather picked him up on the streets, he was an orphaned kid. He's grown up under the influence of the Montavios, and he's tough and ruthless, but he knows that he and I can't fight.

"I told you," Adriano says, "your problem is not with me."

I get another buzz on my phone; I look down at the screen.

Sergio:

Meeting's been rescheduled. You have the day off. Use it wisely.

"Looks like we have a rescheduled meeting," I say to Adriano.

"What did Sergio say?"

I roll my eyes. "Use the day off wisely." Jesus.

"Marialena is in town, Tosca and Mario, too. Come to dinner tonight. Bring her." He scowls. "See how she handles it."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means. You decided to get in bed with this woman. She could end you. She could do major damage to our family. Bring

her. Test her."

I step toward him. "I don't take orders from you, asshole."

Adriano steps toward me. "Maybe you should take orders from fucking somebody."

I hit him before I realize what I'm doing. My knuckles graze his cheekbone, the punch satisfying as hell. He's taken off guard and stumbles backward but comes up swinging.

I deck him again, but he gets me with a jab, winding me.

I hit him again, and again, and it feels good to finally hit somebody. I've been holding all this back. Adriano rears back and comes at me full force, knocking me off my feet. I land in a pile of hay and he's on top of me.

"We can't fight," he says. "You know it, and I know it."

He strokes his cheek where I struck him. "Jesus, you got me good."

"I feel better, though. And you were being an asshole. Now get off me before we have a fucking bromance here and have something else to explain to Sergio."

He gets off me, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't question you. There's a lot at risk here, Ricco."

"Listen, I fucking know it. Now go. Leave us. I'll see you tonight."

I walk to the house, to find Dani sitting on the front stoop. She's wearing a little summer dress, her hair freshly washed.

"How fast do you shower?"

"Record time," she says. "Though I have to admit my shower was cut a little short because I couldn't really figure out the hot water. You haven't left yet?"

"Meeting got postponed."

Her eyes light up. She looks like I just told her it's Christmas Day.

"I'm taking you to a family dinner tonight. But before then? We have the day

to ourselves. Just me and you."

I hate the idea of anybody in my family testing her. But I know that for us to have any future together at all, she has to pass that test. Before then, though, we can enjoy some time together.

"Hey, did you guys get in a fight?" She stares at me blankly. "Like, hitting each other?"

I wipe at my jaw. "Yeah, it was stupid."

"Why?" When I don't answer her, her face falls. "It's because of me," she says, in a little voice that breaks my heart. "Because I don't belong here."

"It's more than that, Dani," I sigh.

"Wait," she says with a smile. "Do you mean to tell me that someone got into a fight over me?"

"You're unbelievable."



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TO PASS THE TEST

Dani

“YEAH, babe. Someone got in a fight over you.” Ricco shakes his head.

“Honestly, you guys should know better than that,” I say, standing and reaching for him. “Let me see you. Come here.”

I muse to myself, with more than a little delight, about the fact that no one’s ever fought over me before.

I’m still all trembly and relaxed after our barn session this morning but refreshed after a shower. I’m kind of impressed he actually *fought*, like fought another man, over me.

I reach for his cheek and brush it with my thumb. “It’s a bruise, alright,” I confirm. His breath moves a wisp of hair across my lips, and I blow it out of my way with a laugh. “You men are all the same. Overgrown children, the lot of you.”

I’ve battled my need to get over my distrust of men after Nick’s betrayal and infidelity, and I’m not sure Ricco getting into a fistfight with his fellow mafia brother helps the situation. The real problem, though, is that I fear for him. I don’t know what’s caused him to want to fight for me. I don’t know what he faces in his line of work.

I want to know, though, because the closer I get to Ricco, the more I want him. The more I want him to want *me*.

Ricco shrugs, stepping closer and resting his hands on my waist. “You gonna doctor me up?”

I trace his hairline with the tip of my finger, as if looking for injuries. “You need doctoring up?” I swallow when he leans down and brushes his lips across my collarbone. A shiver of pleasure cascades down my spine.

“I do,” he whispers in my ear. “You have what can cure me, woman?”

“I thought I already gave you what could cure you in that barn,” I say, as the back door swings open.

“There’s a beach!”

I turn to face Emmy, and Ricco steps away, but his hand lingers on the small of my back.

“Emmy, we have beaches at home,” I say with a laugh. “It’s not like that’s anything new.”

“Mama,” Emmy says, her little hands on her hips and her eyes wide and bright. “I wanna go!”

Ricco shrugs. “Two preschoolers and an American tourist on an Italian beach in the heat of the day. What could go wrong?”

An hour later, we’ve got a picnic packed and we’ve given Penny the day off. “She can watch them tonight when we head to dinner,” Ricco says. Given that I’m about to meet some of his family, the thought of not worrying about my preschooler’s spilled milk or tantrum over her meat that’s not cut to the right size sounds like an excellent idea.

The beach is a fair trade.

The sun beats down, it’s a warm day in Tuscany. I spread a blanket on the sand and lay out our towels, while Ricco slathers sunscreen over the kids before he races them to the water. I sit on the sand, my sunglasses perched on the edge of my nose. It’s *gorgeous* here, so picturesque it looks like it belongs on a postcard. I can’t believe I’m staring at a Mediterranean shoreline, watching the hottest guy I’ve ever met splashing in the waves with my daughter and his son.

I love the sound of waves crashing on the shore, and Emmy’s giggles. The scent of saltwater mingles with the scent of the ripe peaches I packed, and a gentle breeze fills the air. I breathe in and exhale, trying not to think about our plans for tonight.

What will the family think of me? What will I think of *them*?

My phone buzzes with a text.

Jason:

Hey, babe. Enjoying yourself?

So so so much. It's gorgeous here. Stunning. We're at the beach.

Excusez-moi. Let me get back to my cubicle while you order an aperitif. I want pics, beautiful!!

I send Jason a quick picture of me on the beach, sticking my tongue out at the camera.

The beach stretches along the turquoise waters; fine golden sand runs between my toes. Umbrella-topped loungers and colorful beach towels line the shore. In front of me, Ricco leans on his forearm, building a sandcastle with the kids. Emmy's captivated, drizzling water over one of the sides to make patterns in the sand, and little Marco rears back and kicks it over. Emmy wails. I cover my hand with my mouth to stifle a laugh as Ricco shakes a finger at Marco and comforts Emmy.

"Lunchtime?" I offer, hoping the distraction helps.

Couples walk by hand in hand, and little children splash in the shallow water. It's so calm and peaceful, but I can't help but wonder how today's excursion will contrast with tonight's dinner.

"We'll build you your own castle to destroy, but leave Emmy's alone," Ricco says sternly.

Marco nods. "You promise?"

Ricco nods. "As soon as we've finished lunch, I'll build you as many castles as you want to kick over."

Marco grins and takes a huge bite of his sandwich.

"I was a dino," he says to me in explanation. "Sorry, Emmy."

Emmy frowns into her sandwich and takes a tentative bite but perks up after she eats.

It feels so homey and domestic, and I can't help but imagine ourselves like this... Emmy and Marco, me and Ricco, a small but ready-made family.

When the sun begins to set and the kids are yawning, we pack up our sandy

selves and head back to the house. We get the kids situated and get ready for the night. I'm a little sunburnt but happy. This day at the beach was as beautiful as I could've imagined.

"You feeling okay about dinner tonight?" Ricco asks curiously, standing behind me, buttoning his shirt.

"Oh, yeah, I feel great," I lie. "Why wouldn't I? It's only a whole bunch of people I've never met who know each other, in a country whose language I barely know, and I'm joining a man who may or may not be—"

I don't finish because I suddenly realize I'm not ready to say this out loud.

"May or may not be what, baby?" Ricco asks softly.

I was going to say *the man I'm falling in love with*.

I shake my head. I can't say it out loud, not yet.

I meet his eyes in the mirror. "Ready to fight someone over me at a moment's notice?" I say, my eyes twinkling.

Ricco stands behind me, looking sexy as fuck in his suit and tie, clean-shaven yet still rugged and masculine. He rests his hands on my hips and meets my gaze in the mirror. "There's no may or may not about that," he says with conviction. "I'll fight anyone for you."

I swallow and bite my lip, holding his gaze in the mirror.

"But we're civilized," I protest, even as a part of me loves this fierce side of him.

"*You're* civilized," he corrects. "This is only a facade for me."

He gives me a wink. I can't help but wonder. How much of this is true? How much is he making up?

How much does he really mean?

The kids squeal in the other room as Penny puts a movie on. They're already in their jammies with large bowls of popcorn, but I doubt after our day at the beach they'll last much longer. Again, it feels so right and domestic, so natural and homey but there's an edge to everything I can't quite settle. It's as

if Ricco's only shown me one side of himself and hinted at the other, but I have a dark feeling there's so much more than what I've seen so far.

I need to know that side of him. I need to know *all* of him if I'm going to make the right decision.

My stomach growls with hunger as we drive away. "You're fidgeting," Ricco says as I squirm on my seat.

"I'm nervous."

"Why, baby?" He rests his hand on my upper thigh and gives it a little squeeze. "You have nothing to worry about. They'll love you. Anyone who doesn't needs their head examined."

"You think so highly of me," I say with a grimace. "But you haven't smelled my morning breath."

He shrugs. "I'm not scared of morning breath."

"You really don't know what I'm like when I have PMS."

He quirks a brow as he takes a turn. "You turn into a dragon?"

"Well, no, but I cry a lot and may or may not eat copious amounts of ice cream."

Ricco shrugs. "Crying doesn't bother me, and I'll buy you all the ice cream you need."

I contemplate the passing countryside, not really seeing it. "I just... I don't belong in your world, Ricco."

Ricco sighs. "Babe, I don't belong in my world, but here we are."

I wonder what that means, but he doesn't elaborate as we continue to drive.

"I got something for you. I want you to wear it tonight."

My heart beats a little faster in anticipation. "If it's one of those pairs of remote-controlled, vibrating underwear..."

Ricco winces. "God, you shouldn't guess so accurately."

“Ricco! You did not buy me those!”

“You’re right,” he says with a laugh. “I didn’t.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief while nursing the tiniest bit of disappointment as well. Climaxing through the tiramisu would be a good distraction.

“Open the glove compartment.”

I look at him out of the corner of my eye as I do what he says.

A slim but long velvet box sits inside.

My heart beats faster.

Did he buy me jewelry?

“Open it.”

My hands tremble slightly as I reach in and draw out the box. I gasp when I open it.

An entire jewelry set is nestled inside; the sapphires and diamonds of the necklace, earrings, and bracelet are cast in white gold. The gemstones are exquisite and perfect.

“A glint of the bluest blue, flash from a sapphire sun,” I muse, quoting a line of poetry as I finger the glittering facets. “These are so beautiful.”

Ricco parks the car. “Come here and let me put them on you.”

His fingers are warm as he slides the necklace in place and kisses my bare neck where it lies. I slip the earrings in and the bracelet on; he touches and cups my cheek and kisses me there, too.

“Stunning,” he says. “And the jewelry isn’t bad.”

“You know you can’t buy my love and affection,” I tell him, joking but also partly serious.

“I have no intention of buying love and affection,” he says, exiting the car to walk around to my side. “But sex, now that’s another story.”

I snort as he opens my door, then realize we have an audience.

“Hey, Adriano,” Ricco says. “Dani, this is Adriano, Quinn’s husband.”

“Oh, yes,” I say, hoping my voice doesn’t betray my nerves. “I love your wife! I think you were at the club once when I was there.”

Adriano gives Ricco a sharp look. “You were at the club?” he asks, shaking his head. “Sorry, I didn’t realize. Pleasure to meet you, Daniella.”

Holding Ricco’s gaze, Adriano embraces me and kisses first one cheek, then the other. It’s a classic Italian move to welcome someone, so I’m not sure why Ricco’s jaw tightens.

What the hell is up with these two?

“And you,” I say back, then give a start when someone squeals.

“Is this her? Oh my *God*, Ricco, you dog! How’d you land a woman like this?” A stunning brunette wearing spiky heels and a bodycon dress dances over to us.

“Daniella, meet my cousin, Marialena Rossi.”

Rossi. My stomach clenches. I remember stories of the Rossis, years ago, from when I was a teen. They were known for their acts of brutal retribution, and the old Rossi Don—her father?—was a notorious mobster whose cruelty knew no bounds.

“Nice to meet you,” I say, trying not to choke at the memories flooding me. Of the latest victim of the Rossi family strung from the Zakim Bridge for trying to assault one of their sisters. Of another found executed on the Boston waterfront for theft, another gone missing after a shooting in the North End. And of the brutal tales people told of Orlando Rossi’s meat freezer in his restaurant...

“Come on, come on,” Marialena says. “Let the men catch up and you come and meet my mother.”

She whisks me away to a patio bathed in reds and golds by the setting sun’s rays. A tall, regal woman who looks a lot like Marialena but obviously older sits at an outdoor bar with a tall glass of wine. She raises her eyebrows at us but smiles.

“You have a friend, Lena?”

“Mama, this is—oh my God, I didn’t get your name.”

“Daniella,” I supply. “You can call me Dani.”

“Dani, oh I *love* that. Mama, this is Ricco’s date, Dani. Dani, this is my mother, Tosca Rossi.”

Ricco’s...date.

That’s one way to put it.

Tosca extends her hand to shake mine, then rises and kisses each of my cheeks. “Welcome. Your first time in Italy?”

“Yes,” I say, biting my lips nervously. “I’m sorry, I’m a bit nervous. I’ve never met Ricco’s family before.”

“Understood,” Marialena says warmly. “But I promise we don’t bite.”

“Or if we do, you’ll like it,” a male voice behind me says.

“Mario!” Marialena snorts and her mother just shakes her head.

A man dressed in a shirt and tie, bearing a resemblance to Ricco but a bit younger, waves to me. “Sorry, she teed it up for me. Nice to meet you,” he says, giving me a wave before he walks back inside.

I blink, a little overwhelmed, but within minutes I’m chatting easily with Marialena. Turns out Marialena has a little girl, too, and she tells me all about the places I might want to go shopping with Emmy.

“What’s Emmy short for?”

“Emmeline, my late husband’s grandmother.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she commiserates, her brows creasing. I stiffen, waiting for the inevitable questions that follow but loathe to answer them.

When did your husband pass?

Was he sick?

He died months ago. Yes, way too soon for me to be dating anyone by traditional standards, but traditional standards can get fucked for reasons that are my own. And no, he wasn't sick, he fell and suffered a life-ending injury.

No, none of this is suspicious at all.

But another glass of wine and a few more trips to Bella Notte, and maybe I'll forget everything.

"Dinnertime," Marialena says. "And I suppose I'll reluctantly let Ricco have you back." She winks at me as we walk inside. "But if you want to do some shopping, please let me know. I'd be happy to take you and buy another bag or ten."

I smile and thank her.

I scan the room and don't see Ricco. I look back to Marialena, but she's off toward the kitchen, and her mother's nowhere to be found. I'm standing in the dining room alone with Adriano.

"Hi," I say awkwardly. I take out my phone and shoot Ricco a text.

Where are you?

I hear a beep and vibration and see Ricco's phone on a side table beside a bottle of wine.

Well, that won't help.

"Do you, um, know where Ricco is?"

Adriano nods. "He had to step out for a minute, but he'll be right back."

Huh. Strange. I swallow nervously. "I see."

"Please," Adriano says, in a voice that's cold and hard. "Have a seat."

I pull out a chair and have a seat.

Where is everyone? Why is it just the two of us in here? It feels at once completely intentional and terrifying, like I've been set up, or I'm the unwilling guest in a horror show intro.

“This is odd,” I say under my breath. I look around the room, taking in every detail, such as the bottles of wine resting in large basins of ice.

“What is?” Adriano asks, pouring himself a glass. “And would you like a glass of wine?”

“Just that everyone disappeared all at once,” I say, unsettled. “I thought this was a dinner party. And yes, please. Any kind of white.”

“Do I scare you?” Adriano asks, as he pours my wine.

“No,” I say with a laugh, lying through my teeth. “Of course not.”

He pauses for a beat. “I should try harder.”

Okay, so this is getting creepy.

I take the wine he gives me and eye it suspiciously.

“It’s not poisoned, *mia bella*. Go ahead, drink.”

I take a gulp and immediately feel better.

“So, tell me about your husband,” Adriano says, as the door opens and Marialena comes in with a tray of food. She nestles it on the table in front of me.

“Where the hell is everyone?” she asks. Relief floods me. At least she’s not doing whatever this guy is doing to me.

“Good question. I can’t even find Ricco,” I tell her.

Adriano shakes his head. “Back in my day, women would’ve loved to have me alone. What has this world come to? Go on, Dani. You were going to tell me about your husband.”

I give him a glance and take another gulp of wine. This time, I smile at him.

“Oh, but I wasn’t, though,” I say sweetly. “I had no intention of saying anything about him. But since you ‘asked’ me so nicely”—I make air quotes, my wine sloshing a little— “my husband was a cheating bastard. His only redeeming quality was that he gave me a beautiful daughter.”

“That is a redeeming quality,” Marialena says hotly. “And I’m with you. Cheating bastards don’t deserve attention, even if they’re dead.”

Adriano eyes me coolly and sips his wine.

“How did you and Ricco meet?” he asks, obviously not ready to let this go.

“He’s a client of mine. I own a massage studio.”

“Do you?” Marialena asks, as the others begin to trickle in. “Oh my God, I need a massage so bad. Would you be able to loosen my shoulders? I’ve had them up around my eyebrows from stress but I so need to chill.”

I smile. “Of course. All we need is a flat table and some privacy.”

“And *I* get smacked for dirty talk,” Mario mutters, joining us. Adriano snorts.

“Shiiittt,” Mario says, gesturing to my necklace. “Did Ricco give you that?”

Okay, I am so over these questions.

“Oh, this?” I say, waving my hand. “Nah, I found this at a yard sale.”

Marialena spits out her wine and Mario grins. “I like her,” he says, though I have no idea who he’s talking to. The room?

“I like you, too, even if you’re nosy as hell,” I say, finishing up my wine and handing my glass to Adriano. “I’ll have another, please.”

Where. Is. Ricco?



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE WARNING

Ricco

“JESUS.”

I seriously should've hit Adriano harder. Of all the lowdown, underhanded, stupid fucking shit he could've done, tricking me into coming down here then locking the door so that they could “test” Dani or whatever the fuck was the absolute worst.

I pace the den, try the locks, then pound on the door when that doesn't work. My phone, of course, is back in the dining room, and every window is locked.

What the fuck are they playing at? I'm going to fucking *kill* him.

I trust them. Dani's safe, and I know this, but I do not like this method of questioning, or testing, or whatever the fuck they're doing.

Finally, after ten minutes of trying everything on the lock, I manage to pick it with a letter opener I find at the bottom of a drawer. Fuming, I compose myself and head straight to the dining room.

When I enter, Dani's got a glass of wine in hand, her eyes are shining and a bit glassy, and she's clearly having the time of her life telling them a story about her sister's escapades. Asshole Adriano's actually grinning, Mario's wiping tears from his eyes, and Marialena's pouring more wine into Dani's glass.

“Ricco, there you are,” Adriano says.

“Sorry, I got held up,” I say, pretending like I'm not going to beat the fucking shit out of him when I get him alone later. “What'd I miss?”

“I was telling them earlier about how you booked every time slot,” Dani says, her voice a bit louder than usual.

I slide up next to her and take her hand in mine. “Sorry about that,” I whisper to her.

“It's not your fault. Adriano tricked you so he could question me. But I

handled it.”

Of course she fucking did, and she’s no fool, either.

I nuzzle her ear. “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

She grimaces, likely not knowing if I’m exaggerating. “Isn’t that against the law?”

“I don’t fucking care about the law.”

“You could maybe, like, beat him up just a little,” she finally concedes.

I grunt. I could.

I could also kill him.

Sergio might get mad about that, though.

Sergio.

Jesus. Adriano’s under Sergio’s leadership and obedient to him. Unlike me, Adriano does anything Sergio asks. If Sergio asked him to cut off his left nut and batter fry it, he would.

Then I know. Sergio fucking put him up to this.

“Excuse me,” I say, standing up and heading to the sideboard so I can get my phone. I step out of the room to see ten texts on my screen.

Jesus.

I read Sergio’s first.

She passed. Good job. I’ll leave you alone now.

Gah-fucking-reat. She passed. Woohoo.

I stifle the need to throw something again. I’ve learned to mask my anger and harness it. A father with a hair-trigger temper isn’t something that’s compatible with preschoolers.

I would know.

Another text, this one from Adriano.

Sergio made me do it. I'm sorry, bro. I'll willingly let you kick my ass.

There's no fun if there's no fight, though. And fine, I get it.

I scowl.

Still gonna kick your fucking ass.

Adriano, sitting at the table, flinches when I reenter the room. He's tough as nails and brutal in a fight, but not if he won't defend himself.

"And Ricco was so good, helping me pick out the right spot for a kiosk in town with Rosa, because I know nothing about that stuff," Marialena says, finishing a story she's telling Dani.

Dani drinks another glass of wine. "But I thought you said that was two months ago?"

"It was," Marialena says.

Dani shakes her head. "But Ricco was still here in Tuscany two months ago."

Marialena laughs. "No, he wasn't. He was—"

She catches my eyes and freezes, pausing mid-sentence. "Oh, God, how could I forget. Of course he was! We were Facetiming, not talking in person." Marialena downs an entire glass of wine in a few gulps.

I breathe a sigh of relief when Dani laughs. She's a little tipsy, no question. For once, I hope that will work in my favor.

I feel like for the first half of the meal, I'm holding my breath.

I wonder if any of them will fuck up the timing again and give away the truth. I *hate* this.

I also wonder if Dani will say or do something that pushes the others away. It's true that she doesn't belong in this world, and I fear that something about her honesty and simplicity will make her stand out, and though I don't care if she fits in at all, I do care that no one makes her realize it.

But during the second half of the meal, I breathe a bit easier.

Dani talks easily to anyone and everyone. She chats with Marialena about Tuscan fashion, about raising a daughter in the modern world. She compliments the chef on the food and loves everything that's served. She holds my hand when people ask me about Martina, and how her family and I do business. I explain how we're friendly, but that it's no more than a business transaction. Dani isn't threatened by the wife that I had, and recognizes that she's a necessary part of my past. She even makes cold-hearted Adriano smile, by regaling him with tales of her learning to swim in the Atlantic Ocean as a child.

By the time dessert is served, and everyone sits around drinking cordials and helping themselves to pastries, Dani leans into me. "We should get home to the kids."

"We should."

"Ricco, can we talk before you go?" Adriano asks.

"Yeah. Let me talk to Adriano first," I tell Dani.

We meet in the study. I shove him against the wall. "Sergio make you do that?"

"Yeah, don't kill the messenger. Let me go, brother."

With a growl, I let him go, but only until I can actually talk to Sergio.

Adriano shrugs me off. "What do you know about her husband?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. He cheated on her, that's all I know."

"What was he doing at Bella Notte?"

"God if I know. Why?"

"Listen, man. I got a cryptic message, something about staying out of it before more innocents get dragged in. Made no sense, we couldn't trace it."

Shit.

"Just a prank?"

"I don't know," he says. "You get anything?"

I frown. "No."

Now I want to get to the kids as much as she does.

I don't tell her about the text until we're back and we've checked in on the kids.

They're tucked safe and sound in their beds, and Dani and I both relax.

"That's the last time we'll leave them here." I take her to the sitting room and show her the text that Adriano got earlier. She covers her mouth and her eyes water. "Why didn't he tell us?"

"He thought it was a prank. And maybe it is. But now it's time to show you, so I did."

"Ricco...." I know that she's struggling with this. Hell, I'm struggling with this. We can't live our lives worrying about the shadows, worrying about the next attack, but at the same time, I'll never be able to put down my worry about the people I love. It's who I am, and what I do, and, after losing Martina, I won't let something like that happen to someone I love. I can't.

I open my mouth to try to explain this to her, but instead, what comes out is, "I love you."

When she doesn't say the same back, I hold her to me.

"Ricco, I'm scared."

"I know." I swallow hard. "So am I."

"We don't need to rush anything," she says vehemently, holding my gaze.

I'm not sure I agree.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“HAVE YOU SEEN RICCO MONTAVIO?”

Dani

I LOOK up from the endless line of clients and finally catch a breath. It's been a week since we returned from Tuscany, and I'm still waking up in the morning waiting for those glowing sunrises, that toasted crusty bread with a cup of rich, hot coffee, and Ricco's smile.

But he's gone, traveling for business, and I haven't seen him. And cold Pop-Tarts and Special K greet me instead of the crusty, warm bread from Italy. And my coffee doesn't hold a candle to his.

I miss him. Things were becoming intense, but I liked spending time with him. It felt so right, even with the kids. He's present, and attentive, and even though he works hard, he spends time with his son, with me, with Emmy. Ricco values family, that's one thing I can't fault him for.

But more than anything, he treasures me. No one's ever treated me this way before, and it feels so good that I long for him when we're apart.

I throw myself into my work, shrug my shoulders, and stretch. Client after client after client. I have a three-week waiting list at this point, and even Sarah and Jason have begun to beg me to take them on as clients.

"How come you didn't want to book me when I had no customers?" I ask Jason at one point. He waves a hand in my direction.

"That was before you had a five-star rating on Yelp," he says. "Now you're a hot commodity."

"I was a hot commodity before you knew I was a hot commodity."

Still, I pencil them in.

I yawn and stretch, and am glancing at the clock when the door opens and someone I've never seen before steps in.

"Have you seen Ricco Montavio?" The man has a scar across his cheek, and his eyes glitter like black obsidian. A shiver runs through me, the kind that makes my belly clench, and right now I wish that door had been locked .

I'd left it open. Waiting for the afternoon clients.

"I haven't. Can I tell him who's asking for him?"

Without a word, he turns on his heel and leaves, and I know then that he's not really looking for Ricco. He's trying to send a message, only I don't exactly know what that message might be.

I lift my phone to text Ricco. I send him a quick message, but the notice at the bottom of the screen that tells me my message was delivered never goes through. My hand shaking, I text Marialena. She gave me her number before I left Tuscany and told me to call her if I needed anything.

Hey. So a guy just came in here looking for Ricco, and I didn't know what that was all about. He didn't tell me who he was, and now I can't get in touch with Ricco. Any idea what I should do?

A text comes back immediately.

Call Sergio.

I begin to shake. I know Sergio doesn't like me. He doesn't want me to have anything to do with his brother. And anyway, I don't have his phone number.

I'll call him for you, answer if he calls back.

I'm pacing the shop when my phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Dani. Sergio Montavio. I'm sending a team to bring you to Bella Notte." The line goes dead. So that's how they do things in the Montavio family. Wait there, we're escorting you to my sex club? Lovely.

But just as he says, a few minutes later two men wearing suits enter my shop.

"You got a call from Mr. Montavio?"

I nod. "I did."

"We'll escort you."

"I have to pick up my daughter from school," I begin to protest.

"Ma'am, do you have someone you trust who could pick your daughter up for you?"

"Yes, of course."

I send a frantic text to Sarah and Jason.

Something is wrong. Someone came here looking for Ricco, then left. I asked Ricco's cousin what to do and she said to call his brother, now I'm being escorted to the club. Please, can someone get Emmy?

I pull up the app on my phone because I need to see my baby girl, right that very minute. There's only footage from that morning, so I hit the "live play" button. I quickly scan the footage and don't see her. Where are the damn teachers? My phone is vibrating with responses, but I don't look because I can't find Emmy.

I breathe in and out. The teacher's on her phone in the corner of the room, laughing at something she sees. The children are playing with blocks and an aide has one that's sitting with a book in the corner, but there's no Emmy.

Okay, alright.

She's there, she must be there. No one's panicking. No one's called the cops. I try to reason my way out of it but can't get a grip on my rocketing emotions. *I need to know if my baby girl is alright.*

I'm pacing as Sergio's men wait for me.

"Ma'am," one begins. I hold my hand up to tell him to stop.

"Mr. Montavio said to bring you in now," he says. "If you don't come with me, I'll have to take you in physically. I can't disobey Mr. Montavio."

I turn the full heat of my gaze, fueled by my mama bear instincts, on him. "Which Mr. Montavio do you obey?" I snap. "Because if you lay a finger on me, I'm telling Ricco you manhandled me, and I'm not sure what that means for you, but I know that he does *not* fuck around."

He takes a step back.

"I'll give you a minute."

Little toddling feet dressed in a furry monster costume walk by the video camera. I sink onto the counter, bracing myself. I know those little shoes. Emmy's wearing a costume.

"Take it off. Let me see your pretty little face, baby," I whisper to the air in front of me. When she does, I almost cry with relief.

Okay, alright, I am way too hyped up.

I look at my texts.

Jason:

Breathe, honey. I'll get Emmy. Call me when you can.

Sarah:

What Jason said. Emmy will be safe with Jay, you call me when you can. It's going to be okay.

I say a quick prayer of thanksgiving to the universe for sending me level-headed and dependable people that love me. They're my damn rocks at times like this.

"Alright, I'm done. See now, was that so hard?" I ask, still seething. "Let's go."

I'm in the back of a black sedan with a fully equipped leather interior when it hits me.

I haven't been to Bella Notte lately.

Every time I think of going, Ricco has an excuse.

Is that on purpose?

I've neglected the reason why I wanted to go to Bella Notte to begin with, swept off my feet by Ricco's intensity and passion.

Who am I?

What have I done?

"Who came into that shop?" I ask. No one answers me.

“Hello?”

The guy driving looks in the rearview mirror. “We don’t know. We were only sent to get you.”

“Who sent you?” I ask, even though I know it was Sergio.

“Ricco, ma’am.”

My heartbeat races. I check my phone. No messages from Ricco.

I send him a text.

I was told you were the one having me come to Bella Notte. I haven’t even seen you or heard from you. Where are you?

There’s no response.

We pull up to an area of Bella Notte I haven’t seen before, a back parking lot. I scan it and see Ricco’s car in the back corner. He’s here but hasn’t called me? What the hell?

Just to soothe my fraught nerves, I pull up the preschool app again and watch Emmy. She’s laughing with one of her classmates over something behind the camera. I sigh. She’s alright.

The door to the car flies open and I get my answer. Ricco’s here, alright, and he’s pissed.

Without a word, he reaches for me and pulls me out. Stands me in front of him and looks me over, as if he’s looking for bruises or a cut or something.

“Ricco, I—”

His mouth crashes on mine with a ferocity that takes my breath away. I almost push him away, but when his lips touch mine, I can feel his nervous energy, his nerves as fraught as mine. I let him kiss me. I sigh. I’m dimly aware of doors being shut and opened and Ricco lifting me up.

This time, I don’t protest.

My legs straddle his waist, and he deepens the kiss. Tears spring to my eyes at the nearness of him, the certainty of him, the relief that floods every inch

of me like light breaking through clouds and illuminating everything in its path.

Finally, he pulls away. “You’re alright,” he breathes. “And Emmy?”

My heart breaks a little that he immediately asks about my daughter.

“She’s fine. What happened?”

“We don’t know yet. Let’s get you inside.”

He slides me down his body and grabs me by the hand.

“I made them wait, Ricco. I had to check on Emmy.”

“I know.”

How does he know?

The back door to Bella Notte is wide open and a few people I don’t know are behind the open door.

“Dani, you remember my brothers, Sergio and Timeo.” Today, Sergio looks somehow both younger and older than Ricco—younger physically, but there’s a weariness to his eyes that makes me wonder. Timeo grins and winks at me.

“Get her ass in here and we’ll give her a proper welcome.”

Turns out “proper welcome” involves stiff shots of Sambuca and a plate of pastries. I throw back a shot, let out a breath, then sit back and help myself to a frosted cookie.

My stomach growls.

“God, I’m starving,” I mutter. I eat the cookie and reach for a second.

“Have you eaten today?” Ricco asks.

I shrug. “Protein bar...got a salad. Bag of chips, and a leftover packet of animal crackers. Maybe a banana? Yeah. I get hungry when I’m stressed.”

Ricco crosses his arms over his chest. “You got someone to pick up Emmy?”

“Jason’s getting her.”

“Good. We’re eating dinner out tonight.”

I can tell he’s not in the mood for a diplomatic conversation about damn near anything right now. I take a big bite out of a chocolate chip cookie. “Yes, *sir*,” I say with a bit of an edge to my voice because hello, he might be stressed but so am I and I’m not in the mood to be bossed around.

Ricco narrows his eyes at me. I give him a little wink and he shakes his head.

Sergio sits across from me and watches this all go down with a neutral expression. I would *not* want to play poker with that guy. He’s mastered that damn poker face. Timeo snickers into a bottle of beer.

“Feisty. I like it.”

Oh, he hasn’t seen anything yet.

“Now that I’ve satisfied my need for sugar and alcohol, can someone fill me in?”

The brothers all share a look.

Ricco opens a tablet and places it in front of me. “Here. These are the cameras I’ve had stationed at your studio.”

I blink as the screen comes on and video footage of my studio comes into view.

“You... put surveillance cameras in my studio?” I ask. I shove my hands onto my lap because they’re a little shaky.

He doesn’t answer the question but flips to earlier footage. “Here. This is when he entered. Timeo, you got that software ready?”

“Of course,” Timeo says. His fingers fly over a tablet and something that looks like facial recognition scans across the screen.

“Hello? I asked a question,” I push. I grab another cookie and chomp on it angrily. It doesn’t help.

Sergio frowns at me and Timeo is concentrating on the screen.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Ricco snaps.

“No, we will *not*,” I insist. “The food was one thing, Ricco, but this is like next level shit. When did you have those installed?”

He narrows his eyes again in a way that tells me if we were alone, I’d be yanked across his lap. I swallow and hold his gaze.

“That’s my shop,” I explain. “You can’t just install video cameras.”

“I can and I did,” he says. “I did it when we became a thing. You know who I am, Dani. What you don’t really know is what’s at stake here.”

“That’s abundantly clear,” I say, wiping crumbs from my lips and pouring myself another shot. “Because I’m telling you now, I was not prepared for the full *Men in Black* routine just because someone walked into my studio looking for you. He could’ve been anyone.” I throw my hands up in the air.

“And yet the first thing you did was check to see if your daughter was okay.”

I stare at him.

“You’ve been spying on me,” I say, my voice wobbly.

“Not spying on you,” he says on a growl. “I’ve been watching to make sure you were safe when I wasn’t there.”

“Kids, kids, wait to argue in a room where you can fuck it all out later, okay?” Timeo says, pointing to the screen. “I got who it was.”

I blush at the “fuck it all out” comment but have bigger things to worry about right now.

“Well, do tell,” Ricco says, clearly still pissed. “Jack Sullivan, Boston police.”

“Interesting,” Sergio says, stroking the scruff on his chin. “Very interesting. What the hell did he want with you?”

“I don’t know,” I say. Under my breath, I continue, “Maybe check the security footage you have on *him*.”

Timeo chuckles, Sergio ignores me, and Ricco shakes his head. He lifts his

phone and mine vibrates with a text.

You think I won't turn you over my knee right here and now?
Try me.

Before I can respond to his Neanderthal-ism, there's a tentative knock on the door.

"It's me, Eden."

"Come in," Sergio says. A lovely, wholesome-looking blonde woman steps into the room.

"Hi," she says brightly, looking directly at me. "Quinn said you were heading in, and we haven't met yet." She sticks her hand out to me. "I'm Eden. Sergio's wife."

I manage to keep my temper calm long enough to be polite. "Nice to meet you, Eden."

"Did you like the cookies?"

Ricco's teeth snap together, obviously unamused by our chatter at a time like this.

"They were delicious."

"I'm so glad. I need to get back to the kitchen but first have to chat with Sergio." She walks over to Sergio and speaks to him in a low voice. As she talks, Sergio rests his hand on the small of her back and listens attentively. Something about her earnest expression and the tender look of attention he gives her makes my throat clog.

"Okay, so why would someone be looking for you?" I ask Ricco, and I think it's a very reasonable question. "Furthermore, why wouldn't they come in here? It's a more obvious place to find you."

Timeo snorts. "The cops aren't allowed in here. It's the one place that's safe from their prying eyes."

Ricco shoots him a look that tells him to shut the fuck up.

"It's too kinky for them," Timeo says, flipping merrily through more footage.

“Wait, what the fuck is this?”

Ricco’s immediately on alert. “What? Jesus, Timeo.”

He scans out, touches the screen, then zooms back in. The recording shows the officer checking his phone a few times, speaking into it, then, further in the footage, subtle nodding between him and someone else .

“Who’s he talking to?” Ricco asks, his eyes narrowed on the screen.

“I don’t know,” Timeo says, but I’m not sure I believe him. “I need more time. Let me dig into this some more then get back to you.” He’s lying, though, and I can tell that it’s likely because I’m in the damn room.

“In three to five business days?” I mutter.

Timeo rolls his eyes at me and chuckles. A muscle ticks in Ricco’s jaw. Sergio, however, takes two cookies off the plate and snorts.

“Good. I like you, Dani. Welcome to the club.”

“Speaking of the club,” Ricco says, standing and stretching as he reaches for my hand. “Dani and I have some catching up to do. Timeo, let me know what you find later.”

“Will do,” Timeo says, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he intently stares at the screen.

My hand’s tight in Ricco’s grip.

I’m curious what “some catching up to do” might mean.

We walk through the club hand in hand. This time, I sort of want to yank my hand out of his, but I don’t.

I’ve missed him.

And yeah, he might’ve gotten high-handed with me, but if I’m honest, that’s sort of what drew me to him to begin with. Ricco has always been, and always will be, dominant at heart. And I love that about him, even if it occasionally pisses me all the way off.

Just like the last time I was here, people part and walk with purpose away

from us. A few greet Ricco, and I happen to see the same men that escorted me out as well.

“I’ve missed you, even if I’m mad at you,” I mutter.

He gives me a sidelong glance as we walk down a hallway. “I missed you, too, even if I’m gonna spank your ass.”

A little flare of arousal flickers through me. “I didn’t say you could do that.”

“Didn’t say I couldn’t,” he counters.

I want to be over his lap. I want to feel the surge of release from being dominated. I want the closeness between us.

“Maybe I should spank *you*,” I mutter.

He increases our pace and growls, “Now why would you do a thing like that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Because you left and haven’t talked to me? Put up cameras in my shop without my permission? Didn’t respond to any of my texts?”

“I was in Mexico with no cell service. I put up cameras in the shop to keep you safe while I was away. And I didn’t respond to your texts because I was on my way back home to you.”

“Humph,” is my only response, because that all makes sense and I’m mad at him that it does.

I don’t want him to talk his way out of this.

“Well, I guess that makes sense, but I still think you should answer some questions.”

“Of course,” he says. We’re in front of the door to his private room. He slides his thumb over the digital lock and the door clicks open. “Under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“Neither one of us gets to wear clothes.”

“Alright,” I agree, because even though I’m mad I still want to fuck the hell out of him. “But I have a condition of my own.”

“Yes?”

He swings the door further open. “I sit on your lap while we talk.”

His eyes gleam in the darkened hallway. “Deal.”

The door shuts behind us with a bang. “I’m checking on Emmy first.”

Fisting his tee, he yanks it off. I stifle a whimper at the sight of his uber-masculine bare chest, tanned and muscled. I want to feel the weight of his body on top of mine. “Of course.”

I take out my phone and check my texts. “Emmy’s fine, and Jason’s getting ice cream with her.”

“Great.” He reaches for his belt and unfastens it. I lick my lips and swallow. “And how’s Marco?” I ask, my voice high-pitched.

“Fantastic. Been with Vivia and Dario, her husband. They bought him his first Lego set.”

He stands in front of me wearing boxers and an obvious erection.

I hold his gaze and shimmy my skirt down my thighs. He deserves to be teased, and the length of my top will hide everything even if my legs are bare.

“Aw. That’s sweet. Emmy drew a picture of me and you, by the way.”

“Did she?” I am very aware of the fact that he is now naked.

“Yup. You look... okay, sorry, a little bit like a gorilla, but remember, she’s only four.”

He shrugs. “As long as you don’t look like a gorilla.”

“I look like a beautiful princess, crown and all.”

He crosses his arms on his chest and watches as I slowly slide out of my panties.

“That suits you, then, doesn’t it?”

“Sure,” I say with a wink. “You gonna help me or what?”

I’m in his arms in a second, and my clothes are quickly tossed onto the floor. I’m naked and aroused and relishing the feel of his rough hands on my bare skin. “God, I missed you,” I mutter. “Jerk.”

His hand smacks against my bare ass. I come up on my toes and hiss out a breath. “What? You were a jerk.”

“So disrespectful,” he mutters in my ear. “Should put something in that mouth of yours to shut you up.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” he says. Reaching behind him he grabs a remote and hits a button. Flameless candles spring to life. Ricco pulls a chair out with his foot and sits heavily on it. My naked body presses up against his.

“Tell me why I’m a jerk,” he says, fingering my nipples.

“You didn’t tell me about the cameras.”

“Of course I didn’t fucking tell you about the cameras. You would have lost your shit.”

I stifle a moan. I’m not letting him off the hook that easily.

“That’s a shit answer for not telling me! This isn’t gonna fly, Ricco. You can’t just make decisions for me like this!”

A muscle works in his jaw as my hips jerk. Arousal snakes its way through me like molten lava.

“It matters,” I say, my voice hoarse with the effort of staying focused.

“*You* matter.” His stormy eyes narrow on me. “You fucking matter to me. I did what I thought I had to to keep you safe, and I’m not going to lie to you and tell you I wouldn’t do it again.”

I glare at him. Holding my gaze, he bends his tongue and laps at my nipples, first one, then the other.

“Ricco...”

“I’ll keep you safe, Dani. I’ll do what I have to. I won’t play nice when your wellbeing’s at risk. You get that?”

I open my mouth to retort, when he continues.

“And I’m sorry. I should’ve at least told you.”

My argument is immediately short-circuited by his apology.

“Wait, you can’t apologize yet,” I protest with a frown.

“Why not?” he says, lowering his head to suck one of my nipples into his mouth. I release a low moan and squirm on his lap, the heat of his erection pressing against my ass.

“Because I wasn’t done being mad at you. We didn’t even get a good fight in.”

“Girl,” he says. “Go ahead. Tell me off. Let’s see how well you do when I’ve got you over my knee.”

“Wait, I don’t know about—”

He expertly turns me across his lap and pins my legs down with one of his much bigger ones. Before I can respond, his palm cracks across my ass.

“That’s for mouthing off to me in front of my family.” Heat flares across my skin and my breasts tingle. It feels like we haven’t had sex in years, not days, and I want him. Now.

“You deserved it,” I say, still a little miffed about the whole thing.

He spanks me again. “You couldn’t confront me in private?”

“And you could’ve asked my permission!”

Another hard smack.

“We covered that. I apologized.”

I scissor my legs which gets me another few smacks before he spreads my legs and fingers me.

“Ricco,” I say on a moan. “Okay, alright, I was a bad girl.”

“I know how to make you a good girl, baby. Show me that pussy, Dani.”

I spread my legs and relish the feel of his fingers right where I want them, that perfect blend of pressure and friction on my swollen sex.

“Are you going to behave yourself?” he asks, smacking my butt again. His palm is as heavy as a paddle, and I squirm and squeal under the onslaught of smacks.

“I’ll be so good, you have no idea.”

“If you mouth off again, I have other methods of teaching you to watch what you say.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, squirming against the length of his erection because I can, and it gives me the smallest semblance of control.

“I’ll put something else in your mouth.”

“Dirty, dirty.”

I grin and relish his groans.

“Come here,” he says, lifting me so I straddle him. My legs dangle on either side of him. He holds my chin in his hands and keeps my gaze locked in place.

“Are you going to be a good girl, Daniella?”

“So good,” I say, leaning my head in to flick my tongue against one of his nipples. He groans. I tug his nipple into my mouth and grind against him.

“Fuck,” he groans. “I feel like a goddamn teenager. Was going to get you good and riled up first, but I need to be *in* you.”

“Good,” I say on a moan. “I need that, too. Fuck me, Ricco.”

He spans my ass again. “There’s that mouth again. Say please, baby. Be a good girl. Beg me.”

“Fuck me, please,” I say in the politest voice possible. “Please fuck me. I want your cock. I want you in me.”

“Such a good girl,” Ricco murmurs in my ear as he lines up his cock at my entrance. “That’s my good girl.”

The first thrust makes me squirm with pleasure. I lean against the wall of his chest and move with him, our bodies joined in mutual pleasure.

“I missed you,” I whisper, as he builds a rhythm of perfect friction. “I missed you so much.”

“Next time, you come with me,” he whispers in my ear. “I hated being apart from you.”

Another thrust splits me nearly in two, my body aching with pleasure and need.

“Then let’s not do that again.”

I shake my head. “Never again. Actually, let’s just move to Italy.”

He chuckles as he thrusts again, groaning as my pussy hugs his cock. I’m so full, his cock stretching me deliciously, as we move together to chase release.

“Where? When?”

“Rome, Venice, Milan, you name it. Right now. Let’s buy a castle on a beach and not tell anyone where we are. We’ll meet other people when we’re ready. We’ll take the kids, of course.”

He thrusts in me again, and I’m right on the cusp of release.

“Of course.”

“Just don’t leave me again,” I say, as my pleasure peaks. “Because I love you, Ricco.”

He holds me so tightly it’s almost painful. “And I love you, baby. I love you so much, Dani.”

He comes inside me, his hot seed filling me. I relish the shudders of pleasure that match my own. Even as I lose myself to bliss, I wonder. Have I only buried my concerns?



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RESERVATION FOR TWO

Ricco

"WHAT DID YOU FIND?" I demand from Timeo.

"I can't tell you yet," he says. "I'm going on a whim, and I need to investigate more before I tell you anything. Just trust me, will you?"

Sergio and I exchange a glance over the bar at Bella Notte. I left Dani getting ready in our room because we have a date tonight. We need it. The two of us need something where we don't have kids asking us questions, threats at our door, or work obligations.

Where we can just be alone. Just be us.

"I trust him," Sergio says. "Took me a while, but it's done."

"I can trust you, too, but I wish that you would tell me what's on your mind. I wish you would at least tell me what you think you saw."

"No," Timeo says. "Because if I tell you and I'm wrong, the consequences are hefty. You need to just let me investigate more. I promise, man, I'll let you know by tomorrow."

"Let you know what?"

I turn around, staring at Dani. I forgot what I was angry about, because all I can think about is how beautiful she is.

When I met Sergio's Eden, I knew that she was heaven-sent. Wholesome and kind, my bastard of a brother doesn't deserve a wife like her, but he's good to her. He'll spend the rest of his life making up to her what he lacks. But right now, I swear a fucking angel stands before me.

"Jesus, woman." I stand back and admire her, but half a second later want to gather her in my arms so no one else can look at her.

Sergio smiles, and chuckles. "Go. Get her out of here before you hit somebody. I don't need any more of that bullshit on my hands again."

"Looking beautiful, doll," Flo says, waving from behind the bar. Dani looks

so stunning, she turns heads when we walk out.

"Guess I shine up nice," she says, winking at me.

"Is that a dress? A skirt? What the fuck are you wearing?"

"It's called a romper, Ricco," she says, rolling her eyes at me.

"There she goes again, earning her next spanking."

"A girl has needs," she says with an adorable little toss of her head. She's done this thing with her hair so it's all swirls and curls and looped up on her head in pins. It's gorgeous, and so is her makeup. She has that look as if she's not wearing any, but I know her cheeks aren't usually that naturally flushed, her lips aren't that glossy, her eyes that bright. She did magic back there.

Probably has something to do with the way I fucked her, too, but I can't take all the credit.

I think back about the text we got in Tuscany. No one was able to find the source, but I wonder now if there's a dirty cop at large.

I immediately think about Nick, and wonder... who did he know? Did we not hide everything as well as we thought we did? Where the fuck is this going?

Sergio sends me a text as I get to the car.

Timeo's onto something. It might change how all of this plays out, but you go and have fun tonight. You're safe, she's safe, the kids are safe. I like her, Ricco. Don't fuck this up. You deserve someone like her.

Some other people might think he's an asshole, but my brother loves hard, and he's loyal. When he's in, he's totally in.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I didn't know how much this shit between us was bothering me until now.

I haven't thought about Martina and the grueling end to her life, I haven't forgotten about my responsibilities, but it feels good to have someone to look forward to. I never knew that I would have a love like this, that I could have one. And I don't want to lose her.

I don't know if the reality of who I am scares her. She's still with me, and that's something, but she's only seen small facets of who I really am. When she knows the full truth, will she hide? I have to tell her. I have to tell her tonight.

"What's on your mind, gorgeous? You're unusually quiet, and that's saying something, because you're not really a chatterbox."

Dani plays with her fingernails, glancing at the tips, nervously fidgeting.

"Did you get a new manicure?"

"Did them myself. Cost me two bucks instead of thirty."

"If you want to get a manicure..."

"I have enough money, Ricco," she says gently. "It's actually not the money. Honestly, it's the time. There were times in my life I had more time than money, but at this particular stage of my life, I have more money than time. I dunno, I just like doing them myself."

"They look nice." We're sitting here talking about manicures, and time, and I have to tell her that I accidentally killed her husband. The father of her child.

I think I might throw up. I don't remember the last time I felt so nervous.

"There's a lot on my mind," I tell her. "But mostly, Dani, I want you to know who I really am. What I've really done. I love you, and you've told me that you love me. But I can't do casual. I won't do it."

She's quiet for a minute as we drive through Boston. The streets are thick with traffic, people in work clothes strolling along, busy and distracted as usual. People chat on their cell phones, and a few glide by on Rollerblades. But here we are, in our own little world, right here in the interior of this car. It's just me and Dani, while the world passes by us.

"You know, that's one thing I love best about you," she says thoughtfully. "You speak the truth. And I like that you're truthful. That matters a lot to me."

Well, if that doesn't drive a knife in my heart. Fuck.

"It's time for me to be more honest with you," I tell her. She gives me a

curious look, and nervously fidgets in her seat again. We pull up to valet parking in front of the restaurant that I picked for tonight. It's a high-end steakhouse, known for their million-dollar steak and potatoes, their salad bar, and most notably, a dessert tray straight from the North End. But I have no appetite.

"Let's go inside," she says, reaching for my hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. "I can tell that you don't wanna do this, but it's important. And I want to hear it. But I'm starving, and that valet guy looks pretty impatient."

Her friend Jason has Emmy, and I know that Marco is safe with Vivia. But it feels as if there's a threat looming over us today. I don't feel that we're safe. Most especially, I don't feel that she is.

"Why do you keep checking your phone?" she asks as we stroll hand in hand to the entrance of the restaurant. It smells like steak and onions, garlic, and basil. My mouth waters. I shrug.

"I don't like what happened today. It wasn't an accident. That police officer wanted me to know that he knew who you were. And I'm not sure why yet."

"I can't believe I'm saying this," she says, giving me a funny look. "Because it feels like I'm in a clip of *The Godfather* or something? But... can't you, like, ask him? And I don't mean ask him, ask him like in a threatening way *per se*...But... don't the men in your group have ways of asking...um, questions?"

"Yes and no. I could ask him. I could locate him in minutes. But it seems to me that that's exactly what he wants from me. He wanted me to see him. He wanted me to know he was there. And I don't want to play into that hand."

"Oooh. I get it. So if you pretend that you didn't know he was there, then he wonders if you knew."

"Exactly."

We stand by the front desk. The hostess greets us politely.

"Can I help you?"

I nod.

"Reservation for two. Montavio."

"Right this way, sir." I put my hand gently on Dani's back, guiding her in front of me. And when we arrive at the table, I pull out the seat for her. She smiles bashfully. "Thank you."

I like taking care of her. I like making sure that she's safe. I like doing things like pulling the chair out for her, holding her, tucking her into bed. A part of who I am, the part of me that loves to protect and care for the people I love, relishes taking care of Dani. Even though I know she doesn't need me to, even though I know she's fully capable of taking care of herself, I love that she gives me this peace.

We feast on shrimp cocktail and split a bottle of house wine. She laughs when she tells me about Emmy's latest escapades, and I tell her about Marco deciding that he was going to draw on the bathroom wall. Her eyes twinkle at me. "Did you get mad at him?"

I shake my head. "My parents would've killed me if I'd ever done that when I was his age. But I don't wanna be that kind of dad."

She squeezes my hand. "You're an awesome dad."

"Thanks. I mean, I made him clean it up. And I told him that he can't do that. And I told him he better not do it again," I admit, with a little bit of a grimace. "But I have to admit, it was damn good. For a three-year-old."

She laughs out loud.

"It's interesting being a parent, isn't it? You have to teach them lessons, you have to make sure they know right from wrong, but you also have to encourage them to be who they are. You have to build them up and teach them about the world in a way that doesn't break their spirit."

"Yeah," I agree.

I want to do this with her. I want a woman by my side who understands this, who shares my value system, who knows that family is the greatest gift we have, and love makes all the pain bearable.

I want to live life with her.

It's time.

I swallow. "I have something to tell you."

How she reacts to the next bit of news is going to determine whether the two of us can do exactly what I want to. Live life together. Can she accept me for who I am given what I've done to her?

"Yes?"

I draw in a breath, and I let it out slowly.

"I haven't been completely honest with you."

A little furrow forms between her brows. She's troubled, obviously. I don't blame her. How would I react in her situation?

"I was not in Italy when I told you that I was." I take another sip of wine, but it doesn't help my mouth, which still feels dry.

I can hardly speak, because I've never been so afraid to tell anyone the truth in my life.

"I was at Bella Notte the night your husband died."

She stares at me, with a look on her face that's part shock, part anger. "What? Why didn't you tell me that before?" I hate this feeling, but I must tell her the truth. I have to let her hear it from me, not somebody else.

"I promised my brothers I wouldn't tell anyone. Sergio moved heaven and earth to make sure that no one knew I was there that night. And this is how it happened. This is how I got to know you. Because I was the one that hit your husband. He fell, and he hit his head. I did not mean to do it, Dani. He was attacking my brother, and I defended Timeo. Nick fell and hit his head, and you know the rest."

"You what?" she asks. "You hit him?"

She's staring at her daughter's dad's murderer. It makes me feel sick.

"I hate violence. You know I do."

She nods but doesn't say anything else.

"I would've told you sooner, but Sergio made me promise I wouldn't. As it is now, I'm gonna have to tell him that I told you the truth. But he's met you."

"And why do you answer to Sergio?" she asks in a tight voice. Her hands tremble.

"Because he's the Don of my family."

"Oh," she says in a little voice. "That's right. You told me that."

"This isn't the way I wanted to tell you." I wish that she would say something, anything, to give me a clue as to what she's thinking. I want to put this behind us, but I also need to serve my penance for keeping one of the most important things I should've told her hidden.

"Is that why you brought stuff to my house?" she asks. "You killed my husband, so you felt guilty."

I nod. "It was an accident, Dani." I need her to know this part of it. "I hit him. He fell and hit his head." I shake my head. "When I found out that he had a wife and a kid... you gotta understand where I was coming from, having just lost Martina. I felt like a total douche."

She swallows, hard, and I can tell she's wrestling with this.

"I hear what you're saying," she says, shaking her head. "But Ricco, I need..." She doesn't finish the sentence. She chokes on her words, her hand clasp her throat.

"I can't breathe," she says. I recognize the signs of an anxiety attack right away. Martina had them when she went through chemo, and I know what to do. The only problem is, she needs to trust me.

I reach for her hand. "Hold my hand," I tell her. "Breathe." She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

"I need to go home," she says, her voice wobbly. "Please don't follow me. Please don't have me followed. I need..." She takes another deep breath. "I need space to breathe."

It feels like a nail in the coffin.

I need space.

I need a break.

I need some time.

I met someone else.

The first gasp for air when someone's drowning.

"Of course."

I thrust too much money into the waiter's hand. The valet brings the car around, but Dani shakes her head.

"Sarah is coming to get me. Don't drive me home. I don't want you to follow me. I don't want you to reach out to me. Don't talk to me, Ricco."

It would've been so much worse if she found out from someone else what happened. She had to hear it from me. This had to happen if there's any chance of us lasting. I couldn't hide the truth forever. But God, I wish I could have, not because it feels so shitty, telling her the truth, but because I hate that my actions caused her pain.

It doesn't matter that his death was an accident, I took the life of her child's dad. And that's something I can never change.

There's so much I want to say to her, but don't.

Dani walks over to Sarah's car when she pulls in. Sarah looks with concern to me, to Dani, and back again, then shakes her head and opens the door.

"Is he coming?"

"No."

Sarah narrows her eyes and shoots me a look that says, *if you hurt my sister, I will personally kill you*. I shrug, because if I hurt her sister, I would lay my neck across a chopping block.

I watch her leave.

Fuck.

It feels like part of my heart left with her.

Before I can wallow in self-fucking-pity, a text comes in from Timeo.

I confirmed my suspicion, and this is huge, Ricco. You gotta come here now. Do not, and I mean it, do not bring Dani with you.

I don't fucking care what he tells me. I don't care what he says, there's nothing he could tell me that's going to change anything between me and Dani.

I call him. He answers on the first ring.

"What is it? Dani just left."

Left.

"Good. She's gonna need a little space."

There's that goddamn fucking word again. "What the hell do you need to tell me? Tell me now."

I can hear him exhale on the other end of the line.

"That footage, where we identify the cop? In the background, I saw the man that he was nodding to. I did a double take, because it wasn't possible, Ricco."

A cold chill runs down my spine. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"It's her husband, Ricco. He's not dead."



CHAPTER NINETEEN

FALSE ALARM

Dani

MY SISTER KNOWS me so well, she doesn't ask questions when I get into her car, crying.

I can tell that it kills her, that she wants to either murder Ricco with her bare hands or find out who hurt me so she can kill them, but she doesn't say anything. At a red light, she reaches out for my hand and gives it a little squeeze, a silent reminder that whatever is making me cry, it's going to be okay.

I'm not so sure.

"I don't know how to tell you this." It feels like something out of a movie, so terrible, so dramatic, so violent.

"Does it have to do with Ricco? And did he hurt you?"

"Yes and no, and no, yes." I shake my head, fresh tears falling. I swipe at my eyes, but they will not stop. "I don't know. I don't know how to say this, Sarah."

I don't want to say it out loud.

"Honey, listen. I know that you're in love with a criminal. It's alright. I know this isn't like normal relationship stuff, okay?" She sighs and squeezes my hand. "But I also know that whatever you're going to tell me, this is all going to work out."

I shake my head and swallow. "How do you know that? You can't cover up real tragedy with bullshit and unrelenting optimism."

Sighing, she nods. "I know, Dani. But I also know that love is stronger than what threatens to tear us apart. So tell me. Let's hear it." Dropping my hand to navigate around a double-parked car, her voice drops. "Share this with someone else. With me. It will help."

She's right, it will. And I need to talk about this.

"He lied to me. He told me he was in Tuscany the night Nick died. But now I

know the truth, and it's... it's so much worse than you can imagine," I finish in a wobbly whisper.

"Oh, Dani," she says, swiping at her own eyes as we continue to drive toward Jason's. I don't ask her to pull over. I want to see my daughter.

How can I tell Sarah that Ricco killed Nick? That the man I love is the man that took my daughter's father away from her? She will carry the pain of that tragedy for the rest of her life, and even though one could argue he did me a favor... I don't know how to justify what he did.

"Let's get back to Jason's. I want to see Emmy."

We drive in silence through the teeming streets of Boston, and as I scan our surroundings, I don't even know what I'm looking for.

Someone I know? Some sign that hope exists? A threat that might be lurking?

I send Jason a text.

How are things?

There's no answer. I look at the time. It's way too early for him to be sleeping. They know I'm ridiculously vigilant when it comes to Emmy, and I like to know exactly where she is and if she's okay. Usually, by now, Jason would've sent me pictures of her finger painting in his dining room, eating way too many cookies, or watching endless streams of cartoons she doesn't get to watch at home.

But I realize he hasn't sent anything.

Who am I? I've relinquished some of the supervision of my daughter because I fell in love with a hot criminal?

I feel like such a child. Such a failure.

"Have you talked to Jason? He's not answering my text."

"No, I haven't talked to Jason, and you know how he is. He only texts when he feels like it." She scowls at the road in front of her.

"What's the matter?"

"What's the matter? You decided to date a man that I can't kill very easily," she says fiercely. "I'm racking my brain about who I might know, to see if I could call in a favor so that I can get some retribution for whatever that asshole did to make you cry. Because nobody makes my sister cry without consequences."

"This isn't an elementary school playground, Sarah," I say.

"No, the stakes are much higher. I know that. But it still doesn't mean that I don't care about you, that I wouldn't protect you no matter who hurts you." She scowls.

I text Jason again, and again, and again. Now I'm starting to panic.

"He probably has stupid surveillance cameras up in Jason's house, too."

"What? Who? What are you talking about?"

"Ricco. Who else would I be talking about?"

She throws up her hands, and then slams them back down on the steering wheel. "How am I supposed to know? I don't know, Dani. Oh my God, this is what dating a criminal's like!"

And then I realize she's right. I hardly told her anything about my trip to Tuscany, she doesn't really know how I feel about Ricco. And I haven't even told her the worst of it yet.

I wait until we're stopped at a red light so she doesn't crash the car.

"He had video surveillance cameras put up in my studio."

She gasps. "He did not. Are you serious?"

"Yep. Said it was for my own good."

"Is that why you're crying? Because even though that's an asshole thing to do, and super creepy, I could see it being kind of like a normal thing for a mobster?" She cringes. "Sorry, I'm not trying to make excuses for him. I just..." She shakes her head.

I need to hear what she needs to say before I tell her the rest. "What were you going to say?"

"Well, I just... You deserve someone who takes care of you. You deserve someone who takes *fantastic* care of you, who spoils you, who makes you smile and laugh and blush, and do all those things. I hated Nick, but I know that you guys had a kid together. So, I'm just wondering, if the only thing that's holding you back from Ricco is the knowledge that he put up some stupid video surveillance cameras, probably for your own good, then maybe you can..."

I try to breathe.

"He killed Nick, Sarah!"

Her face falls. She grips the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles turn white. She looks like she can't speak, and for my sister, that takes a lot.

I keep going.

"He wasn't stateside when Nick died. And like a dumbass I got distracted by cute little Ricco Montavio," I say, even while realizing how ridiculous that is. There's nothing cute or little about Ricco. "Now it's turned out it was all a lie, and I should've known it was a lie. I would've picked up on the clues if I hadn't been plastered when I was in Italy and his cousin mentioned something about him being here. And if I wasn't smitten with him."

"This is not your fault," she insists.

I shake my head. "I know, but... I still feel like I shouldn't have been so stupid." I tell her everything I know. "He said it was an accident. He said that Nick fell and hit his head, and he died. Of course, any other normal person would have faced manslaughter charges. But he's a Montavio," I say cynically. "He's above the law. His brother Sergio waved his magic mobster wand and made it all go away, I guess."

Sarah shakes her head. "Have you ever really gotten the answer to why Nick was outside of Bella Notte to begin with?"

"He wanted to fuck some hot little thing," I say to her, exasperated. "Why else would someone go to a sex club?"

"Babe," she says consolingly, reaching her hand out to me. I push it away. I don't want condolences right now.

All I know is that the man that I'm in love with..." My voice chokes because I don't know if that can still be true knowing what I know now. "*Killed* my daughter's dad. How do I get over that?"

She doesn't answer. "I don't know, honey. I don't."

We pull up to Jason's house, and it's strangely dark. I'm trying not to go into panic mode, knowing that my emotions are on tenterhooks right now.

They're fine, I tell myself. *They're fine.*

"Why are there no lights on in the house?" Sarah says. She gives me a sidelong look. "Is it me, or do you feel like we're in a movie right now?"

"Definitely not just you. I just confessed that my mobster boyfriend murdered my dead husband. People still do this stuff and face no repercussions for it. No, not only does he lie about it, and hide it, but he..." I stop myself. I don't need to recount all of this for her. I need to get inside the house and find my daughter. We run up the steps, but Jason's front door is locked.

Shit.

I call him as Sarah knocks on the door, knowing even as his phone rings that he's not going to answer. He's freaking me out.

And a part of me, right then in that moment, when I'm afraid my friend and daughter are in danger, wants to call Ricco. I hate that my thoughts go there.

"Where the hell is he?" I say. "Do you see any signs of a break-in or something?" I don't even know what we should be looking for. This isn't my field of expertise. I'm a family law lawyer, and a massage therapist, for Christ's sake. I know about divorce settlements and how to get knots out of strained limbs and muscles. I don't know what to do here.

"There's a light on in the garage," Sarah says. "Is this the part where the aliens land?"

I smile in spite of myself. I knock on the door, louder this time.

"If there is someone in there, yelling at the door and knocking on it probably isn't the right thing to do," I say, biting my lip.

"I've been taking Tae Kwon Do," Sarah says out of nowhere.

"What?"

"I'm just saying, I can defend us if there is a bad guy or something."

"That's great," I say, looking at my sister's five foot tall, one-hundred-pound frame. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Wait a minute. I know he has a key here somewhere. Doesn't he have a key here somewhere? Isn't there like a fake rock or something?"

"Yes! The boulder by the front door." I run over to it and lift it, my fingers finding and clasping the cold metal of the spare front door key. *Oh, thank God.*

When I open the door, Jason's tiny terrier is barking her little head off, but that's nothing out of the ordinary. I give her a little placating pat to the head. "Where's your daddy, baby?"

She runs into the living room, and Sarah and I follow.

The TV is on.

Jason is dead asleep on the couch, Emmy snuggled up to him. There's a blanket strewn over them, and they're both snoring softly.

They're fine. Unharmed. Safe.

I sink into an overstuffed chair, lay my head on my knees, and sob.



CHAPTER TWENTY

PANIC

Dani

THE NEXT FEW days I keep Emmy out of school. I sobbed on Jason's couch until two o'clock in the morning, until my head hurt and my eyes were red. After getting Emmy tucked into the guest room bed, Jason had hugged and reassured me, and promised that he would help bury the body after Sarah murdered Ricco.

They're very good to me, but even their reassurances and sympathy don't soothe the ache in my heart.

The next night, I sleep in bed next to Emmy. I don't want to sleep alone, and I need to assure myself every time I roll over and wake up that she's still okay. That she's safe, and unharmed.

The man that I love killed her father, and I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself for bringing Ricco into her life.

After a couple of days with her playing hooky from school, with me taking her all over creation, checking out different zoos, buying ice cream cones, going shopping to distract myself, and very dutifully ignoring every message that comes from Ricco, I finally decide she needs to go back to school.

I wish that when I was with Ricco, I would've at least asked him to show me how to hold a gun.

I don't trust people anymore.

And I fear for my daughter.

I fear for *me*.

I can't help thinking about what Sarah said, that mobsters may be understandably using surveillance cameras for the people they care about, or love... and coming to the conclusion that it also makes sense he'd fight Nick to defend Timeo.

But then I wonder if I'm only justifying things. If I'm ignoring the cold, hard reality and changing the narrative to suit my needs.

It's also so surreal, so outside of my own value system and experience, that it does feel like something out of a movie.

My heart, though. My heart hurts, and I can only hope that it remembers how to heal from it.

I look at my list of clients, a much bigger list than usual because of the days I took off, but the name that's missing is the only one I hope to see.

Ricco Montavio.

Of course, I was the one that told him not to contact me. He's only doing what I told him.

That doesn't mean that I don't miss him. That I don't still wish that he'd walk through that door, with that fierce look of his, all hotness, ready to fight.

Ready to fight for me. Ready to fight for us.

But his name isn't on the list, and he doesn't come.

It rips my heart in two that he doesn't show up, and yet I know this is exactly what I asked of him. So why does it hurt so much?

Taking clients one at a time, I power through with sheer determination, grateful that I am now experienced enough that muscle memory carries me through.

Between sessions I check up on my daughter via video—watching her coloring a sheet of paper with delight, building a stack of blocks only for some other kid to knock them down and make her cry, watching her tongue poke out as she concentrates on tying her shoes with the teacher's aide helping her along. My heart breaks for her over the ramifications of her father being gone. He may not have been kind to me, but he was always there for her—and now he's not.

It just isn't fair, not to Emmy, not to me. The only man I've ever truly loved has betrayed me, and all I want is more from him and our relationship.

Half an hour before my next client, I have some breathing room. I sit in my break room on an overstuffed chair and reach for the switch on my kettle. It's time for early afternoon tea. Breathing in deeply through my nose and out

through my mouth, I massage my shoulders, arms, and hands as I prepare for the next client. Suddenly I pull out my phone—it's time to check up on Emmy again.

I don't see her at first, but since this isn't the first time that's happened, I don't think much of it. I drink my tea, the scalding liquid welcome to my fraught nerves. I shut off my phone, close my eyes and meditate for a minute. But the fact that I didn't see Emmy on that last surveillance shot nags at me, has me worried.

I open the app again, and search for her. I remind myself that the last time I lost her on the camera, she was in dress-up clothes. I look for her little white shoes, the pretty ones with the buckles that she picked out for me to buy her. I don't see them.

My heart begins to beat a little faster. I drum my fingers on the tabletop, and this time when I bring the teacup to my lips, my hand shakes.

The teacher's there, the teacher's aide is there.

And then the tops of her little white shoes come into view.

Something tells me that this isn't right.

Emmy's once again dressed in a costume, but this time it's a dinosaur.

She hates dinosaurs, ever since we went to a dinosaur exhibit at the local zoo. She was scared. She would never dress up in a dinosaur costume.

I'm standing, looking at the video, staring at my daughter's shoes. I swallow hard. She toddles around, and everyone seems to be going about as normal.

A couple of the kids are hanging their jackets up in the closet, they've just come from outside. Outside, where there's a playground, and a parking lot. My mind begins to spin.

Outside, where anyone could just come right up to one of them when someone wasn't looking...

I'm letting my thoughts get away from me again.

I have to stop going into panic mode every time I think someone I love isn't

safe.

I try to breathe and let it out again, and once again I wish that Ricco was here with me. I wish that he would hold my hand and tell me to relax. He knew how to soothe me. He would go down there himself and make sure that Emmy was okay, I know he would.

And for the first time since I broke up with him, or left him, or whatever it is that I did, I justify in my mind that Ricco is a good man. Maybe not by other people's standards, but he's the most dependable, loyal man I know.

Feeling like a total idiot, I call the school.

The secretary answers on the fifth ring. "Hello?"

"Hi," I say brightly. "I'm so sorry. It's Emmy's mom, Daniella. I was just watching their class on their surveillance, and I don't know. Something seems off. Can I talk to Emmy for a second on the phone?"

"We don't normally take parent phone calls during the day," she says kindly but firmly. "Parents get worried about their kids often. It's hard being separated like this, we understand. But it's best if you can wait until school is over to chat with her."

"You don't understand. She isn't on the camera."

She's quiet for a minute. "I'm going to go check on this. Please hold."

I wait. And I wait. And I wait. I finally realize that the phone is dead. What the hell? I look back at the surveillance camera, and it's been shut off.

Now I'm in a full panic.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“SHE’S GONE”

Ricco

NICK ISN'T DEAD.

He isn't dead.

What the fuck's he playing at?

Of course, this news comes just when Dani's asked me to give her space. I have to honor that. She wouldn't believe me if I told her this now, and I need to find out why he's still alive, why he framed me for his "murder," and what his next move is going to be.

We'll hunt him down.

And I do my best to give her the space she asked me for. But fuck, I hate this.

I knew I should've told her sooner. But we were too new, and she didn't trust me yet. I'm afraid I've dashed whatever hope I had of earning her trust forever.

Fuck.

I stomp to the room where we keep surveillance footage, because I haven't allowed myself to look at any of hers. But I want to see her. I need to see her. Her and Emmy, too, dammit. This morning, Marco asked where they were. I told him, honestly, that I didn't know.

And it killed me.

I'd allowed myself to imagine Dani as Marco's mom. Someone who could take care of him the way he deserves to be taken care of. Someone who would treat him with a mother's touch that I can only imagine having.

And I'd fucked that up.

Even though my conscience tells me that watching the video footage of her is probably breaking some kind of rule, I do it anyway. But when I flip the switch, nothing comes up. Dammit. Of course. She disconnected them. There's no way that she'd allow me to still watch her studio.

I stomp down to Sergio's office. "She took down the video cameras."

His face registers only mild surprise, his eyebrows raised. "Of course she did."

"I need to see her," I say, scrubbing my hands through my hair. "I need to know she's alright."

He leans back in his chair and doesn't speak at first. I pull out a chair and sit across from him.

"Sergio, imagine if that was Eden."

"But it's not," he says placidly.

"Why are you being such a douche about this?"

"You know why. I've explained it to you. It's not that I'm against you falling in love, Ricco. For fuck's sake, you deserve that. So does Marco. But you can't fall in love with someone who can end everything for you. This is too complicated."

"Are you fucking kidding me? Your relationship with Eden put our family at war with a fucking Mexican cartel!"

Timeo appears at the end of the room, standing in the doorway in a stance that tells me he's ready to run if one of us decides to throw something at him.

"That's a really good point," he says. "Actually, now that I think about it..."

Sergio glares at him, and Timeo does duck just in time to avoid the stapler whacking him across the head.

Eh, he could've done worse.

"Fight me on it then," I say to Sergio. "You know as well as I do that marrying Eden made everything super fucking complicated here." And then I jerk my head at Timeo. "And we all know he's in love with her sister!"

"What? Don't you dare bring her up, Ricco," Timeo says. "She's just a kid, for fuck's sake!"

"Not anymore," I counter. "And it doesn't mean that you didn't fall in love

with her when she was off limits."

"I never touched her!"

"Thank fuck. My point is, I'm not the only one who fell in love with a woman that complicated shit." I sigh. "I need to fucking see her."

I feel like a toddler, but I'm pissed. "Look, nothing's easy. Listen to me. You, me, all of us, we buried our brother. That fucking sucked, worse than anything, and you know it as well as I do." I swallow, hard. "I gave up my throne, my position of leadership, and yes, all the complications that were involved, and I'm aware of that, but I gave them up to you so that I could take care of my kid and my dying wife." I swallow again, surprisingly emotional about all this shit.

"I wouldn't have married Martina if I'd had a choice, and you guys know that. We were best friends, though. We saw each other through thick and thin, so when she was dying, I was there. I was fucking there, holding her hand when she cried because her hair fell out. I was there when she started losing weight and couldn't eat anything. I was there when she grew too weak to hold our son. I was there when she *died*." I look away. She may not have been the love of my life, but it doesn't mean I didn't love her, that it wasn't easy to bury a woman who was my friend. "Yeah, this situation with Dani is complicated. But I didn't kill her husband on purpose. I defended my fucking brother." I stand. "And for God's sake, I think I finally deserve a fucking break."

My phone rings. Timeo rubs a hand across his temple.

"That's that lovebird song for her ringer, isn't it? Is this the universe giving you a break? Because if it is, that's some really fucking awesome shit you just did, bro."

I look down at my phone. My heart leaps into my throat.

Dani.

"Hello?" I sound too desperate, too eager, but I don't fucking care.

"Ricco..." She's obviously crying. I'm on my feet, gripping my phone tightly, my other hand fisted into a ball.

“Dani, what happened?”

"It's Emmy, Ricco. Help me. She's gone."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I’M ON MY WAY”

Dani

"WHERE ARE YOU?" My voice is wobbly, and I'm not sure how I even get the words out. I haven't even called Sarah or Jason yet. My finger was on Ricco's number while I could barely process the next step. Ricco was the first person I called.

And I know that says something about me, about us, that in a tragic situation like this, he's the only one that I call. But I don't have time to figure all that out right now. I have to keep my shit together.

"I'm at her school. The cops are here," I tell him. "I was watching her on the video feed, and I could tell it wasn't her. She wouldn't wear a dinosaur costume, Ricco!"

"Stay calm, I'm on my way. Tell me everything as I get into the car and come to you." His voice is calm, and I can actually breathe, just hearing him on the other end.

I tell him everything I know. That she's been with me over the past couple of days because I was distraught and feared for her safety. How I discounted my own worries, because there have been too many instances of worrying about her that turned into the boy who cried wolf in my own mind. That I had to let her go, I had to trust that she was okay. But that I had to make sure that she was safe.

"Some other child had her shoes on, Ricco. Whoever took her was clever enough to swap her shoes with someone else's, and then put the other child in a costume. I don't know how long she's been gone. The teacher says they've had the costumes out all day. And they have shit video surveillance here. I may have been pissed off at you because you had video cameras in my studio, but I sure as hell wish they had some decent surveillance at the school. It's a school, with children, for crying out loud!" My voice rises.

"I know, babe. Schools don't have the money for good surveillance equipment sometimes."

I can't listen to his rationalizing right now, I'm in a total panic because my

daughter's missing.

"The police are here. I had to call the police. The school was twiddling their thumbs, thinking that maybe she was in the bathroom, maybe she went for a walk, maybe she decided she was thirsty and went to go get some apple juice from the cafeteria." Anger begins to rise because I hate the way they treated us. To be fair, a child being abducted or taken off school grounds isn't something that anybody even wants to admit could ever happen.

"Who could've done this?" I ask him.

"I don't know, Dani. But we're going to find her. I promise."

I don't think that his promise means anything to me after what he's done, but just hearing him say that, I want to believe him. I have to believe him. I don't know what else to do except believe him.

We talk on the phone, me telling him every single possible detail while he's on his way.

When he reaches me at the school, my reaction surprises me. When he exits his car, my heart leaps into my throat.

I can breathe again. I didn't know that the presence of another person could actually help me breathe again.

When Ricco stalks over to me, all stern and fierce and competent and respectable, I know that he's going to do everything, fucking *everything*, to find my daughter. The police have already told me that they have a twenty-four-hour protocol they have to follow.

"She's a child, and she's gone," I tell them.

"Children go missing often," one police officer patiently tries to tell me. "Without evidence of abduction, we need to ensure she hasn't walked off or fallen asleep somewhere."

I've been seething, ready to throttle them, when Ricco shows up.

To my absolute delight, the police officers suddenly start taking me seriously. Ricco storms over to one of them.

Ricco told me once that when he's only wearing a tee, it's to show off the Montavio family crest tattooed on his arm. It signifies who he is and what he demands.

He's only wearing a tee right now.

"Ladies, gentlemen," Ricco greets in a voice that gets everyone's attention. The police officers stand straighter, and a few of them give each other looks. "I'm Daniella's boyfriend. Name's Ricco Montavio."

He's not my boyfriend, but it's a very convenient thing to say right now. I let it go.

"Mr. Montavio," one of the officers says. "I can assure you we're doing our best." Ricco shakes his head, then he does that thing where he crosses his arms on his chest. His muscles bulge, and it's scary as fuck, honestly.

They all take a step back.

"Actually, you're not. I know you're not because my girlfriend is distraught. And if you were doing everything you could an hour ago, she wouldn't still be so upset. Instead, you had to go look in the fucking cafeteria to make sure that she wasn't getting juice. Emmy doesn't even like fucking apple juice."

I love you.

Silence. Ricco glares. "I want you to tell me the location of Officer Jack Sullivan."

One of them looks scared, his eyes wide, and he shakes his head. "I can't do that, Mr. Montavio."

Ricco takes a step toward him. "You can." The way he lowers his voice to deliver those two short words makes the little hairs on my arms stand up on end. "And you will. Don't make me ask again."

"I'm so sorry," a different officer says, a much younger man with white-blond hair and watery eyes.

Ricco gives him a curious look.

"Oh?"

"We don't know where he is. We haven't seen him in a couple of days."

"I see. Allow me to have a look around myself."

Ricco reaches for my hand. I take his, and we walk together into the school. "She's not here," I say to him. "Ricco..."

"I didn't come into the school because I think she's here," he says in a low whisper. He turns to face me, the two of us alone in the dark corridor. "I need you to trust me, baby. Can you trust me? I know after everything that's happened that it's a big ask of you."

I swallow. "I wouldn't have called you if I didn't trust you," I say. "I don't know where we stand, but I do trust that you'll help me find my Emmy." I squeeze his hand. "Ricco, please. Find my little girl."

Leaning into me, his gaze is intense. His thumbs on either side of my cheeks, he holds my face in his hands. "I promise you I will do everything I can, but you need to understand that I have methods that you won't like."

I think this over for like ten seconds.

Emmy could be hurt. Scared.

I swallow. "I don't care. Find her, Ricco. Find my little girl."

He nods. "I'll do everything I can, Daniella. But there's more at play here, and you need to know." I swallow and nod. He draws in a deep breath. "This is not the way I would've chosen to tell you. But you need to know." He stares at me. "Do you remember that day when the officer came into your studio? Timeo saw something on the camera. He said that he needed to investigate further."

I nod impatiently, eager to find Emmy.

"He's not dead, baby." I stare at him, uncomprehending.

"What?"

"Nick's alive, Daniella. And that matters right now because if what we believe is true, it's possible that Nick was the one that took Emmy, or he knows who did."

I have such mixed emotions, I don't know how to feel or even think. On one hand, I'm shocked and horrified that something happened. But all this time... Nick's been alive?

We're still... married!?

Still, a part of me is relieved. Because if Nick took Emmy, he's not going to hurt her. I don't know what his end goal is, but I do know that he loves Emmy.

"I'm going to take your word for it, but obviously we're gonna need to prove that."

"Of course. Now do what I say and follow my lead. Got it?"

I nod. "Yes."

Find her.

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see."

Down at the end of the corridor, near the restrooms, two police officers stand. Ricco speaks to me in a low voice. "I want you to go to the older one. I want you to tell her that the police officers outside have information that may pertain to this case. You need to get her away from the other officer. Understood?"

I have no idea what he's trying to do, but that's clear enough.

"Yes, of course."

I swallow hard and walk over to the officers. It's easier than I think, when they see who I am, and they see Ricco. The older officer looks more than happy to leave her station.

The younger officer looks barely old enough to graduate college. He talks in a low voice to Ricco. I cannot hear what they're saying, but it looks like they're making a deal.

This might work in my favor.

Ricco finally nods. "Thank you for your help. And if you hear anything at all, you know where to reach me." It sounds like a proper business transaction, no more, no less. "Daniella, we're going to go home for now."

I open my mouth to protest. I'm not going home when we haven't found my daughter. But he gives one shake of his head, and I remember what he said. t

Trust him, do what he says.

"Okay, let's go." Back in the car, I wait for him to fill me in.

"I can't tell you everything, babe," he says. "We have some cops we avoid and some are on our payroll. That's all you need to know. I've got a lead and that's all I need."

He dials Timeo.

"Identify this location for me."

"Car dealership on the South Shore."

Turning to me, he says, "He's hiding out."

"Why would anyone hide at a car dealership?" I ask Ricco.

"Lots of reasons. Limited foot traffic, it's hard to get in and out. The safety and security of amenities, bathroom, food."

"And I can tell you right now, when I get my hands on that officer, we will find Nick's location. We have them communication on video footage. I'd bet anything he knows where Nick is."

We drive to the dealership in silence. I don't know what to say, and I'm a bundle of nerves. But for the first time since this began, I have hope. Hope that we're going to find my little girl.

We pull up to the dealership, and as soon as Ricco parks, I get a little uncomfortable.

I don't know if I should be here. I don't want to witness whatever he's going to do to find out the answers.

"Flo's picking you up," he says. "You do not have to go far. There's a little

coffee shop down the street, and a little delicatessen. I don't want you to be nearby, Dani. Even though I don't want to ever hide anything from you, that doesn't mean there aren't things you shouldn't see."

"If he had anything to do with hurting my daughter, there's nothing that I'm going to ask you to stop doing." Flo pulls in behind us at the entrance of the dealership, waving at me. I come to a decision. "Ricco, I need to see."

"See what?"

I stare at him and state the truth that's hard to admit. "Who you really are."

For the first time, there's pain in his eyes when he talks about any of this. And I know it's because he isn't the kind of guy that likes hurting people. He doesn't want to do what he's going to. But there's nothing that will prevent him from finding Emmy.

That's why I called him.

Flo rolls her window down and waves me over. "Come on, let's go. Let's leave Ricco to do his magic."

I shake my head vehemently. "No. I'm staying."

Ricco shrugs. "Thanks for coming. But if she's made up her mind that she's staying, I'm not gonna make her leave."

He stares at me. "You sure about this?"

I let out a breath and nod. "Yes."

Ricco and I walk into the main showroom, and he raises his voice, his hand up in the air. "The dealership is closed for the night. Any salesperson on the cusp of a deal, I'll pay you double. Employees with hourly wages, they're tripled for the night. Get a drink on me. You'll give all your information to this woman right here." He gestures toward me. Ricco pulls a gold card out of his wallet and hands it to a secretary at the desk. "Take them somewhere, feed them. Everybody leaves, but before you do, you'll each check in with me after passing along your information."

They start to come up to me, giving me their names and hours and contact information. I put notes in my phone.

People stare at each other, while the customers begin to leave. "What the fuck is going on here?" one guy demands. When the secretary answers in a hushed whisper, we realize she knows who Ricco is. And she's filling everybody else in. She glances down at the credit card, her eyes wide. Of course. His name is right there.

One by one, they leave, each of them checking in with Ricco first. It's surprisingly simple, the way he commands the room so quickly and easily. In a matter of minutes, it's vacated.

He jerks his head to one door as a black car, the same one that picked me up at my studio and took me to Bella Notte, arrives. Half a dozen men I've seen at Bella Notte get out of the car. Some have weapons, others don't, but they don't need them. Just their presence alone is terrifying.

I look at Flo, who had followed us in, but she only smiles. "They're hot, huh?"

"How can you say something like that at a time like this?"

"Honey, I live for times like this. All this big-dick energy testosterone? *Fuck.*" She fans herself. "Hey, you want something from a vending machine?"

She jerks her thumb at them.

"No, thanks, I'm good."

"You sure? I know how to get in without any money. You don't have to pay at all! It's easy."

I shake my head. "No. But thanks."

I turn back to Ricco.

"Tear down everything until you find him," Ricco says.

With brutal efficiency, they begin.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

INTERROGATION

Ricco

DANI and I are both slumped in chairs, exhausted, when they find him. It's taken them two hours and several million dollars' worth of damage. And now the real work begins.

"This who you're looking for, boss?" Gino asks, holding a bedraggled officer by the scruff of the neck.

"That's him," Dani says in a tired voice. "He's the one that came into my shop."

Excellent.

"Thank you. Leave him here with me. Everyone else can go." I stare at my men. "We are off. The. Grid. Am I clear?"

"Of course."

Gino shoves the guy into a chair before leaving with the rest of the men.

Timeo's voice comes over the speakers. "Dude, as far as the online world is concerned, this car dealership has been obliterated from the face of the Earth," he says with relish. I'm glad my brother's so fucking good at what he does.

Dani bites her lip nervously. "What are you going to do?"

"Depends on what I need." Sullivan glares at me.

I shake my head and blow out a breath, walk over to the coffee pot, and flick the switch. They both watch me warily.

"Do you know who she is?" I begin.

"I do. Your fuck toy," Sullivan says. He's trying to get under my skin, but I'm not that easily baited. I crack a smile.

"You think you're playing with someone who's new to this game," I say, shaking my head. "Fucking asshole. You know that her husband faked his death. I know that you've been complicit in hiding the evidence of that. Her

kid is missing." I take the two cups of coffee and walk casually toward Officer Sullivan, who's glaring at me warily. Dani sits primly, her hands folded in her lap.

Part of me wants to tell her to leave, to close her eyes, to go in another room so she doesn't have to see the violent side of me.

But I'm done hiding. I'm done lying. I did what I thought I had to, and this is the next step.

I look straight into Dani's eyes though I'm talking to Sullivan. "I love this woman. I love her daughter as if she were my own." I swing my gaze back to Sullivan's. "Keep that in mind."

"What makes you think I know anything?" he scoffs, doing that stereotypical move where he looks up at the ceiling. Classic.

"I don't think. I know. With every fucking second that you waste, Emmy's not with her mother." I take a step over to him. "We'll begin with you explaining why her husband faked his death."

Sullivan fumes. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

With a quick flick of my wrist, I pour the scalding coffee on his lap. He screams and tries to get to his feet, but I shove him back down.

"Try that again."

He's writhing, slapping at his legs, trying to get the steaming liquid off the fabric.

"Tell me why, and I'll let you take them off."

"He was trying to frame you for murder. He wanted to bring you down. He said something about the Montavios fucking with friends, and you were the easiest target. He knew that you'd defend your brother, and he knew that you'd hit him."

I draw in a deep breath and meet Dani's eyes.

The entire interior of the showroom smells like hot coffee. I hold the second cup in my hand.

I place the second cup of coffee on the side table, and I remove my belt. Dani and Sullivan watch me carefully. I pull Sullivan's hands behind his back and quickly tie them, looping the belt around his wrists and securing them. "I have more questions. You're going to answer them."

"And if I don't?" he grits, probably to save face, because this asshole just gave away half of his deck of cards because I poured a little coffee on his lap. Jesus.

I have many weapons at my disposal, I've been here before. I'm not proud of that fact.

Psychological manipulation, physical intimidation, sensory deprivation... I could keep him awake for days, all to make him give me information. I could threaten his family. I could beat him senseless. But time is of the essence, and there are only certain things I want Dani to see.

I take off my T-shirt and wrap it around his eyes, quickly cinching it at the back of his head. If he doesn't know what I'm doing, a coward like him is going to imagine the worst.

I point to the desk where a pair of scissors and a stapler are sitting. I beckon for Dani to get them.

"You know who I am."

He licks his lips and swallows, obviously disturbed. It helps when my reputation precedes me.

"I do."

"I need you to tell me. Why did he fake his death? It has to do with more than simply framing me."

"The plan was to use him to frame you, get you put in jail or killed, whichever was easier. Faking his death was simple. We told him we'd keep him under protection in exchange for you. He was hiding from the fucking cartel. The cartel doesn't even fucking know he's alive. No one does except you, apparently. If the cartel knew he was fucking the local boss's wife, they'd kill him."

So he did the job first. He put his wife and daughter on the line like a goddamn pussy.

It doesn't matter why they wanted me. Every fucking officer in Boston wants me and my whole family behind bars. It's easy to frame us for crimes—the ones we've committed and the ones we haven't.

We've been there before.

“That's all I know.”

I look at Dani. “He's lying.”

Dani flinches, but stares at the two of us.

"Where is my daughter?"

She holds the scissors and looks about ready to stab him. Good girl. Mama bear means business, and she won't take shit from anyone.

"Fuck if I know," he says. I take the scissors, opening and closing them ominously near his ear so he can hear them. He begins to shiver. "I don't know, I don't fucking know."

"You're lying." I open the scissors and press the metal against his thigh.

“Fine, okay! I'll tell you. Jesus.”

"Let's hear it."

"He's going up to the Canadian border," Sullivan says in a rush of words. “He's going to take Emmy with him and meet up with her. He's not in his right mind, he's high as a fucking kite on meth. He kept saying stuff about wanting his daughter back, wanting to start a family, wanting to start over. A new identity, a new life.”

Dani shakes her head, trembling.

"Canadian border?"

"Yeah. He's probably halfway there. He took her a couple hours ago."

Dani buries her face in her hands and takes a deep breath.

I reach for her shoulder and give her a gentle squeeze. "We've got this."

Turning back to Sullivan, I tell him, "I'm gonna let you go now. You're gonna have a nice, hefty sum in your bank account. This conversation never happened. Do you understand that you owe me a favor because of this?"

"Yes, yes," he cries, probably thankful he still has his balls intact.

"Excellent. Because none of this happened. In fact, while we were having this conversation, what actually happened was that you committed a federal offense. If you do anything, and I mean any fucking thing, to push back against my family, what happened today is going to put you in jail for the rest of your life, if you make it that far. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," he sobs. The fucking pussy.

I look to Dani. "We're going to the Canadian border. Let's go."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

TRAP

Dani

RICCO ACTUALLY CLOSES THE BORDER.

I may have some doubts about my relationship with Ricco, but I have zero doubts that I called the right person to find my daughter.

I won't forget what he said when he was questioning that cop.

I love this woman. And I love her daughter as if she were my own. My God, I'll never forget that. No matter what happens.

With a series of phone calls, Ricco and Sergio make sure that no planes leave from local airports on the way to Canada and that no cars cross the Canadian border, from New York all the way to Maine. It is not an easy task, as it involves multiple phone calls, lots of what Ricco might call negotiation, and a ton of bribery.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this," I tell Ricco as we get in the car to wait for Timeo to give us Nick's location.

"What is it?" he says, obviously reserved. And I know then, he doesn't want to push anything. I asked him for space, and he respects that. He said that he loved me, and he said that he loved Emmy, but that doesn't mean that he's going to force the situation.

I lick my lips, and swallow. I bite my lip. "I wish that you had actually killed him."

"Sullivan?"

"No," I say with a sigh. "Nick. I wish that what we thought was true actually was."

"Me, too," he says grimly. "I mean, I already had it in my mind that the fucker was dead, and now that he's done this to you? And to Emmy?" He shakes his head. I'd like to say that he stays dead.

"Exactly. I hope she's okay. God, Ricco, if he hurt her—"

"She's going to be okay. I know it. And if she isn't, Dani..."

"I don't need you to finish that sentence, because if he hurts her in any way, I'll finish the job myself."

He grins, and I wish I could be immune to the effect it has on my heart. That flash of white against his full lips, that dark skin and those eyes, so full of life and intelligence and intensity. "Atta girl," he says approvingly.

The phone rings, and he answers it by tapping a button on his steering wheel.

"Yeah?"

I'm noting all sorts of interesting little facts. First, Ricco and his brothers have an interesting way of talking to each other, including a series of short, monosyllabic words, grunts, and sounds of approval or disapproval. Very interesting, and rather ape-like, yet it seems to get the job done. Second, I'm not sure there's anything they can't do.

"I think we have a location." It sounds like Timeo on the line.

"Where?" Ricco taps the rectangular device on his dash, some sort of space-age GPS thing. "Tell me."

"There's a rest stop just outside Albany." *Fuck.*

"Albany? Jesus. That's hours from here."

He taps the address that Timeo gives into his GPS. "It'll take me three hours if I drive as fast as this fucking thing can go."

A different voice comes on the line. "Take the helicopter." Sergio?

Ricco nods. "Fucking perfect. What's faster? Helicopter? Jet?"

"For a short distance, helicopter. You're five minutes from where we can pick you up," Timeo says. "I'll arrange it now. Let's go."

We take off. He's driving faster than I've ever seen anyone drive, and yet I feel safe, because he's competent. He's good at what he does. And I need to get to Emmy. Slower would frustrate me.

"You guys don't fuck around," I say to Ricco, and I must admit, I am

impressed with their effectiveness and reach.

"When it comes to the people we love? We do not. Add children to the mix, and we'll burn the city to the fucking ground."

I believe him.

And I've gotta admit, knowing what I do about the man I consider my ex-husband? With my daughter missing? I want a man by my side that will burn the city to the fucking ground. I want a man by my side that will do anything to protect us.

I want Ricco. With all his flaws, the moral ambiguity and fierce protection... I want all of it. The mobster and the single dad, the man that can make me a cup of coffee as easily as he can tie me up and spank my ass.

I don't want to think about us, not when we're trying to get Emmy back. Not when there's going to be a showdown with Nick. Not when we still have questions, questions that may or may not have answers. So I table that thought for now. But a little seed of hope is planted.

"Are you afraid to fly in a helicopter?" Ricco asks.

"It doesn't matter. I don't care if I'm afraid of flying, afraid of heights, or closed spaces. If I have to take a helicopter, then take an elevator to the fortieth floor and skydive off a building to rescue her... I'll do whatever I have to." I stare at him. "Take me to her."

"That's my girl. I'm so proud of you. And I'm not just saying that because I want to get back together with you," he says, almost like a little boy.

We pull down a side road. He drives so quickly that the trees whip past us in a blur.

"Can I see her?" I ask, my stomach in knots.

Reaching for my hand, he lays his on top of mine. "Let me see." He taps a button on the steering wheel again, and his brother answers.

"Can you get footage on the little girl?"

"Nah, man," Timeo says. "I'm sorry."

"I know how to," Sergio says. "Let me."

I don't know why I had it in my head that Sergio hated me, but I could kiss him right now.

"How the fuck did you figure out how to do that?" Timeo says, obviously impressed. I have no idea what "that" is, but I'm impressed too, because the next thing I know, a picture of Emmy pops up on Ricco's screen. She's holding her stuffed animal, and sucking on her thumb, asleep in the back of the car. There's a crumpled McDonald's bag and an empty chocolate milk bottle on the seat beside her. She's fed, and asleep, and she probably had chicken nuggets with sweet-and-sour sauce, which means that her belly is happy. I take in a deep breath and let it out, stifling the need to cry again. "Thank you. I owe you a favor, and don't tell me I don't, because I always make good on my promises."

I have no idea what someone can do as a favor to the head of the Boston mob, but I'll figure something out.

Ricco parks the car, takes me by the hand, and we run to where a helicopter waits, the chop of the blades deafening. "Now I definitely feel like I'm on a movie set," I say to him. He can't hear me, of course.

"What?" he shouts. I shake my head. I'll definitely be telling Sarah about this later, after Emmy is back with me.

I don't know the man flying the helicopter, and I can barely focus on anything as I grip the seat, intently watching everything whip by below us.

"We're here."

Ricco opens his wallet, takes out a stack of crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. When we finally land, he hands it to the pilot. "That's your tip. Thank you."

My belly begins to churn as we exit.

We're closing in on them, and that means I have no idea what's going to happen next.

"You alright, Dani? You look pale. You gonna be sick?" He eyes me warily.

I shake my head. "No. I'm fine, just nervous."

What would I say to a man that faked his death? After everything he's put me through?

"I never thought I could hate somebody, Ricco. I try to think that I'm above hatred."

"Anyone who's hurt enough can hate someone," he says. "The key is you don't hold onto it."

"What do you mean?"

"Nick won't give a shit if you hate him. He won't give a shit if you don't. Do you know who will?"

"Me. Emmy."

"Exactly."

He pulls out his phone and taps a couple of buttons. "There he is," he says. "We need to get her, Dani, but in such a way that he isn't going to hurt her."

I nod, not exactly sure what our next plan should be.

"He's driving. I don't wanna risk him crashing the car. If he knows that we're chasing him, he'll probably drive at a reckless speed. I don't know if he knows how to drive that fast."

Ricco does, but I don't know about Nick. And the idea of my daughter being hurt is unacceptable.

"What other option do we have?"

"We head them off." Thinking for a moment, he finally nods. "I have an idea."

Ricco makes phone calls and quickly puts his plan into place. I'm astounded at how proficient he is, how clear of a thinker under stress. Still, at a speed a hundred times faster than any other humans, some of Ricco's men begin to show up.

"We've set up the detours, sir."

"I didn't know you have men all the way up here."

Ricco's scowling at footage on his phone and making notes on a small pad he pulled from his back pocket. "We have friends and enemies everywhere. The key is knowing when to call a friend and when to confront an enemy."

He shows me on his phone twelve men dressed in construction clothes, putting up a detour sign to block a road. They block Nick's main route and re-route all traffic in another direction. Nick, however, will be sent here.

"We meet him at the detour," Ricco says. "With Emmy."

"Got it. How far away are they?" He looks at something on his phone again.

"Seven minutes."

"Should we have a plan?"

"Oh, babe," he says in an ominous voice. "I have a plan."

The way he says it makes the hair on my arms stand up. I swallow and lick my lips again. I wobble a little, feeling faint.

"Want to fill me in?"

With a frown, he says, "After you tell me the last time you had something to eat or drink."

"I have no idea. It was probably... yesterday, I guess. I'm fine."

His eyes grow stern, as he points to a bench. "We have six minutes. Sit."

"Should've gotten that candy in the vending machine from Flo," I mutter under my breath.

"Could've had that second cup of coffee I didn't dump on that asshole."

I'd laugh if I wasn't so keyed up. I take the Coke and package of peanut M&Ms he hands me, but I have no appetite. I can't even think about normal things like food at a time like this. I take a tentative sip of the Coke and eat one little M&M to appease him.

It's almost showtime.

It's sort of amazing to see how easily and quickly everything is orchestrated

as he fills in his brothers and gets their updates as well.

"We've gathered intelligence about his route, and the timing when he should be here."

"I have intel from a New Hampshire state police dispatcher. She's had a crush on me for a while. She gave me access to everything in the state highway computer systems thinking she'd get a date out of it. LOL's on her, though. I met her at a party in Swampscott last year, great ass but wouldn't shut the fuck up the whole night," Timeo says. "Oh, sorry, I went off on a tangent there... we also have surveillance and tracking devices across the country, and everything matches up. Five minutes to go."

"Which location do we choose?" Ricco asks him. The idea is that they've diverted traffic one way, but we need to make sure that we divert Nick the other, so he drives right here.

"We thought it best to set it up in a remote area," Timeo says. "There are fewer escape routes."

They talk about locations, what Nick's driving, what they'll use to physically stop him. I look at my watch. The time is going by quickly. I can't wait to see my daughter again. Nick, on the other hand, I could do without, but he's a necessary evil in this particular instance.

"How is it going to appear legitimate? How is he not going to know that it's you?" I ask.

"We've already coordinated it with the authorities," Ricco says. "He's committing a criminal offense, so they're happy to have our assistance with this."

"And because they owe us a couple hundred favors, they'll turn a blind eye to whatever we tell them to turn a blind eye to," Timeo says.

Ricco leans in and says into my ear, "After we have Emmy back, and all the dirty details of what's going down are cleaned up, you and I are going to get a hotel. You can get a separate room if you want, but I want to see that you're safe. You'll give me that, Dani." My heart feels like it's breaking. I nod as he continues. "Emmy's going to have room service for the first time in her life, and she'll be allowed to order anything she wants that you're okay with. You

can take a nice hot bath, and we'll order dinner. How does that sound?"

"Like heaven," I say honestly. I don't tell him I still don't know where we stand, because right now, that doesn't matter.

Glancing at his watch, he nods. "It's time," he says. "We're ready. Let's do this." Ricco checks his weapons. He checks me. He nods to Timeo over the video surveillance, and like magic the group sets up a fake road construction zone. It looks completely legitimate, and quickly cars start taking an alternate route. No one is coming in this direction.

"Checking in with surveillance," Ricco says. "I want a report the second you see his car."

"Sighted, sir." One voice comes through on speaker, giving a coordinate and an estimated time of arrival.

They're one minute out.

I'm breathing heavily, my hands sweaty. I wipe them impatiently on my jeans, and Ricco catches my eye. "Hey," he says, his voice husky and deep.

I swallow hard. "What?"

"Dani, I want you to wait in the restroom. It has brick walls, and there are stalls you can hide in if you need to. We have no way of telling if he's being followed or traced."

"I don't care if he is, Ricco. I'll fight for her."

"Of course you will," he says. "And I'll give you that chance. But don't you realize that we're gonna stand a much better chance this way?"

"But he'll know who you are, won't he?"

"I'm going to hold that off. Can you at least step to the side of the doorway, so he doesn't see you right away? Emmy will come to you, and I will make sure to defend you."

I nod. "Yes, of course." I swallow. "Let's do this."

"Coming your way, sir."

"What's he driving?" I ask him, just because I feel the need to know all the details. It doesn't really matter, because the only car heading our way will be Nick and my daughter.

"Blue Mazda," somebody says. I don't even know who it is at this point. My adrenaline is surging, my heartbeat pounding. I can hardly hear myself think. I'm tapping my foot, trying to calm my nerves, when the hum of tires on asphalt reaches us.

"He's here," Ricco says. "I want a team assembled to catch him if he runs. Do not hurt him. I repeat, do not hurt him. I want him in one piece when I get him."

This is a side of Ricco I haven't seen before. He has that same cold, angry look he had when he was talking to the police officers outside of the school. It's almost as if he's put on a mask, hidden his real identity, and now he's sliding into the role of protector.

He pulls on a ball cap and a pair of shades. It will buy him a little time, anyway.

I imagine this is how he looked that night he attacked Nick. I imagine this is how he looked when Nick fell and hit his head.

I wonder how he looked when he thought Nick was dead.

The car comes to an abrupt stop. Ricco goes out to meet them. I stand back, watching this all unfold.

"Get out of the car." Nick is not visible from where I'm standing, but I can guarantee he's about to lose his mind.

I shift a little so I can see for sure that it is Nick when he rolls the window down. I want to hit him. I feel sick. I want to cry. After all this time, I thought he was dead. There was a time when I loved him.

"What is this bullshit?" he says, his voice garbled and too high-pitched. I remember that Sullivan said he was high, and I could fucking kill him for driving in that condition with my daughter in the car.

Ricco pulls out a gun. "Come out with your hands up. Do not touch a

weapon. Do not reach for the little girl."

The little girl. She's there. I stifle a sob and cover my mouth with my hands.

The car doors open.

I stand in the doorway and watch as little feet hit the ground before Emmy runs straight for Ricco.

"Ricco," she says, as she throws her arms around his legs. "I want Mama."

Ricco cannot take care of Nick and stop him in any way, shape, or form if he's holding Emmy. "Emmy! Come to Mama. Run, baby."

Emmy turns and stares at me, wide-eyed as Nick gets out of the car brandishing a gun. "Get your ass over here and give her to me, Dani. You don't get her back." The situation's escalating, and if my daughter gets hurt—

"Ignore him," Ricco snaps. "Dani!"

Ricco makes a swift move. He scoops Emmy up in his arms, and swings her to the left, to me, as I run to him. I pull her to me as Ricco brandishes a weapon in my peripheral vision. I kneel and hold my baby to me, stifling the need to cry. She needs to see her brave Mama right now. Later, I get to cry.

"I missed you," I whisper as a second car pulls up. When Ricco doesn't look that way, I know that he expects this arrival. I need to distract her. "Are you hungry?"

"You have snacks?" Emmy says, her eyes furrowed in that adorable way. I turn away so she doesn't see my eyes watering and swallow hard.

"There are machines in there that have snacks!" I say with as much enthusiasm as I can muster. I don't know if she's ever seen a vending machine before. Please God I can use it to keep her attention away from whatever's about to go down.

The door to the second car opens. I stare and my heart swells while fear floods me.

Sarah and Jason. They're here. Someone called them. I stare, shaking, terrified that all the people I love are in one place, where they could so easily

get hurt.

Ricco gives Nick a look that dares him to move one damn muscle and stalks over to us.

“Emmy,” he says warmly, falling to one knee. “I heard Mama say you could get a snack.” Pulling out his wallet, he takes out a stack of bills. “Look who’s here! Auntie Sarah and Uncle Jason. You go and buy them whatever they want and you, too.”

Emmy gleefully grabs the money and runs over to Sarah and Jason. I tamp back the urge to reach for her and hold her to me.

I have to do this.

"We have to make sure that everything is safe for you to come home," I tell Emmy, which is the God’s honest truth. I give her a big kiss.

“Come with Auntie, baby,” Sarah says. “Mama will be right there.”

Emmy runs inside waving the bills, excitedly talking about what she’s going to buy everyone.

Leaving me and Ricco alone with Nick.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

RETRIBUTION

Dani

MY RELIEF at seeing Emmy safe quickly dissipates when I stare at the man I once loved, the man who faked his own death to save his own ass, who tried to take my daughter.

I expected I would hate him, and he's definitely no friend of mine. Instead, though, I'm filled with a deep sadness.

It's dark and dimly lit where we are, and Nick looks like a cornered animal. The effect is unnerving.

"Tell us everything," Ricco says. "I'm not sure which of us deserves retribution more, me or Dani. First, you used me to fake your death and frame me. Then you lied to Dani and took Emmy from her."

Nick's eyes are wide and bloodshot, as he nervously fidgets.

"I had to," he says, his voice reedy, like someone's squeezing his neck. A crow squawks overhead and Nick is so tense, he nearly leaps a foot in the air. The tension in the air is palpable.

"Tell me why you think you had to," Ricco says in that voice that makes people shiver in fear.

"The cartel!" Nick says on a choked whine. "They're after me."

Ricco shakes his head. "You fear the cartel more than you fear my family?"

Nick doesn't respond. Ricco's called his bluff.

"Tell the truth," Ricco says. "You got more skin in this than you're letting on."

"I don't!" he says.

I shake my head because I know that look when he's lying.

"You lying piece of shit!" I say, my hands clenched into fists. "You made me believe you were dead. You made our daughter cry. She couldn't sleep for nights on end and slept in my bed with me. Every morning she woke up and

she asked for you.”

My voice breaks. Ricco’s eyes darken when Nick scowls.

“You didn’t love me,” he spits out. I look at his wide, frantic eyes, made larger behind wire-rimmed glasses. There was a time I thought he was handsome in a nerdy-professor sort of way. Now....

“This has nothing to do with us,” I say, my voice taut. “You’re changing the subject because you’re a coward.”

Nick looks from me to Ricco. “You’re one to talk,” Nick says in a low voice. “You think I’m dead and the first thing you do is jump into bed with the man you thought killed me?”

Ricco’s growl takes Nick off guard. He stumbles backward as Ricco draws his pistol.

“I’ve had enough,” he says, advancing on Nick. “Dani, back!” Ricco shouts as Nick holds a gun in his trembling hand.

“Touch me, Montavio, and she dies.”

I’m shaking with fury as Nick inches back toward his car and Ricco’s eyes flash from me to Nick and the car, calculating his move.

“I told you once,” I say in a low voice to Ricco, “I wish you’d actually killed him when you thought you did.” Nick’s eyes widen, his hands shaking. “And there’s something you don’t know about him, Ricco. He’s a *terrible* shot. He can’t even aim his dick at the toilet to pee when he’s drunk.”

“Got it,” Ricco says.

A silver SUV screeches into the lot. Ricco steps back, tucking his gun at his waist, his hands held out. Again, no surprise registers on his face and this time, he doesn’t tell me to get back.

The SUV’s doors open. Four armed, masked men leap out. Who are they? It’s clear they’ve come for Nick, as he screams and cowers, but he’s no match against the barrage of bullets. I close my eyes, so I don’t have to see the brutal end and pray with everything I’ve got that Sarah and Jason have protected Emmy from all of this.

The muted exit of bullets thud as they tear into his flesh. His cries and screams for mercy fill the air. And then silence descends as Ricco wraps his arms around me and tucks my head into his chest, blocking me from any sound except for the soft lilt of his voice in my ear.

“The cartel’s come to take their due. They had a local syndicate. We clued them in to Nick’s little habit of visiting their boss’s wife when he was away on business. Hush, baby. They’ll take it from here.”

I don’t ask questions. I’m not sure I want to know. I nod against him and wish for this to be over.

There’s a heavy thump and the sound of car doors slamming.

Someone speaks in a heavy accent. I don’t look up, as Ricco’s firm hold on my head silently indicates for me to stay still.

“It’s done, Montavio. You’re free to go... this time. See you around.”

Car wheels screech. Then, silence.

Ricco blows out a breath.

“How did you...?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I don’t care if it’s complicated. Promise me you’ll tell me later? I don’t like being in the dark, Ricco.”

“Dani, I’ll tell you anything and everything you need to know, baby.”

“I want to see Emmy,” I whisper.

“So do I.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“ANYTHING?”

Ricco

THE QUIET AFTERMATH of Nick's capture and subsequent death leaves Dani depleted and exhausted. I lead her into the rest area where Jason, Sarah, and Emmy wait for us.

Emmy's no longer crying, she's happily sipping a drink, and munching from a bag of chips.

"Mama, you're back," she says.

Dani nods. They have some catching up to do, but fortunately Emmy is young and doesn't remember much beyond Dani not being at school and Nick showing up with chicken nuggets.

"I was scared, Mama. I missed you."

"I was scared and missed you, too, honey." She sits and pulls Emmy onto her lap.

"Alright," Sarah says, her hands on her hips. "Now is someone gonna fill us in or what?"

We tell them everything, cryptically and briefly because of Emmy's presence, but we manage to convey the bulk of the story in its entirety.

"Ho-ly shit, that's some straight-outta-Hollywood story going on there," Jason says. "Ricco Montavio, *you're my hero.*"

He gives Dani a funny look and whispers, "That's okay to say, right?"

"Yeah," she says. "It is. I mean, a lot's changed, hasn't it, Ricco?"

I nod and give her a smile. "I hope so. Let's get a room, get some food and rest. There's nothing else that needs to be handled right now. My team will clean all this up like it never happened."

"That would be scary, if it wasn't so hot," Jason mutters, giving Dani a wink.

An hour later, we're comfortably situated in a luxury hotel room with an attached door to Emmy's. After a full dinner and a bath, she was happy to

dive under the covers. She's fast asleep, just on the other side of this door. Dani and I set up a baby monitor with video so she can watch her. It soothes her Mama heart.

I told Emmy she could have anything she wanted on the room service menu. She chose macaroni and cheese and chocolate milk.

Dani, on the other hand, chose the shrimp kabobs with rice pilaf and roasted asparagus, followed by a decadent chocolate mousse topped with whipped cream. Good girl.

We lay in bed next to each other.

"I never knew I'd be too tired for sex," she says with a groan, rubbing her eyes.

"Humph."

"You, too? I don't know what *humph* means."

"Means I don't think it's possible to be too tired for sex, but if you are, then I'll give you that space."

She laughs and turns to me, burying her head on my chest. "How very noble of you, sir."

"Dani, I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, I really am," I say, pulling her even closer to me and holding her tight.

"I know," she says. "Ricco, I know."

"Back there when Nick was at my mercy. When you looked at me, I knew then."

"That I accepted all of you," she finishes. "Right?"

"Yes. That I didn't have to hide who I was. That if we are truly meant to be together, we go into this knowing exactly who we are."

"Yes. Yes, that."

We lay in the silence before she broaches the other subject.

“How did you arrange for the cartel to take Nick out?”

“I didn’t want his blood on my hands or yours. I was framed for his murder, and I’d be damned if I was going to allow that to happen again. And you didn’t want the weight of that on your shoulders, either.”

She nods. “Do I want to know the terms of the agreement?”

I feel a familiar weariness descend on me. “No, baby.”

If she wants to know everything, I will tell her. But for now, I want to put this behind us.

She entwines her fingers with mine. I hold her hand, palm to palm.

“Thank you, Ricco. For telling me everything. For being honest. For today, helping me get Emmy.”

“Baby, I love you,” I say softly. “I’ll do anything for you, Daniella.”

“Anything?” she asks with a twinkle in her eye.

“Anything.”

“Good,” she whispers. “Figure out how to work this coffee maker in the morning.” She swallows and her eyes go half-lidded. “But right now, Ricco Montavio... I am *very* awake and I need you to do something about that.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WHAT FAMILY DOES

Dani

“IF YOU PUT your hands on my brother, I’ll take you straight over my knee.” Ricco glares but I only laugh, because I have no intention of putting my hands on his brother, and I love it when he gets all protective and possessive.

We’re in the back of one of the Montavio Brotherhood’s cars, heading into the North End for dinner. We’re meeting his brothers and sister. The kids are home in bed, Penny watching over them.

“I was just saying I owe them both a favor.”

“You owe no one anything,” Ricco says, giving me a pointed look.

“I do, though,” I say, my voice getting thick with emotion. “You guys went above and beyond.”

They truly did. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to repay them.

“And all I was saying is, the only thing I’m good at is massage.” I shrug.

“I mean it, baby. You don’t owe them anything.” He reaches his big hand to my knee and gives me a warm squeeze. “You’re family now. You and Emmy both.”

My eyes water. Though I’ve had mixed emotions and even now don’t quite know how I feel about everything.

I know how I feel about Ricco, though.

I love him.

He’s everything to me.

We couldn’t be more different in some ways... and in others, couldn’t be more alike.

“This is what my family does, Daniella. We’ve got each other’s backs. If you need something, we’re here for you. If they do, you are. I love that about you, babe.”

The long car pulls up outside of a restaurant situated back from the brick stone street. The smell of roasting garlic fills the air. My mouth waters.

Ricco opens the door and extends his hand to help me out. “Come here, gorgeous.”

Maybe it’s because he says it every chance he gets, or because I’m wearing a dress that really accentuates my curves and wraps around my waist just right, but tonight...I *feel* gorgeous.

I’ve never been to this part of the North End. It’s a cozy, intimate space with low lighting, ivory candlesticks at each table, soft Italian ballads playing in the background. It’s romantic but private.

I feel myself grow shy when Sergio and Eden wait for us, along with Eden’s sister Starla and Timeo. We have a large table in the back, away from the entrance and far enough back no one else will hear us.

“Hey, guys!” Starla says cheerfully, waving to us from the corner. “So glad you’re home! And congrats.” Frowning, she turns to Eden. “Can I say congrats because of what happened?”

Eden frowns and bites her lip, but I only smile. “Um, sure?” I say tentatively.

“It wasn’t fair what you went through,” Starla says fiercely. “You deserve better. So, welcome,” she says with passion.

Timeo smiles and gives me a little wave. “You gotta be patient with her, Dani, Starla’s like super shy and timid,” he says with mock concern, making me laugh. Starla promptly punches Timeo in the arm, making him grimace.

Today we received word, confirmation, whatever you want to call it, that Nick is indeed gone, never to resurface again. I’m both saddened and relieved by this news, even though I already knew as much. The confirmation shuts the door on a chapter of my life, never to open again.

Turns out Nick did a side job with a branch of the cartel. He got hot and heavy with the boss’s wife and needed someone to save his ass. So in exchange for witness protection, he cut a deal with a police friend of his. Give them way to bring the Montavios down, and they’d protect him.

Only Ricco managed to escape prosecution and everyone's plans went to hell. We got caught in the crossfires.

"How's Emmy?" Eden asks gently.

"Good," I say. "She's thankfully young and was confused by everything. It sounds like she thinks it might've been a dream."

It helps that her life went immediately back to normal, and Ricco and I have kept her busy and occupied.

"Oh, good," Eden says. "I'm so glad."

The waiter brings us several bottles of wine.

Ricco declines and fidgets. It's out of character for him.

"You okay?" I whisper in his ear.

"Fine," he says, tugging at his shirt like the collar is too tight. "Do you want some antipasti?"

My eyes widen at the trays of caprese salad with ripe, heirloom tomatoes and fresh mozzarella, and prosciutto di Parma, nestled among ripe figs, and crusty bread with warmed olive oil.

We eat and laugh, but Ricco barely touches his food. He pushes it around on his plate like he's nervous about something or has lost his appetite.

I text him.

Okay, you're definitely off. What's up? You can trust me.

He doesn't check his phone. I hadn't thought of the fact that everyone who'd send him a text he'd immediately check is sitting right here beside him.

"Have you gotten any messages from Penny?" I ask discreetly, and when he checks, he finally reads my text.

"Everything's fine," he says, responding to my text and the question about the kids.

Alrighty then. Ricco is allowed to be off occasionally. I, on the other hand,

am going to feast.

The first course, *primo*, is served—risotto and gnocchi, and a lasagna Bolognese that melts in your mouth, followed by *secondi*, grilled sea bass and herb-crusted lamb chops. Everything's served family style on large platters, and I love that. Sergio rests his arm languidly around Eden's slender shoulders and Timeo gives Starla his cherry on a toothpick. They tell me about Quinn's latest ventures in Italy, and how she's setting new fashion trends all over Tuscany.

"Hope you saved room for dessert," Starla says, her eyes twinkling. "I love dessert."

"Do you ever think they should serve dessert *first*?" I ask her.

"All the time. Someone should totally open a restaurant that does *exactly* that. Seriously."

Timeo looks thoughtful. "Wow, that's a really great idea." I catch Starla smiling covertly and blushing in response.

"I like the Italian tradition of digestives myself," Eden says, as they bring chilled lemon liquor, limoncello, and amaretto with our dessert.

"This was quite a culinary tour through Italy," I say, helping myself to an adorable little glass of amaretto.

"I'll be right back," Ricco says, standing.

If his behavior seems strange to anyone else, they don't show it.

"He seems distracted," I tell Eden, shaking my head. "But he says he's fine."

"If he says he's fine, he's fine," she says.

"Oh, that's so sad. Maybe he has PMS," Starla speculates, and Timeo bursts out laughing. "More amaretto? Oh, Dani, I want to ask you something," Starla says, pulling out her phone. "Can you tell me which shoes you think go best with this skirt?"

She's flipping through pictures on her phone when I realize that no one's talking. It seems as if the entire restaurant's gone quiet.

“I like the wedges,” I tell Starla, as I look up from the phone. I blink in confusion when a new waiter and waitress stand before me at our table.

“Sarah? Jason?” I look around at the table. “What’s going on here?”

Ricco steps out from behind Jason, a black velvet box in his hand.

I draw in a sharp breath and everyone else seems to fade into the background.

“Daniella, I love you,” Ricco says, his gaze burning into mine. “And I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you do me the honor? Will you—”

“YES!!!” I say, leaping to my feet and clapping my hands. “Yes, yes, yes!”

Cheers erupt all around us. Jason and Sarah hug me, and Sergio orders wine for everyone at the restaurant. I’m shocked, moved to tears, and overwhelmed. I bury my head on Ricco’s shoulder and sniff back tears.

“Okay, let me see that ring,” I say, swiping at my eyes. “I know you don’t do anything half-assed,” I snort. “Of *course* you didn’t.”

The ring is a thick white gold with a stunning array of diamonds that twinkle under the overhead lighting. “It’s gorgeous,” I breathe.

Ricco slides it onto my finger.

“To new beginnings,” Ricco says, holding a glass of wine up to all of us.

I smile as we clink our glasses. “And happily ever afters.”



EPILOGUE

HE REMEMBERED

Dani

JASON LEANS OVER THE TABLE, looking incredibly dapper in his custom tux, his eyes twinkling at me. He's brought a date, *the* date, and together, they look like they should be gracing the cover of a magazine.

"Honey, I have an idea."

"Mmm?" I help myself to another shrimp skewer and tug one off the stick with delight. "What's that?"

"You and Mr. Montavio renew your vows, like, *yearly*. And in honor of the occasion you throw the same exact party you're throwing *tonight*."

He grins at me, a dimple forming in his adorable cheek.

"Ah, so it's *Mr. Montavio*, now that you've had your fill of open bar and fondue? Having fun, are we?" I ask, wiggling my eyebrows suggestively. His "plus one" is adorably nerdy, currently engaged in a heated discussion about hydraulic engines with Timeo.

"Oh, we are having fun," Jason says with a sigh. "Now tell me as the bride you've had enough time to actually enjoy yourself?"

"Of course," I say, as Ricco walks up behind me and glides his arm protectively around my shoulders. "It's a day worthy of celebration."

Leaning closer, Ricco kisses my temple. "I couldn't think of a better reason."

So, apparently these families like big to-do's for weddings. We considered our options and chose a chic rooftop venue in the heart of Boston, the entire perimeter lined with opulent bouquets of wildflowers, the night stars lending a twinkling air of magic.

I picked out my dress without looking at the price tag, mostly because the catalog Marialena showed me didn't *have* any.

"Mmm," she said approvingly, when I pointed at an elegant white dress with billows of chiffon. "Nice choice. I do believe that one's trimmed with Swarovski crystals."

Who knew?

“I’m just here for the open bar,” Sarah says, a drink in each hand. “Have you *seen* the assortment?”

“I have,” I say with a wink. “We got to pick.”

“No wonder there’s four bottles of Captain Morgan,” she says with a wink. I know my sister’s fave.

“Mama,” Emmy, the most adorable little flower girl I’ve ever seen, asks. “When do we have cake?” Emmy’s preschool was closed because of a power outage the day of our cake testing, so she tagged along and hasn’t stopped talking about it since. Smart girl.

She’s also been showing remarkable restraint by not swiping some of the towering festoons of icing. Marco, on the other hand, not so much. We’ll forevermore have wedding pics featuring a cake-smearing ring bearer who simply couldn’t help himself.

After partying long into the night, Emmy falls asleep on Sarah’s shoulder and Ricco himself sits at the head table holding Marco, who’s snoring softly, still clutching two wedding favors in his chubby little fists.

“Now, you two,” Jason says, leaning down to scoop Marco up. “Time for Uncle Jason and Auntie Sarah to take over. It’s time for you to go catch that flight.”

“Flight?” I ask Ricco. He’s kept me in the total dark about the honeymoon.

“Yeah, flight,” he says with a smirk. “No questions. Get your bag and let’s go.”

A minute ago I felt as if I could’ve curled right up in bed with the two little ones and passed out still wearing my wedding dress, but now, I’m very much awake.

“What are you hiding up your sleeve?” I ask him curiously.

“An excellent memory,” is his only retort.

“Ricco...”

Leaning over the table, he cups my cheek and puts his mouth to my ear. “You once told me exactly how you’d like to honeymoon. Now, trust me and let’s get going. And for the love of God let me surprise you for once, before I have to spank that gorgeous ass of yours.”

“Ricco,” I hiss. “The children.”

“Are dead asleep. Now, *go*.”

This time he actually gives me a teasing swat, which I don’t even feel because of the layers of tulle, but it doesn’t stop his brothers and my friends from catcalling and hollering. Cheeks aflame, I plan to get even when we’re alone again.

Several hours later, we’re safely secured in his private jet, and he opens up his laptop.

“First stop, you nosy little girl,” Ricco begins. “A Mediterranean cruise. We’ll take a stop in Barcelona, Cannes, and Santorini.” Pausing, he waits for a response. I can only stare, my mouth hanging open.

“I’ve never been on a cruise,” I finally whisper.

“I know,” he whispers back. “I even paid extra so we get the balcony. Now instead of staying in a place the size of a pinhead, we get the upgrade to postage stamp.”

“Good,” I say with a decided nod. “You need your space the way you manspread.”

Ricco narrows his eyes at me and wags a finger. “You are in so much trouble,” he says in that raspy voice that makes me shiver. I *love* teasing him and can’t wait to consummate this marriage.

My husband.

He’s taken something that brought pain and heartache and made it into something altogether lovely.

“I’ve always wanted to cruise the Mediterranean,” I say with a girlish sigh.

“I know.” Ricco’s chocolate brown eyes dance as if he’s keeping a secret he

can hardly keep any longer.

“And then,” he continues.

“Wait, wait, wait. What do you mean *and then*? There’s more?” I chug a small bottle of water, parched and exhausted after the day’s events.

“Of course there’s more.”

Of course.

“We’ll return to Rome where our cruise originates and from there, we fly to Zürich.” He pauses. “Familiar yet?”

I snort. “Uh, hello. You think I’ve actually been to Switzerland?”

“God, I love you,” he says on a laugh, leaning over to cup my jaw with his large, strong, rough hand. When he kisses me, my eyelids flutter closed and I sigh into him.

“And I love you,” I whisper. “Even though I’m curious as hell and a little confused.”

With one quick tug, I land on his lap, straddling him, a task thankfully made much easier thanks to the ridiculously roomy layout of this thing.

“In Zürich, we’re staying at a resort. It’s incredible. I haven’t been there in a while, but you won’t forget it. From the resort, where you’ll be taking ski lessons...”

Suddenly, I remember. I remember the whole conversation. My throat gets tight, and my nose goes all tingly. “Ricco,” I say in a choked voice.

I want to take a cruise on the Mediterranean, ski the Swiss Alps, ride a boat in Venice, eat sushi in Tokyo and climb the Andes in Peru. I want to travel everywhere.

“Yeah, baby?” he says, his eyes boring into mine. He knows that I know. “You remember now?”

I nod, my vision blurred. “We aren’t coming home after skiing, are we?”

Shaking his head, he laces his fingers at the small of my back. “Not yet. I’ve

truncated the itinerary from what I originally wanted to do, because, *kids*. But we are hitting the major points. After Zürich, we'll be back in Italy so we can take a gondola ride, and visit St. Mark's Basilica. My son's namesake, after all."

"Of course," I say, hiding the need to grin. I can't *wait*.

"And after we indulge in some local restaurant fare, we'll be heading to Tokyo and getting you some of that sushi." He makes a face. "Me, I'll find an American burger somewhere. We'll spend a few days in Tokyo, then head home because by then, Sarah and Jason will have aged ten years and the kids might forget us."

"Amazing," I whisper. "That sounds amazing."

"And if you think I've forgotten Peru, think again. That's our winter destination. I just couldn't quite squeeze all of it in right now with such short notice."

"December?" I squeal. "Are you serious?"

"So serious," he says with a grin that tells me he's a big, fat liar. "So we'll come...home," he says, his voice suddenly getting a little softer. "Where we'll start building... a family."

I lay my head on his shoulder and lock my fingers with his. "Sounds *perfect*." My heart warms and my throat tightens.

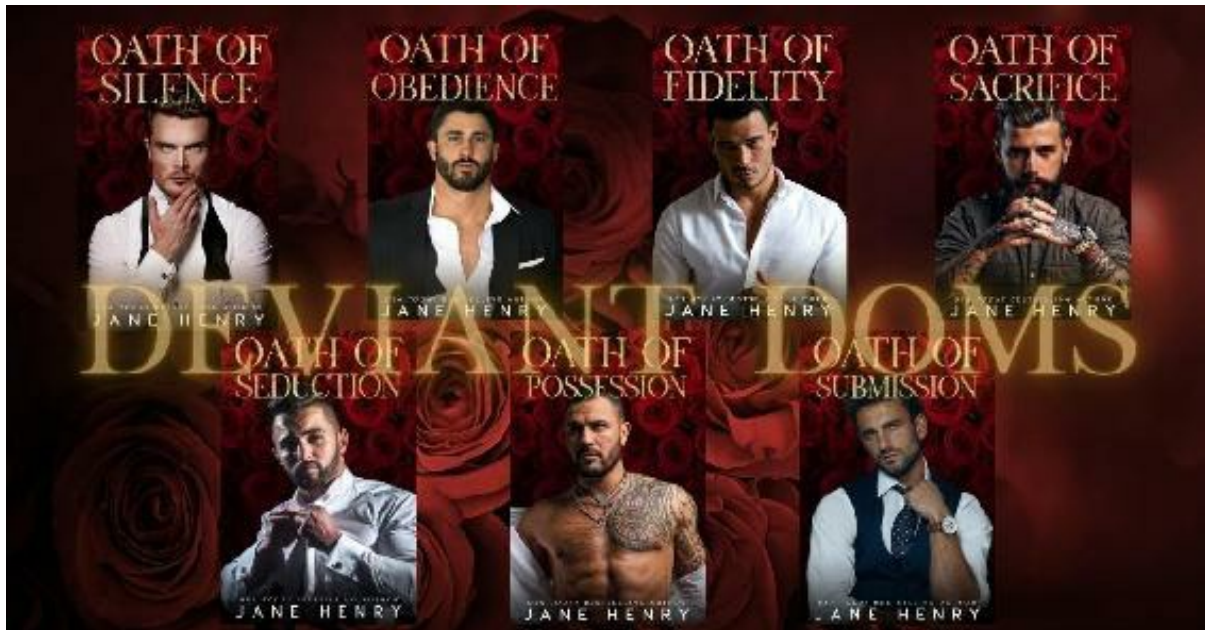
"I love you, Ricco Montavio," I say, leaning up for another kiss.

"And I love you, Daniella Montavio," he says, which sounds strange and perfect all at once, which is maybe the exact way every couple in love should be.

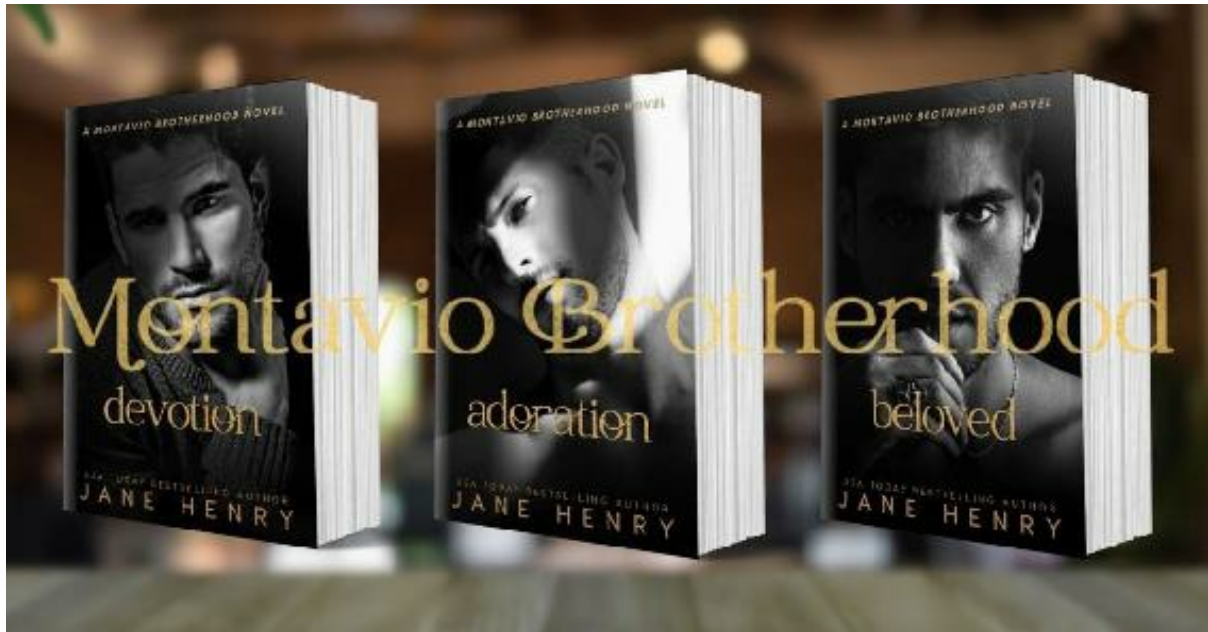


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PREVIEW

INFATUATION: A MONTAVIO BROTHERHOOD NOVEL

CHAPTER ONE

THE INTERVIEW

Starla

I open the app on my bank account and blink. Some days, I look at that number and I wonder if there was a glitch. A mistake. Surely I, Starla Soul, with no college education or even so much as a sugar daddy to pad my wallet, hasn't managed to accumulate *that* much cash. I quickly shut the app, because truth be told, it makes me a little uncomfortable.

It's one thing having a few hundred bucks. It's another having thousands. And then, when it gets into the hundreds of thousands, you start seeing the possibilities.

And no one even has the slightest clue.

I hit my monthly goal, though. I set a goal, those numbers showed up in my inbox, and now I get my reward.

"Good job, Starla," I whisper to myself as I swipe up on the Ugg app and choose the prettiest pair of chestnut brown fur-lined boots. They'll be perfect for the New England winter, and pair nicely with damn near anything.

My phone buzzes, followed by another buzz and another until it feels like I'm about to be attacked by an angry swarm of bees. I look with concern at the screen until I realize exactly what's going on. I forgot about those damn notifications.

My heart beats faster, because my inner voice is telling me maybe it would've been better to keep secrets... well, secret. But I have work to do, and if I want to keep those numbers rolling into my bank account, I have to focus and I have to up the ante.

I check my make-up. Re-apply my lip gloss and flick my hair so the waves fall over my shoulders gracefully. I check and double check that everything's in place, including a solid Wi-Fi connection. I practice smile just to lift my spirits. No one will actually see me smile.

There was a time when just the thought of the day ahead, out from under the abusive thumb of my parents and the knowledge that I'd see *him* again made everything seem brighter. I'd pop out of bed in the morning, grateful to be

alive and free and ready to face whatever came.

Or, so I thought.

When you survive what I have, you don't take little things for granted anymore.

But that was long ago.

No one's seen or heard from Timeo Montavio in six months.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I can't think of that now.

My brother-in-law Sergio is convinced he's dead but doesn't want to say it. He's hinted as much, though. "This is the world we live in," he said just last week. "The chances that he's made it this far, Starla, this long..."

Sergio's brother Ricco obviously agrees, but I don't care what they say.

They never found a body. They don't have any evidence that he's not still out there.

I breathe in deeply and close my eyes. I finger the locket around my neck and whisper a prayer that I know may fall on deaf ears, because I have no idea how or when I'll ever believe in any kind of being like God ever again.

I swallow hard and check the phone again. Almost go time.

I hate notifications on when I'm working, so I quickly swipe down to "Do Not Disturb."

It's been a hot minute since I've done an interview. I want to be fully present. *On.*

There's a knock on my door. I hold my breath. God, I do not want anyone here right now. If it's my sister Eden or her husband Sergio coming unannounced...

"Starla?"

Shit.

I shut down my laptop with a frantic look at the time. Only five minutes left.

“Yes?” I yell, my voice too high pitched.

“It’s Jody.”

Jody. Right! God, how could I forget? I’ve been so nervous since my interview I’m forgetting everything

“Phoebe! Mimi! Time for a walk!” I nearly keel over when my pair of golden retrievers comes bounding in from the bedroom. I grab their leashes and open the door for the dog walker. My work will go so much better if my girls aren’t begging for treats or tummy rubs. “Thank you! Sorry, I have a work meeting with a client in like thirty seconds, please make it a super long walk today!”

Jody blinks from behind large wire-rimmed glasses and nods. “Got it. You okay?”

“Fine,” I lie, as my stomach churns, clenching with nerves. “I’m good.”

“Okay!” She says brightly, flashing her braces at me when she grins. Taking the leash, she gets down and lets my babies slobber all over her and lash their pretty tails. “Let’s go, girls!”

I shut and lock the door behind her, trying to quell the rapid beating of my heart.

Maybe I *should* take those little edibles my friend Quinn’s been trying to convince me to try, but the good girl inside of me that only very recently moved out from beneath Eden and Sergio’s roof worries. They would *kill me*.

I wonder if the edibles would help calm me down. I don’t have to *smoke* the weed. Just a little sour watermelon chewy...

I walk over to my computer, propped in my powder room right outside the bathroom with a bright round ring of light behind it. On camera, no one knows I’m near the bathroom for privacy reasons. Lulu Melon pops up on the screen.

“Hi!” I say brightly, waving at the camera. She can only see me from the chin down.

“Hey,” she says, grinning at me. “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it’s actually

you and you're granting me an interview. You have *no* idea how much this means to me. It was like one of my bucket list things just to meet you, never mind interview you."

I squirm uncomfortably under her praise and adoration. I'm just me, nothing special, and I don't know why people get all weird about meeting me. Some days, I *wish* I wasn't so popular. Other days, it's the only thing that keeps me going.

Timeo would've been proud of me. He would've cheered me on, given me those damn edibles, then taken me to spend some of that money I have stashed away in my account. Maybe he even would've known what to do with it.

"...and then when I met Myers Moe, I was like, this is the best job *ever*," she croons, name dropping like it's a competitive sport.

"It is," I say, but I'm not so sure.

"Was there ever a job you wanted to do but didn't?" Lulu asks, tipping her head to the side in that way that only she can. It's sort of her signature move, so her blond curls bounce adorably. "Just off record," she says, waving her hand dismissively. "I'm not recording yet."

I stifle a snort. As if I'm that naïve. Naïveté is a luxury I can't afford anymore.

"I wanted to be a writer once," I say with a smile. "Still do, really."

"Oh my God, that would be amazing. You should write your story." She nods excitedly. "You would *kill* it, seriously *slay*, girlfriend."

Maybe. Maybe not. I shrug. "Maybe some day."

Some day, I'll write my book.

Some day, I'll tell Eden and Sergio everything.

Some day, I'll see Timeo again.

"Now for the interview," Lulu says. "When you confessed in a recent video lately that there was a man you once loved, the internet blew up. Everyone

knows you lived this sheltered, almost idyllic existence—“

“It was not idyllic,” I say, wondering to myself if I’ve really given that impression. “Not at all.”

“Right, right,” Lulu says, waving at me again. “But the whole *Amish* thing.”

“I...was not Amish,” I say, shaking my head and trying to stay friendly. Attacking Lulu Melon on camera would be absolutely disastrous for my career.

“But it’s *like* being Amish.”

I shrug. People say that all the time. “Yeah, and I suppose I sort of focus on that sometimes, don’t I?” I say with a charming smile, even though sadly she doesn’t get to see that. “In many ways, I miss the simplicity of it all. Being disconnected from the constant need to perform and respond.”

“Yes, yes! And then you dropped the bomb and told us you were once in love.” She sighs dramatically. “And the whole world sighed collectively.”

It was hardly the whole world, and I’m not sure what those supposed sighs held, but —

My phone buzzes. It can only be Eden or Sergio, the only two who can still text me during *Do Not Disturb*.

I’ll get it after the call.

I swallow and focus back on the camera.

“Can you tell us a bit more about your love? What he was like, how you knew him?”

I bite my lip. I thought I was prepared for this question, but now that the time has come to tell a perfect stranger about Timeo, it feels like defiling something sacred and special.

“He was my brother-in-law’s brother,” I say. Dammit with that stupid past tense again. “Is, I mean.”

“Your brother-in-law’s *brother*, she says, as if trying to puzzle out a complicated math equation. “Okay, right, I get that. Yup.”

“We met when I was only a kid,” I say, fully aware of the fact that Sergio *still* calls me a kid even though I’m twenty-two years old. But I’m not a kid anymore. One could argue that what I suffered stripped me of my childhood long before I hit the legal age of adulthood.

“Ohhh,” she says suggestively. “You were underage?”

I shake my head. “No, no, it was nothing like that. We never—“

“You can tell me,” she says, giving me those wide eyes that christened her the LuLu Doe Eyes “You can trust me.”

Right.

“We were only friends,” I say with a sigh. I can’t tell her that Timeo Montavio was a high-ranking member of one of the most dangerous mobs in New England. I can’t tell her that he went undercover to do a job as repayment for a favor, that I’m not even supposed to know about that. I can’t tell her anything. “His job was dangerous. He... he took on a very dangerous job, and he never came home.”

LuLu wipes what I’m confident is a fake tear from her cheek. “Heartbreaking,” she says in a shaky voice. “Absolutely devastating. Please, if you can,” she says, clutching at her chest. “Tell us one of your fondest memories, can you? And can you tell us his name?”

I shake my head. “No names, please. But yes, of course.”

My phone buzzes again.

And again.

And again.

Is everything okay? Why are they trying to get in touch with me?

I either have to end this interview sooner than later, or somehow discreetly check my watch for messages.

“He taught me how to drive,” I say with a happy sigh. God, those are fond memories. Sergio about lost his mind when he found out that Timeo had been taking me to the quiet graveyard near our home, but when I logically pointed

out it saved him the trouble and I was ready to get my license, he decided to let Timeo live after all. “God, that was so fun. We’d sneak out at the crack of dawn, since I was still living with my — “

Oh, God. I almost slipped. I almost told her more of my back story that I do not share.

“My family,” I say. “We’d drive around this graveyard that was nearly abandoned. It was this ne of the older ones you only see in New England.”

Fuck. *Shit*. I’d ask her to edit that out, but we’re live.

New England’s a big place, I reason. A really big place. I could be anywhere.

Another series of texts comes in. I can’t put this off any longer.

I pretend to drop something on the floor and lean over to get it, before discreetly checking my watch.

I have twelve texts.

My belly swoops.

Eden:

Starla, please answer. Please. Are you home?

Starla! I’m trying to get in touch with you. Please, please respond. I’ve been calling and texting and haven’t heard from you!

“Sorry, dropped something,” I mutter as I quickly click on Sergio’s messages next.

Where the fuck are you?

There’s a loud banging at my door.

I jump to my feet.

“I’m so sorry, I’m going to have to continue this interview another day,” I say apologetically as I scroll through ten messages from Sergio demanding I call immediately.

“Of course, of course,” Lulu. “Thank you for your time and I am so sorry to hear that you—“

I shut the screen off. Looks like I had “technical difficulties.” Lulu will roll with it.

The door bangs again, loud and insistent. My poor pups aren’t even home yet. With a racing heart, I walk to the door. I have a bodyguard, per Sergio’s insistence, but there are other voices outside the door.

I peek through the peep hole and gasp.



CHAPTER TWO

RAGE

Timeo

I blink in the glaring light of overhead spotlights. After God knows how long in this dark and dimly lit room, I'm nearly blinded by an actual light overhead.

Where the fuck am I?

I've been asking that goddamn question for months — years? Who fucking knows how long. A question I've never been able to get the answer to. I don't even remember how I got here.

But I've never forgotten who I am. That's one thing they can never take from me.

I'm sitting in a folding chair in a typical holding cell — brick walls, concrete floors, no windows. Six assholes sitting in folding chairs with their arms crossed over their chests, staring at me.

"You guys look worse in the fucking light than I imagined," I mutter. My voice sounds husky and rough from disuse. "I've never been a 'fuck with the lights off' kinda guy, but I sure as fuck hope you dicks keep the damn lights off."

If not for my voice in my own ears, I'd wonder if I said anything at all, because there's no response. They don't even blink, like the fucking well-trained robots they are.

The door swings open. They leap to their feet as one, like a trained military unit.

Maybe they *are* trained military. Would make sense.

Fuck.

Logic tells me the only person they'd stand for is their boss, and I haven't seen him yet. He walks in the room, his heels clicking on the floor, and I breathe a little easier. The guy's fucking ancient, walking with a hobble and a cane, even if he's dressed as if he's about to go to a Broadway show.

Impeccably clean, three piece suit, shined leather shoes. I'm wearing threadbare, soiled clothes, my feet are bare, and I've got a beard that would challenge Rip Van Winkle. He probably likes it that way. Imbalance of power or whatever the fuck.

Still, a man his age can't fight the way these other motherfuckers can, and that's a plus. Doesn't mean he can't pull a trigger on a gun, though.

"Mr. Montavio," he says in a gravelly voice, sitting beside me. His face is creased with wrinkles, and I detect the faintest trace of an accent. Probably been in America for decades. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Ah, so he's one of *those* guys. Professional, reserved, takes his job seriously and expects his men to do the same. The type that would slit your throat with casual efficiency, step back so the blood wouldn't splash on his shoes, then wash his hands and take his wife out to dinner. Contrary to how they appear, they tend to be the most ruthless sort, so driven by their unwavering need to get what they want, there's not one fucking line they won't cross.

Shit's about to go down.

I take quick inventory of my body. Pain on my back where the assholes beat me with a fucking night stick. That pain in my right arm from what I'm convinced was broken but never set. Constant pain in my head from chronic dehydration and whatever fucking meds they gave me.

Meh. Nothing I can't fight through.

"Looking good, boss," I say brightly, not because I'm in any kinda of good mood, but because this asshole needs to know he hasn't bested me.

"There's been an interesting new development."

My pulse spikes and my mind races. Sergio's been killed, Adriano's in jail, Ricco's found me... thank fuck nothing they can use against me involves Starla. They have no idea who she is.

"Yeah?" I pretend to yawn. "What's that?"

"We're considering allowing you to go home."

I hear the words but don't process the sentiment behind it.

Home.

There's no fucking way these men are allowing me to go home without very, very serious consequences. I pretend I'm not hoping, that I'm not holding my breath for the rest of his story.

"Yeah? Why's that?" I try to keep my voice nonchalant but fail miserably, at least to my own ears.

I watch as he takes out his phone and flicks through it. Responding to messages. Checking his email. Maybe he's pretending that I'm a prisoner sitting next to him holding my breath doesn't even ping his radar.

"Oh, there will be conditions... of course."

Of fucking course. There always are. I wait for him to continue.

"Aren't you curious, Mr. Montavio?"

I lick my lips and shrug. "Sure."

It's fucking killing me.

He jerks his head at his crew, who silently get to their feet and circle me.

What the fuck? Are they afraid I'm gonna try to kick his ass or something?

"You'll go back home, Mr. Montavio. You will pretend you remember nothing of where you were or who you saw. We will get a note to you regarding a secure location where you will find a burner phone. You will use that phone to communicate with us—"

As he starts to lay out the terms of our agreement, I'm already laughing.

"Right, yeah, you guys are smart enough to know that asking me to spy on my family and report back to you means that I would rather die first. Kill me now. I'll bare my fucking neck. If you think that for one second—"

I stop talking when he shows me his phone screen.

Rage, like red hot lava, spews into my veins. "You motherfucking son of a whore," I seethe. One of the men slaps my face for daring to disrespect his boss, but I don't even feel it. As soon as he gets near me I kick my foot out

and nail him in the balls. Screaming, he falls to the ground and grabs his crotch.

“You fucking goddamn assholes. Let me out of here! You fucking undo me! If you motherfucking assholes don’t, you—“

Another one comes at me but I use both feet, rear back, and kick him so hard in the chest he falls into one of his cronies. Starve a man and put him in solitary confinement, all he fucking has to do is turn what’s left of his body into muscle.

“If you get anywhere fucking *near* her—“

A third and fourth come at me. I manage to incapacitate one with a kick that shatters a knee cap and even get on top of the fourth. I pin him beneath my knee and smack him with my head, knocking him out cold. “Fucking pussies. Uncuff me and I’ll take fucking all of you.”

Something pricks my neck.

I growl like a rabid animal and bite the hand that holds the syringe. I bite hard until I’m deafened from the screams and the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

“You will do what I tell you,” the man says placidly, as the room swirls around me. “And now you know exactly what’s at stake.”

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