

A close-up portrait of a man with dark, wavy hair and a beard, wearing a blue suit jacket over a white shirt. He is looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. In the background, the Eiffel Tower is visible at night, illuminated against a dark sky with some stars. The overall tone is dramatic and cinematic.

TAINTED REGIME

CAPTURED

Innocence

PIPER STONE

CAPTURED INNOCENCE



PIPER STONE

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This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

PROLOGUE



*W*eakness: A person or thing that one is unable to resist or likes excessively.

—Oxford Languages

“There was a moment when I laid eyes on you that everything changed. Where your innocence had collided with breathtaking beauty, rendering me incapable of thinking about anything else but you. Wanting you. Craving you. Needing you. And after that day, the need to possess you became intolerable. Some might call my desire a weakness but I knew the difference. You will be my greatest strength. And one day, I will own you.”

—Mattia DeLuca

CHAPTER 1



*S*ophia

I was fourteen when I met Mattia, the first time I'd also witnessed him killing a man, but it wasn't the last. On my eighteenth birthday, he saved my life, slaughtering the assassin in cold blood. And both times, I was told he was my enemy, born into a merciless family. Perhaps that's why for my nineteenth birthday, I decided to go behind my father's back, indulging in my greatest fantasy, providing a gift that could only be shared once.

My virtue.

With the man I intended on marrying...

"You're weak, Sophia. You believe in love, the greatest vulnerability of all. That weakness will eventually kill you."

They were some of the kindest words my father had said to me just before shipping me away to little more than a convent in Paris disguised as a wealthy boarding school for the upper echelon of society. I'd learned within hours of arriving that sexuality was considered a sin. Instead of turning into an obedient girl, both fearing and ignoring my natural urges, I'd embraced them, nurturing my needs with other methods than boys.

I'd become determined to prove my ruthless father wrong, but I'd also listened and observed, refusing to remain a protected, pampered princess. Entering college had allowed me

additional opportunities to build my repertoire of skills. It had helped build my self-confidence as well. That's why I was prepared to enter a club when the nagging voice inside of me told me I shouldn't.

But I didn't like following good girl rules.

Still. I had my sights set on lassoing my own Prince Charming, just like my beautiful sister had wished for me. I knew exactly who I wanted, a man so powerful and sensual that I could barely breathe when thinking about the passionate man. Or maybe I should call him the devil in Gucci clothing.

The thought brought a smile to my face and flutters into my stomach. I took a deep breath and gazed at the indulgent golden sign, the name printed in bold lettering in vivid crimson.

Like blood to honor the man who owned the infamous club.

Notorious.

The name suited the sinfully decadent club located in the heart of Rome. The building was ten stories tall complete with a conference center on the first floor, the second taken up with a commercial kitchen and a series of office suites, then several floors of various dazzling clubs housed on every other floor, each one meant for different ages. There was also a rooftop bar and private lounge that I'd heard through rumors catered to fulfilling every kinky desire.

The wicked and wild location suited me perfectly, the need to break out of my shell stronger than it had ever been.

"Look at this crowd," my best friend Celeste murmured from beside me. "I feel underdressed."

"You're beautiful. Stop worrying."

The entire city street was alive with activity, people dressed to the nines in continuation of a fabulous weekend celebrating life. I took a deep breath, holding in the scents of a city I'd missed for so long, finally breathing out then allowing a smile to cross my face. It was far enough away from my father's estate that I had no worries I'd be found. In fact, it was in what

my papa considered to be enemy territory. I grinned from the thought. The good girl was certainly testing her naughty side.

“Now, you do realize who owns this place, don’t you?” Celeste asked as soon as we stepped onto the sidewalk leading to the hottest club in Rome.

“I haven’t been away that long, girl.”

“I wasn’t certain. Would you look at the gorgeous men? Whew. But if your father finds out, he’ll be pissed.”

“That matters to me why?” I purred as I headed toward the set of velvet ropes keeping the four hundred or so wannabe guests from getting inside. Of course I knew who owned Notorious, one of the hottest bachelors in Italy, his wealth, arrogance, and good looks making him entirely too sexy, and he knew it.

Mattia DeLuca was everything a girl could wish for but nothing she should entertain given his penchant for violence and his refusal to commit to anyone.

Yet as gorgeous as he was, his dark, thick curls accenting his strong jawline and intense dark eyes, he was a reprehensible man, considered a family enemy. That didn’t mean I wouldn’t mind fucking with his mind or teasing him if given the opportunity. My poor daddy would have a cow given my sinful decision, but I was finished with playing the innocent, hapless girl who couldn’t handle herself.

I’d selected Mattia for a very special reason, my decision capable of rocking all of Italy. I hadn’t set out to do that until recently, the day my father had told me in no uncertain terms that I would be married off to the highest bidder on my twenty-first birthday. That had been the last straw, my plan set in motion.

“Because Mattia DeLuca is a dangerous man. He doesn’t like people who break the rules,” Celeste insisted.

“Aww. Poor baby.” I pouted my lips. “He will bend to my will.”

“Excuse me? I thought you two didn’t know each other.”

I shrugged and continued walking. “We’ve run into each other before.” The last time he’d issued a proclamation after saving my life. It was time I tested his resolve.

“God, you’ve changed so much since leaving for Paris.”

I faked a yawn and threw her a look. “All for the better. By the way, don’t forget to come early tomorrow for my glorious birthday party. I won’t be able to tolerate Lucia fawning all over me if she is able to fly in from the States.” While I adored my older sister, she also thought of me as a child, the birthday party planned in my honor another indication my family refused to believe I was all grown up. I had a terrible feeling my father was laying the groundwork for his promise to marry me off. The thought was disgusting and I’d disappear before allowing that to happen.

I thought about Lucia and sighed, missing her more than I cared to admit. How long had it been since we’d been allowed to spend any time together? She had a new life in the United States, enjoying being free from the tethers of our family and its wretched traditions.

Sadly, my gut told me that my father was prepared to parade me around to suitors at the great party as well. He prescribed to the old Italian customs, including arranged marriages. My mother certainly knew that better than most, her hatred of our father evident for my entire life.

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Then I get to flirt with that sexy brother of yours.”

Exhaling, I stopped short, turning to face her. “You don’t want to have anything to do with Enzo. Okay?”

“Why?”

I hated to tell her that my brother was just like my father, maybe worse, truly an evil human being. “Because you have a normal, loving family. You deserve to find a nice boy who will treat you with respect.”

She narrowed her eyes then burst into laughter, believing I was kidding. “Party pooper. You can’t have all the fun.”

“I assure you that there will be plenty of dangerously stunning men there.” If I knew my father, he was using the event as an unscrupulous business opportunity as well, padding his already hefty bank accounts. “Now, come on. We’re wasting the night away.” Without a doubt, I was playing with fire, but I couldn’t help myself. I’d been stuck in a convent-like atmosphere for far too long.

Did I know what I was doing? Probably not.

As soon as we walked closer, the two beefy bouncers leered at us like we were fresh meat.

“Good God. Look at the two of them. Suddenly, I have a bad feeling about this. I don’t think they’re going to allow us to get in. You either need to know somebody or be somebody.”

“Stop worrying,” I told her as I strutted toward the entrance to the club. “We’ll get in.” I held out a golden card, which I’d stolen from a cute but boring young man in Paris. That’s the moment I’d allowed myself to consider acting on an adventure.

She took a deep breath. “You are such a bad influence.”

“That’s why you love me.” We continued to walk closer, the excitement building.

“How did you get away from the burly security guards who follow you everywhere?”

I gave her a look and batted my eyelashes. “You’d be surprised what showing off your boobs can do.”

“What?” She stared at me in horror.

“Not my finest hour but both of them looked the other way as long as I promised to keep them out of trouble.”

Celeste sighed. “Maybe I need to try your tactics once in a while.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Still, we’re only nineteen. The drinking age is twenty-one,” Celeste said as she fell in beside me. She’d been my best friend since grade school and even though I’d been forced to

go to boarding school in France the day I turned eleven, we'd remained close. However, she was still the meek girl, while living alone for so many years had given me a boldness that I used to my benefit every chance I got. She was only now coming out of her shell. I'd smashed mine.

"So what? Our IDs are perfection." And they were. I had an incredible source in Paris that had provided me with the finest quality pieces of identification I'd ever seen. Besides, there wasn't a single person in the city who'd dare challenge let alone deny entrance to the daughter of Roberto Lazarro. They knew what would happen, the wrath my father would bring down on them.

I pushed in front of the crowd to the two bouncers guarding the door. Then I gave them the sweetest smile possible.

One of them started to tell me to get back in line before glancing down at the revealing dress I was wearing, a little something in scarlet I'd picked up before leaving Paris. It highlighted every curve perfectly, the length barely covering my butt while providing a lasting look at my long legs in four-inch stilettos.

When I handed him my fake ID, he barely glanced at the particulars other than my name. Then a smirk crossed his face. There was no one here that would do the math. It simply wasn't important.

"No can do, miss. Move along."

His tone was gruff and he was stupid enough to try to push me aside.

I jumped in front of him, tilting my head as I threw out the gold card. "I don't think you want to deny anything to the daughter of Roberto Lazarro. Do you?"

The hulking mass of a man lifted his eyebrow, a cold, calculating smirk crossing his face. The other bouncer walked over, grabbing the invitation from Mr. Hulking Mass Number One's hand, giving me a hard onceover. "Let her in."

Although he sneered given his disapproval, he did what he was told, not even pestering Celeste for her ID before motioning us

in.

“Dentro ci sono uomini cattivi che desidereranno mangiare delle belle ragazzine.” There are bad men inside who’d desire to eat pretty little girls.

I threw my head over my shoulder after hearing his comment. “Then I guess it’s good I’m a crack shot, isn’t it?” I used English although I could have chosen French or Spanish, Turkish or Russian. If he had any clue what I’d said to him, it wasn’t apparent, the bastard grinning lewdly as he opened the door.

In return, I flicked him the bird then pounced inside, acting as if I owned the place.

“Wow. That was impressive,” Celeste said as she giggled. “Did you see the one guy’s face? I think he wanted to eat you alive.”

“He’s just hired muscle. He knew better than to touch me.” I had a feeling my arrival had been noted, which was exactly what I wanted.

“God, this place is gorgeous and insane. Look how crowded it is,” Celeste said, clinging to my arm as if terrified I’d leave her.

Men of all sizes and shapes scanned us like we were prime grade-A beef as I pushed our way through the crowd. I was searching for one thing: Mattia. To that end, I made certain I preened in front of several cameras. If he was working, he’d be told I was here. I was certain of it. After a few seconds, I glanced at the balcony, the prime real estate exactly what I was looking for.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

As soon as I pointed, she followed my gaze. “To where all the pretty people play.”

“You are such a bad girl. Did I ever tell you that?”

That’s exactly what I planned on being if only for a single night. I’d concocted the plan on my eighteenth birthday, the party held at my father’s favorite restaurant. Mattia had been

there with his entire family, celebrating something special as well.

I'd watched him as he'd watched me, careful not to allow anyone to see our interest in the other. The images of what happened that night tickled the back of my mind just as it had dozens of times before.

As the hand was snapped over my mouth, preventing me from screaming, shock tore through me. I was quickly dragged from the corridor, the assailant quickly leaving through the rear door of the restaurant. That's when my fight or flight kicked in and I struggled, managing to kick the powerful man in the shins.

But he was too strong for me, jerking me toward an oncoming vehicle. When the driver skidded to a stop, the door pitched open, I did everything I could to get away, biting the asshole's hand.

My high-pitched scream was short lived, the horrible man knocking me to the ground.

"You bitch!"

The words were spouted in English, but I knew the language. Dazed, the wind knocked out of me, I tried to scramble away but he was too fast, wrapping his hand around my arm and jerking me off the cracked pavement.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Four rapid shots were fired and I was dropped. Then I watched in horror and glee as the man who'd tried to abduct me fell to the ground, pitching face first. Seconds later, the driver slumped to the steering wheel, the car rolling into the brick wall of the building next door.

When a figure approached, I tried to scream but nothing came out. Then a larger than life man dropped beside me, immediately cupping my face.

"You're okay, bellissima principessa. I will never let anyone harm you again. That is my pledge to you." The words

'beautiful princess' should be ones I hated, but his deep voice made me feel as if he was my knight in shining armor.

When he gathered me into his arms, carrying me under the light over the back door, I recognized my hero.

Mattia.

He whisked me inside, easing me to the floor near the restrooms. Exhaling, he brushed the backs of his knuckles across my face, giving me the kind of seductive look that would fuel fantasies for days and weeks to come. Then he dared move closer, taking a deep breath and allowing it to slide across my face. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I managed.

He pressed one hand against the wall, lowering his head. Without thinking, I lifted mine. Then he gripped my chin with two fingers, pressing his voluptuous lips against mine. As the kiss became a sweet, scintillating moment, my heart fluttered, my mind spinning out of control. The taste of him was incredible, bourbon tinged with a hint of peppermint, the flavor irresistible.

As he swept his tongue inside, he was insistent yet tender, as if fearful I would be terrified. I arched my back, pressing my hand against his chest. Then I allowed myself to knead his muscles, yielding to his possessive mouth.

When he broke the moment of intimacy a few seconds later, I gasped for air while he growled.

Then he issued a promise that I knew would haunt me for a long time.

"Un giorno sarai mio. Il mio a piacere. Mio da proteggere. E mio da possedere."

One day you will be mine. Mine to taste. Mine to protect. And mine to own.

My lower lip quivered and after he pressed his lips against my cheek, he backed away into the shadows. But not before repeating a single word in English.

"Mine."

As the vision faded, I realized my nipples ached, my panties damp from the lingering desire. I'd only agreed to come home for yet another birthday celebration for one reason.

Him.

The man I'd hungered to taste, the one who'd made a promise, a secret I'd kept locked away in a box.

The good girl, the one who never made waves or stood up for herself, the one who'd been treated like a child her entire life would venture out on her own.

I wasn't just playing with fire. I was igniting explosives, but what was wrong with getting burned? Something magical had happened the moment the clock had struck midnight the evening before, my birthday a monumental event in the back of my mind. I was eager to indulge in my greatest fantasy.

And it had Mattia DeLuca's name written all over it.

CHAPTER 2



*M*attia

Money and power meant everything in a world where the truth was usually veiled in boasting and lies. I could afford to do both when necessary. However, that was because I had more power than most, the DeLuca family wealth in the billions. In addition, we ruled a significant portion of Italy, almost everyone in our territory bowing down to us, considering us celebrities. Wherever we went, we were treated like royalty, our meals comped at restaurants, cases of wine appearing at our doorsteps.

We were even provided with vacation vouchers from anywhere in the world we wanted to go. The truth was we were spoiled with generosity often from people who had little to nothing. In turn, we funded charities and orphanages, provided funding for businesses, and even had a scholarship fund that allowed needy students to go to college without paying a dime.

Would that get us out of hell free of charge? Absolutely not.

We were also brutal, unforgiving men, especially regarding liars and thieves. And the man I was prepared to teach a valuable lesson to would soon learn that turning his back on the DeLuca family had been a costly mistake.

Wham!

Blood spewed from the man's mouth along with a tooth.

“Sit the fuck down,” I told him. The asshole had dared take a swing, his fist connecting with my jaw. I rubbed it while I backed away, cursing in Italian under my breath. The idiot was dumber than I’d realized.

I’d been born into a violent world, death hovering around me like a warm blanket. I was immune to the effects, using violence as an extension of who I’d become. I was merciless, well trained in the art of torture and death. There was no room for second guessing, no concern over an enemy’s welfare. Just do it. The famous motto often made me grin since it suited my lifestyle perfectly.

However, tonight I was antsy and wasn’t certain why.

Usually, I relished the loss of blood, enjoying both the thought of death and carnage. Tonight, I was bored, angry that my quiet night had been interrupted. Maybe I deserved a break from working twenty-four/seven for the last two years.

Vincenzo, my right-hand man shoved the snitch down onto the steel-backed chair, patting him on the shoulder. “Good boy,” he mused, when the guy remained where he was, giving me a hard look given his anger. Marco had put up a good fight, my Capo’s face showcasing a nice shiner.

I backed away, shaking my head and adjusting the brass knuckles. This wasn’t how I’d wanted my day to end. But business occurred when necessary, including providing lessons and warnings. With shipments being hijacked, I couldn’t afford to allow anyone to get away with insubordination.

The thumping noise of the bass drums pulsed inside my office, which would ordinarily irritate the hell out of me at this point but tonight the tribal beat was helping to drown out the strangled noise and pleas.

“Please, boss. I have a family. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again?”

Christ. Did he really believe I’d buy that shit?

“You have a whore and a mother, Marco. Don’t kid yourself. I know everything about you. Granted, I pity your mother. What she must think of you.”

If there was one thing that I couldn't stand, it was men who begged for their lives after being discovered for their treachery. In my world, you took your punishment like a man, no matter the expected end. I'd been lucky enough to have a father who taught me at an early age that there was no room for weakness or tears.

I had him to thank for becoming a savage man some liked to call Satan. I appreciated the moniker more than people could understand. One day, I would be the Don and I would rule the empire using completely different methods, although just as brutal.

I adjusted the brass knuckles for a second time, an instrument I rarely used but given the location of the punishment session, I wouldn't be able to carve my name into his chest or pull out my dentistry tools. Those were some of my favorite instruments in my massive collective of torture techniques. The thought alone brought a grin to my face.

The man's head was lolled, the beating he'd just taken making it difficult for him to breathe. I took a step away, grabbing my glass of scotch from my desk and powering back the remaining liquid. It was important to stay hydrated during rounds of discipline.

After slamming the tumbler on the bloodwood surface, I returned, fisting his hair at the scalp and snapping his head awkwardly. One eye was already swollen shut, the other unfocused. I smacked his cheek lightly, trying to drag him back to reality. "Hey, pissant. Wakey. Wakey. You'll die when I tell you to die."

My two Capos chuckled from behind me. I glanced at Vincenzo, the bulky man grinning like a kid. He'd been the one to track down the asshole when I'd heard the scumbag had left town. Maybe holing up with his mother hadn't been the best idea. She'd been forced to watch as he was dragged from her house crying like a baby.

For that alone, Marco deserved to die. Making a mother worry was a cardinal sin in my world. Women were to be exalted, even though my mother had been a whore, at least according

to my father. I shoved the ugliness aside. It was time to finish business.

“I’m disappointed in you, Marco. You had potential. Then you fucked it up.” The guy had come up through the ranks, starting out in the United States working for a cousin out of New York. He’d come highly recommended, treated like family. It disturbed me that the asshole could turn so quickly.

“I’m sawry,” he said, his words garbled from blood dripping from his busted-up mouth. “I had no choice.”

“You always have a choice.” My snarl was likely sliding into deaf ears.

I offered him a semblance of a smile, although I wasn’t certain why. Along with being more antsy than normal, I was also testy, my nerves shot given the recent shit that had gone down surrounding business. Pops had taken it out on my younger brother, a kid who had no business being born into a family of degenerates. He’d also beaten my adopted brother, treating him like an animal. But the beatings I’d received had been used as training, preparing me to take the throne one day. Allowing this asshole to live wouldn’t score me any points.

I punched Marco several times, including one brutal jab to the kidney. All the while, I envisioned my father’s face. I’d walked in on him using a whip on Tommaso, the kid doing everything he could to hold in his emotion. Crying or pleading only made the beatings that much worse. However, the scars were constant reminders of who and what I was, which in truth was fine by me.

It had taken everything I had not to kill my father with my bare hands.

Sadly, Tommaso was no threat to the dickless man. Why torture him? God, I was livid.

That’s why I was more brutal than normal, but the beating didn’t soothe the beast inside. I wasn’t certain anything would at this point.

Maybe my anger was about my father’s continued conversation about finding a suitable wife so I could pop out

an heir. It would increase my value and the respect seen in me by other members of the Five Families.

“Don’t get your suit dirty, boss. You’re walking the floor tonight. Allow me to finish the job. I’ll enjoy every moment.”

Exhaling, I glanced at Vincenzo. Ordinarily I wouldn’t mind his eagerness, but I felt it prudent to handle it myself. “I feel the need, bud,” I told him and he knew what that meant. I’d been diagnosed with anger issues a few years before, which had been reason to laugh, but given my penchant for violence, I’d been encouraged to find certain things that would help calm me down. I’d found two.

Fucking up a face and sex. I’d had my share of beautiful women, but given so many had thrown themselves at me, I was weary of one-nighters where I didn’t even remember their name afterwards or if the sex had been any good. I preferred a woman with chutzpa and intelligence, capable of outwitting me with ease and a wicked smile. I’d found the one I wanted, even laying claim a year before in an insane moment of weakness.

It was too bad I couldn’t follow through with my promise. The budding flower was absolutely perfect in my mind. Shit. What the hell was I thinking? I took a few additional swings before taking a deep breath, surprised my knuckles ached.

“Gotcha, boss.” He grinned and backed away.

I heard his phone ringing just before I threw another hard punch into the middle of Marco’s face, the crunch of bones giving me a smile. Unfortunately, blood flew from his crushed nose all over my suit. Groaning, I pulled out the handkerchief I’d shoved into my jacket pocket, wiping the glob away before it hardened.

“Yeah. What’s up, Bruno?” Vincenzo answered.

I heard him chuckling seconds later and turned my head in his direction just as he glanced toward me. I could swear the man’s eyes were twinkling. That was something that I hadn’t witnessed in a long time. I waited to see why Bruno had

called. He was at the front door to the club, a good location for him given his love of brutality as well.

“Yeah, I’ll tell him,” Vincenzo said, laughing under his breath as he shoved his phone into his pocket. “You won’t believe who just walked into our club a few minutes ago.”

I had everyone from politicians and dignitaries, famous actors and musicians who graced my club. They were people I couldn’t give a fuck about, and he knew it. Now I was curious. “Don’t keep me in suspense, Vinny. You know how cranky I get when you do.”

He walked closer, his grin full of irony. “Maybe you want me to finish the job for you. I think you’ll have your hands full with our illustrious mystery guest. In fact, I think I can consider it an early birthday present.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. It was just another day of the year I wanted to forget. However, I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was tossing out bait that he knew I’d hunger to taste like a rabid dog.

“Really. Who is this luscious creature who’ll pull me out of the darkness?”

He lifted his head, allowing a grin to remain before answering. “Sophia Lazarro.”

He allowed the information to sink in. He was one of the only people who’d known about my interest in the girl from a year before, the meeting accidental but something I would never forget. Saving her life had been cathartic, even if her father had threatened me and mine had laughed, patting me on the back as if I’d done my good deed for the year.

I’d never learned the identity of the two men who’d accosted her and in truth, I hadn’t given a shit. My reaction had been without thinking but it was something I’d do again. That was the night a weakness was born. I felt it more now than ever. Fuck.

It would seem fate had intervened again. My cock twitched at the thought.

I'd made the stunning princess a promise that day I'd tried and failed at forgetting. She'd awakened something deep inside of me that had lingered for months afterward, leaving me with filthy thoughts and needs that couldn't be sated. I'd almost made a huge mistake that night that could have cost me dearly, but I'd maintained control. But with her inside my club, all bets were off.

Perhaps I'd make good on the promise I'd issued. Hmm... The thought was delicious and very interesting. With the Lazarros and the DeLucas still at odds, our union could present a delicious opportunity.

He chuckled, patting me on the back. "There's that look I know far too well. I thought that would make you happy. From what Bruno said, she's dressed to kill. She also threatened Daniel. She's certainly not her daddy's little princess any longer."

Daniel was a bruiser of a soldier. Anyone threatening him didn't mind taking their life into their hands.

I still had difficulty getting over the sudden news. The woman I'd hungered for was in my club? That wasn't a coincidence. I felt that in my gut. In fact, I'd been certain she would have told her father about my forward behavior, half expecting for weeks for there to be an attempt on my life or at minimum, another threat to stay clear at a cost I couldn't afford. There'd been no such thing. Perhaps she considered me her dirty little secret, especially since her body had responded just as mine had, desire tearing through both of us.

"Did she now?" I rubbed the stubble on my jaw, amused as hell.

"I thought you'd be pleased." His chortle made me laugh.

"You thought right." I reared back, thinking about what he'd just said. Two images flashed into my mind. One was of the girl I'd met several years before, a wallflower who stared at me with fear yet also contempt in her eyes. She'd been at the wrong place at the wrong time, the only witness to a vicious crime. Instead of reacting as a normal young woman would,

she'd seemed drawn to me. I'd spared her life given her identity and nothing else.

And two was the young woman celebrating her eighteenth birthday, no longer a picture of innocence but a woman I'd wanted to deflower even then. Call me an evil man. At least I'd had the good graces to walk away that night. Still, she wasn't old enough to be drinking inside my club. Hmm... Perhaps I should punish her for her bad behavior. I chuckled, my filthy mind working overtime.

Marco moaned, dragging me back into reality. Business never ended.

After throwing him an angry glare, I removed the brass knuckles from my fingers, handing them to Vincenzo. "You know me too well, brother. Just don't forget to clean up after yourself when you're done. I don't like to leave a trail behind me."

"You think I don't know that, boss?" His grin was as evil as the way I felt inside, hunger already bridging the surface. "Go have fun."

Fun. The word wasn't in my dictionary.

Sophia Lazarro, the revered and very protected princess of a rival family. While the Five Families of Italy, crime syndicates who ran the entire country, were all in a moment of truce, at least according to my father, the Lazarros were considered our true enemies. We'd shared bloodshed and violence over the years, claiming lives at various times. Our territories were close, so much so the lines were often blurred. My adopted brother D'Artagnan and I had been tasked to round up straggler Lazarro soldiers over the last few years, which had led to worse blood raining in the streets.

What in the world was the prized princess doing here?

There'd been talk of a marriage between Lucia Lazarro and me, but that had yet to come to pass. I wasn't the marrying kind. For the younger sister to be inside my club was far too tempting.

"Where is my beautiful prize?"

“Near the bar on the upper floor.”

The floor directly above was reserved for private members of Notorious, which meant Sophia had either been invited by someone or had flirted her way into the special club. Now I was more intrigued than ever. Even though she'd changed dramatically in two years, a year before she'd still seemed so innocent, a light to my darkness, good to my evil. Could a year make a significant difference?

When Marco shifted in his chair, I was surprised as well as pleased at his tenacity. When he spoke, I had to listen intently to hear what he was saying, the words muttered in Italian.

“Stai attento, principe delle tenebre, perché il tuo destino è nelle mani di uomini di cui ti fidi.” Be careful, prince of darkness, for your fate lies in the hands of men you trust.

CHAPTER 3



*M*attia

I'd been threatened more times than I could mention. While some were little more than attempts at dissuading me to act violently, others had proven to be true, some taking several months.

However, there was something distinctly different about Marco's warning, as if he'd been lured into treachery for one purpose only.

Providing the message.

I wasn't entirely certain why my thoughts had drifted to an entirely different level, but they had. Along with another wave of rage spinning out of control.

The warning also sent an icy chill down my spine. As my anger became uncontrollable, thoughts of protecting Sophia entered my mind and I wasn't entirely certain why. I'd had much worse things said to me over the years, threats that had sent me into a tailspin. Why this one had ignited a fire deep within was beyond me but within seconds, I yanked out my pistol, driving six 9mm bullets into the man's face without thinking.

Both Capos were stunned, Vincenzo remaining in shock for a few seconds before lifting his head.

"Well, I don't think I need to check for a pulse."

His chuckle was strangled. I closed my eyes, loathing the fact I'd lost control. It was happening more lately, which didn't bode well for my reputation.

Fuck.

Had it been more about the fact the girl had reentered my world?

"Just get it cleaned up." Fuck. What the hell was wrong with me? And why did I have the distinct feeling Marco had known something I should have learned? I wasn't likely to now with the contents of his head spread against the wall.

"Yeah, I'll call in the cleaning crew. I think you're due for a paint job." Vincenzo whistled.

After shoving my weapon into my pocket, I buttoned my jacket and raked my hands through my hair before heading out of my office. Only then did I take a deep breath, trying to calm my anger, allowing my thoughts to drift to Sophia once again. The surprise was one I needed more than I cared to admit. But the question remained furrowing in the back of my mind.

Was it possible her arrival was a coincidence? I shoved it aside for now, but I would check on if there were any other rumors on the street about either family. I headed into the main body of the club, the third floor consisting of four bars, two oversized dancefloors with pulsing neon lights and an old-fashioned DJ booth positioned across from the balcony. There had to be seven hundred people inside, the floor already close to capacity.

There was a buzz in the air tonight, the energy of the club more sensual than usual. Or maybe my hunger had finally infiltrated my brain, my needs overriding the usual hatred I had for crowds and rowdy people. I often wondered why I owned a bar since I hated everything about it.

Like the predator I was, I moved through the crowd silently, pushing my way past the hundreds of guests toward the middle of the floor where I was able to glance up at the balcony. As I scanned the upper echelon group of people who thought for certain they belonged here, it was a few seconds before I

caught a glimpse of my prey in the neon-infused light. My cock twitched, filthy thoughts remaining in the back of my mind.

Her long hair shimmered in the light, the dazzling hues of copper exactly as I'd remembered. I pressed my fingers across my lips, remembering the kiss as if it had happened yesterday. Now my balls were tight as drums.

It was a bad idea to fuck with a princess, especially given the tenuous hold my family had on peace, but when presented with such a delicious gift, I wasn't the kind of man who could refuse.

Nor would I take no for an answer.

As I moved toward the stairs, taking them slowly, I sucked in my breath, excitement tearing through me. Another rarity. Maybe I was nothing but a twisted fuck who preyed on innocence. A smile crossed my face, a chuckle forming in my throat. When I stepped foot onto the landing, I scanned the expansive space, the flashing lights pulsing in time to the beat. Then I noticed her a mere twenty-five feet away and my balls tightened. Her body was illuminated by the pulsing neon blue lights shimmering down from the ceiling.

They acted like a halo, although I sensed by her attire alone that her innocence was fading as my hunger for her increased.

She gyrated in time to the music, completely unaware that a dozen or so predators were waiting in the wings. Whether or not they knew her identity was something I'd need to consider. I had enemies of my own frequenting the club, which I allowed in order to keep an eye on them. I took a step closer, scanning my illustrious guest as I attempted to determine how I wanted to handle her. The best decision was to escort her out, ensuring she didn't try this again.

But that wasn't going to happen.

"Mine," I whispered, the same possessive feelings I'd had before swirling in my brain. She was even more beautiful than a year before, her body perfectly voluptuous, curves that were meant for only my eyes to bask on.

For my hands to grab.

For my lips to taste.

I took a deep breath, concentrating on paying attention to every detail. She was more self-assured than I remembered, as if she had the world by the balls. She'd grown into a stunning woman, one with rounded curves meant for a man's hands to grab while fucking her.

My hands.

Filthy visions of what I'd like to do to the woman kept me on edge, thoughts of driving my tongue between her swollen folds delicious indeed.

Every muscle in my body was tense, my jaw tight as I ground my teeth. The fact my cock had lengthened, pressing against the zipper of my trousers wasn't lost on me. How fucking long had it been since I'd been so fully aroused?

One full year.

As two men shifted closer, my hackles were raised and I almost reached for my weapon. No one made advances on what belonged to me.

Whether or not she was aware of had done so by design, Sophia Lazarro had just sealed her fate.

I was a possessive son of a bitch and the desire coursing through me was more than just predatory. It bordered on obsessive. Not a single woman had ever caused this kind of reaction. I remained where I was, grabbing the drink brought to me by my favorite waitress then leaning against the railing.

I sensed Sophia knew I was watching her, every move she made for me and me alone.

When she turned in a full circle, dancing in time to the tribal beat, my balls began to swell. I was uncomfortable as hell, the adrenaline rush intense.

Both girls were enjoying the moment, laughing as they danced, creating a show for everyone, although I could tell Sophia was dancing only for me.

I took a deep breath, holding it for a full minute before exhaling. Then I threw back my drink, no longer willing to wait for the little game to play itself out. I wasn't known for my patience or understanding. I also was a rule breaker, which meant that even though Sophia was off limits, I couldn't give a fuck.

I slammed the glass onto a table of guests before taking calculated steps toward my prize. There was no doubt she noticed me coming but was determined to act as if she couldn't care less. I heard the sound of her laughter and my cock twitched all over again.

She threw back a shot of something, immediately garnering the attention of my bartender, who was more than willing to provide her with as much alcohol as she could consume.

Almost immediately, the two men from before appeared behind Sophia and her friend, already laying claim to something that didn't belong to them. The girls obviously had no idea what kind of danger they were in or they didn't care. Coming to this club had been a mistake on several levels.

And her risky decision would be to my benefit.

I would never have been allowed to get this close to such a prized possession, her father a complete control freak of his three children's lives. Even the psychotic brother was still under the powerful man's thumb.

Within seconds, two more shots of alcohol were placed in front of the girls, both grabbing them up eagerly.

Several people noticed my stare, moving out of my way without issues. But I was forced to stop long enough to give the two predators a hard look, allowing them to understand my intentions. If they hadn't complied, they wouldn't have made it out of the club alive. It was that simple. That easy.

No one fucked with me.

That's the moment Sophia decided to give me a hard onceover, shaking her head then purposely turning away. But not before allowing me to see the disgusted look that crossed her face. The little girl was playing with live dynamite. I would need to

warn her to be very careful or she'd get burned in the process of teasing the wrong man.

I inched closer, angered that Sophia was ignoring me intentionally. The way she was swaying her hips, allowing the soft material of her dress to swing back and forth across her sculpted legs was far too enticing. They were legs meant to wrap around my hips as I plunged my cock deep inside. A smirk remained on my face as I walked closer.

She had one hand wrapped around a glass, keeping her face pointed toward one of my bartenders. All I needed to do was give him a quick glance and he backed away. Then the girl she was with opened her eyes wide, whispering something to my sinful treat before taking a step further away in obvious fear.

Very slowly Sophia turned her head, locking eyes with mine. She wore a smile that surprised me, as if she'd set out to track me down.

Perhaps we were playing a game of cat and mouse.

Only the girl had no idea what she'd gotten herself in the middle of.

Because as of right now, she belonged to me.

I would teach her a lesson she wouldn't soon forget. She shouldn't start something she had no intentions of following through.

The evil man inside of me had no intentions of playing by the rules. I would take what I wanted.

Tasting her.

Teasing her.

Fucking her.

Let anyone try to stop me.

I dared them.

CHAPTER 4



S ophia

“Mine.”

I could still hear his harsh yet sensual whisper, the promise made that had created a flurry of butterflies. He and his family had left the restaurant soon after he'd returned to the table after my father had grilled him, our soldiers removing the perpetrators before the police had arrived. The horror of what I'd been through was terrible, but my mind had remained on Mattia and his promise. I'd been left in a silly blur of thoughts and desires. It was crazy but I'd turned the moment into the most intense fantasy possible.

How many times had my father harangued me about how Mattia had come to my rescue and if I'd promised him anything? My secret had kept me sane over the last year.

I took a deep breath, tingling from the way he was looking at me, the hunger he couldn't hide. He'd shooed away two handsome men, the anger evident in his eyes. Mr. Possessive.

It was almost as if he was stalking me, even though this was his bar.

Oppressive.

The power in the room was stifling, so much so my throat threatened to close. I was used to being around dominating men who enjoyed lording it over women. They always wanted their women terrified of what they could do. That was the way

my father had controlled his brooding roost and the men who served under him.

I had no intention of giving anyone in the club the satisfaction, especially Mattia.

Even if the thought of being owned by him was deliriously tempting. I tried to my best to ignore him, turning away and holding my breath.

Yet I felt him, his powerful aura sending electric charges through every muscle, his hard stare easily unraveling my resolve. How many nights over the past year had I lain awake thinking about him? Hungering for him? Wanting him to be my first?

How many times had I pleased myself in the shower while images of him remained in the forefront of my mind? The sinful thoughts I had were appalling, something good Catholic girls shouldn't have.

Bullshit.

There wasn't a man in Paris who could compare to Mattia's broad shoulders and sculpted arms, powerful legs and a face chiseled out of stone. He was even more gorgeous than I remembered, so much so I found it difficult to breathe. I dared allow a quick glance down his muscular legs, my nipples aching from the sight of the thick bulge between his legs. I could tell he was long and thick, so large I would be filled completely. How I wanted to wrap my lips around his wide girth, sucking until he erupted in my throat.

Yes, I was a very bad girl.

The way he'd been looking at me was captivating, not just undressing me with his eyes but telling me in no uncertain terms that he'd already captured a part of me.

However, my stomach was in knots, the butterflies I'd experienced walking in turning into a swarm. I was lightheaded, trying to keep my composure when I realized far too late that I had no idea what I was doing. He stood a few feet away, studying me as if trying to determine why I'd be so bold as to enter the lair of a beast.

“My God. He won’t take his eyes off you,” Celeste said from beside me. “Just wow.” She took the second shot, her body trembling. When she eased the glass to the bar, she whistled under her breath. “He is even more gorgeous up close.”

I dared snag another glance over my shoulder, tingling all over. “Yes. He’s perfect.” I’d told no one about what had occurred at the party a year before, including Celeste. I couldn’t risk the single secret I’d kept for myself to get out to anyone.

“For what?” When I didn’t answer, she huffed. “You aren’t serious.”

“Why not? I don’t want to remain a virgin any longer.”

“Girl, I know he’s handsome and all you’ve done is fantasize about him, but you can tell he’s deranged.”

“Deranged,” I repeated. “That makes him that much more forbidden.”

“What are you doing, Sophia, seriously trying to attract his attention?” She moved closer, glaring at me. “Cause it’s working.”

I slowly slanted my gaze, dragging my tongue across my lips. “Absolutely. I’m taunting him. I heard it’s hotter sex when you’re considered enemies.”

“Oh. My God.”

“What?” I challenged, tilting my head and enticing him even more by dragging my fingers down the side of my neck. Of course he was watching everything I did, which was exactly what I wanted.

The one time I’d mentioned how cute I thought Mattia was had landed me a black eye from my father. It had been the first time he’d hit me. If he knew I was here, he’d likely disown me but I didn’t care.

“Girl, that crush you have on him isn’t something your father is going to approve of.”

“Who says it matters to me any longer? I’m an adult.” I darted him a glance, purposely licking my bottom lip. I could tell he

was watching my every move, trying to figure out what I was doing inside his precious club. I hadn't told her about my father's plans or mine for that matter.

"Oh, no, you don't. We need to leave before it's too late. Please. I don't want you to get hurt. He's not good enough for you." She tugged at my arm and I jerked it away. "I can't let you do this."

Shrugging, I laughed softly, exaggerating the sound. "Leaving is not going to happen. Trust me. And he's perfect for what I want."

"Girl. Use a dating service."

I laughed, shaking my head because I knew she was serious. "I deserve a real man."

"That's really why we're here. Isn't it? You're crazy. Your brother will kill you or him. Is that what you want?"

"Enzo is a pig and he can try, but as I said earlier, I'm not a little girl any longer." What she didn't understand was that by engaging in something highly carnal, I would foil my father's plans, especially if he wanted to sell off my virginity as well. Fuck him. This wasn't the nineteen-seventies any longer. I planned on having a career and choosing the man I spent the rest of my life with.

Mine...

Mattia's words lingered in my mind. What if the man had been serious? I chewed on my lower lip, weighing the odds. His father wouldn't stand for it either. I had nothing to worry about.

"Well, that man has plans for you and I don't like it one bit."

As if I didn't know. "Relax, Celeste. I know what I'm doing." There were so many things about Mattia that were powerful, including the way he captured a room the moment he walked in. I'd sensed his presence the second he'd arrived on the landing, studying me as I hoped he would do. I'd even gathered a slight whiff of his incredible masculine scent, his cologne entirely different than every other male specimen in

the room. Yes, the thought of danger prickled the back of my mind, but I refused to allow that to traumatize me.

It wasn't very often a member of another crime syndicate willfully entered onto the territory of another unless under duress or because of a business discussion. I knew the protocol, had been indoctrinated into the understanding that the only place for women inside the organization was in bed or birthing children.

While I didn't mind the sex part, I refused to be used as a pawn for political gain. I'd rather run away than be married to some scumbag from another *famiglia* in Italy. All the boys were fat pigs with no sex appeal. I cocked my head, turning my body toward him.

Except for Mattia.

He was even more stunning the closer he came, the few years of aging adding additional chiseled features, creating sensual shadow lines on his already gorgeous face.

He didn't blink, remaining completely quiet as he inched closer. But I didn't need for him to speak to know what he was thinking behind his dark eyes. They had filthy sin tangling in their luminance.

"Are you honestly serious about this?" Celeste asked from beside me.

"Yes. I'm giving myself a birthday present." Something dark and scandalously alluring was filtering through my system, as if the dangerous aspect he exuded was the perfect aphrodisiac. All the rational about why I shouldn't want him was tossed out the door just from the way he was looking at me.

"Are you out of your mind?" She tugged on my arm and I laughed.

"Maybe so. Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. I'm certain he'll keep me right here." I took a step closer to the man and tilted my head, searching his eyes. Then I took a sip of my drink, waiting to see what he'd do.

Every movement methodical, he took the glass from my hand, placing it on the bar then wrapping his fingers around mine.

Everything about him was authoritative. What I found fascinating was that instead of gazing down my body with lust in his eyes, he kept his heated gaze locked onto my eyes. The moment he touched my skin, a powerful jolt of electric current skittered through every cell and muscle, exploding in my core.

It left me an intoxicated mess, which was a complete shock, even more than that I didn't try to pull away from him. His smirk turned into a welcome smile, his eyes becoming hooded as he pulled me closer.

"Eric," he called to the bartender. "See that Ms. Lazarro's friend is well taken care of."

"Yes, sir."

As he pulled me further away from Celeste, her surprised gasp gave me another tingling sensation of jitters. I'd forgotten how powerful he was. Standing this close left me feeling more angst than I'd anticipated, my pulse racing.

He remained quiet, parting the ways with nothing but his prowess as he led me to the smaller dancefloor. While the music was the same, the lights pulsing in time with the heady beat, suddenly there was no one else on the floor except for the two of us. I'd kept track of him over the years, the reasons entirely personal. He was beautiful and dangerous, so much so I was thrown by my attraction to him.

When we were in the middle of the dancefloor, he regarded me in my entirety, allowing his eyes to cascade ever so slowly down the length of me. While he was definitely memorizing every inch, he wasn't creepy about doing so even though his gaze held an air of ownership. That wasn't anything unusual given the type of families we'd grown up in.

However, there was something more predatory about his look, as if he'd contemplated this for years.

The music was fast paced but it was obvious he had no intention of following the beat or anything else for that matter. He slipped his hand behind my neck, his hold possessive as he pulled me close. He stood several inches taller than I was even in my heels, the scent of his aftershave more exotic than

anything I'd had the joy of inhaling. I remained lightheaded, but I refused to allow him to know he had any kind of effect on me.

I placed my hand against his chest, pressing with just enough force I sensed his amusement. I wasn't certain what to expect from the man. While his picture was all over the internet, often seen with one or two beautiful women on his arms, sometimes on yachts or in fabulous restaurants, I'd noticed something interesting about him.

The man never smiled.

It was as if there was no light to his darkness, no ability to leave the disturbing business he attended to every day. Maybe that's why I'd been drawn to him in the first place, a true understanding of what our lives were like.

Structured.

Obedient.

Practiced.

Orchestrated.

There were dozens of terms I could use, but the point remained the same; we had only so much control over our lives. What I'd come to realize and finally accept was that my father might be able to manipulate where I went to school and the man I married, but he couldn't regulate the passion I enjoyed.

I wanted something all to myself, my choosing and my decision and at this moment, there was nothing my father could do about it.

This was likely my one chance to back out, leaving without following through with my plan. The girl from a year ago would have fled, hiding under the covers.

Not this woman, the one who'd grown so much in a year.

This was exactly where I wanted to be.

With a man who'd already claimed me as his own.

CHAPTER 5



*S*ophia

Sex.

The thought of him ravaging me ignited a fire.

Did the muscular man who slipped his other arm around my waist have any understanding of why I was here? Or was he used to women falling all over him?

Mattia swung me from one side of the small dancefloor to the other, devouring me with his eyes. I continued to tingle all over given how in tune he was to the wild music, but I sensed his need increasing with every passing minute. In his dark suit he appeared regal, but I detected a twisted streak in him similar to the one I had in me. As the electricity crackled, I could swear others in close proximity were affected, struggling to keep breathing normally.

The dance became more passionate as the seconds dragged into minutes. Suddenly there was no one else in the room, barely any sound whatsoever. There was only the two of us and our toxic needs, desires that could eventually land us in hot water. I doubted either one of us cared at this point.

He spun me around in several circles, studying me so intently he didn't blink a single time. I knew better than others that he was a cold-blooded killer with ice in his veins. From what I'd heard, he was a man who'd been born without a conscience. Perhaps our connection was unholy, what I had planned truly

sinful in the eyes of God, but he was someone who could understand my needs and the horrors of growing up in a family where every boy was turned into a vile man. Maybe that's one reason I'd gravitated toward him.

I'd heard all the rumors, the terms Satan and the devil reincarnated used by all the people in town, often the only thing they could talk about. As if my brother was any different, both damaged creatures and products of fathers who were monsters.

The pulsing lights changed color, the dark red adding a seductive feeling to the empty floor. I gripped his shoulder, moving with him as he danced perfectly in time to the beat, shocked when he dipped me seconds later, holding me in place before lowering his body against mine. The move was so unexpected my breath was stolen, something that could be considered romantic if I didn't know better. He was testing me, pushing my boundaries just like I was doing to him.

When he jerked me back into position, I dared accept the challenge, taking my time brushing my fingers down his chest. For some reason, that's the moment I reminded myself that I'd never been serious with a boy, at least not in the ways I'd seen on television and in the movies. I was out of my element, suddenly uncertain of my moves.

His chest rose and fell as his breathing became more erratic, his nostrils flaring as he attempted to take deep breaths. I kept my head tilted, clamping my fingers around his shirt. Then I dared to allow myself another touch, sliding my index finger past the opening from one button on his shirt to another. The second the tip touched his skin, the end was seared, another jolt of current slamming into my system.

He lowered his head, his lips dangerously close. My pulse raced. When he fisted my hair, pulled my head at an awkward angle, I could tell he was searching for any fear. I had none. I pursed my lips, rising onto my tiptoes until I managed to press our lips together.

"My little flower is perfect," he whispered. Then he captured my mouth, crushing his body against mine. The feel of his

throbbing cock sent a wave of tingles dancing down the backs of my legs. Being in his arms was exactly as I remembered, his hold remaining powerful. Unable to breathe, I moaned into the kiss as he pressed my lips open, his tongue finding mine.

No one had ever called me perfect. I swooned in his hold, cognizant that it seemed all time stopped, the air surrounding us dense, the scent of sex all around. He dominated my tongue, sweeping his back and forth as he ground his hips slowly. Then just as the incredible moment had begun, he pulled away by a few inches.

“Is that what you wanted, princess? A reminder of what we’ve already shared?” he asked, the gravelly sound sending a rumble straight to my toes.

“I... you think you know me.”

“Don’t I?”

He pulled away, lifting my arm over my head and spinning me in a full circle before yanking me against him again.

“You don’t know a thing about me.”

“I know that you’re beautiful, forbidden, and that you shouldn’t be here.”

“But often the forbidden fruit is the sweetest.”

He smiled, his eyes now completely hooded. “You’re right. I am curious, princess. Why come to my club?”

“Because it’s the best in town.”

“There are plenty of others that you would have found enjoyable.” He crowded my space, taking deep breaths.

I couldn’t stop tingling, my heart racing from being so close to him. “I do what I want, Mattia. This is where I selected to come.”

“Ah, including coming into the club of a known enemy. Are you a danger junkie perhaps?”

Laughing, I had a sudden urge to kiss him. “No, do I need to be around you?”

He shook his head slightly. “You are certainly in a dangerous position being here by yourself. Aren’t you aware that there are predators in the room?”

“Does that include you?”

When he nipped my earlobe, I couldn’t stop shivering. “Yes, it does, princess.”

“Does that mean you’re going to hurt me?”

As he pulled away, he lowered his gaze to my throat. “I already told you what I intended a year ago. Or did you forget that I saved your life.”

“Is that what you want me to remember, Mattia? That you were a hero or that you laid claim to me?”

“What if I told you both?”

“Then I’d call you an arrogant bastard. You can’t own me.”

“I can do anything I want. Maybe it’s best if you leave before it’s too late.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

He cupped my face, tilting his head as he brushed his fingers back and forth. “Then I’d call you a woman who had no understanding of the lifestyle we live, which I find difficult to believe.”

“You don’t know me very well at all, Mattia.”

“Perhaps I don’t. However, I do know you’re very beautiful, Sophia. Are you aware of the kind of effect you have on men?”

“No one has called me beautiful before.”

“Then everyone who knows you is a fucking fool.”

I suddenly felt beautiful around him, so much so I could feel the warmth between my legs drifting up to my stomach. Everything about him was warm and inviting, allowing me to feel something real and incredible for the first time in my life.

Other than just pain and anxiety.

As I bit back a moan, he rubbed the palm of his hand up and down my back, pressing my hips tightly against him. When he slid his fingers under my thigh, lifting and pushing my leg against his, I took a series of shallow breaths. He was everything I'd fantasized about.

I gasped involuntarily, which finally brought a dark chuckle from his throat. "Be careful, princess. I've been called the devil for more than one reason."

"Heat I can handle. I can also handle what you have to offer."

"Who says I'm offering anything?"

"Aren't you?" I purred. "The use of the term 'mine' is very possessive. Were you just playing a game?"

He lifted a single eyebrow, yanking me closer until he was able to grind his hips back and forth. The feel of his massive throbbing cock pulsing against my stomach kept the butterflies tickling my system. "If I play, I play to win."

"I'm not a prize nor am I a toy."

The rush of desire was stripping away my ability to think clearly, so much so that I almost found the strength to push myself away from him. When I stiffened, hating the fact my nipples were aching to the point I was left breathless, his grip on the back of my neck tightened.

"Did you come here to tease me, princess, flaunting all the things that a man like me shouldn't have or did your father send you with a message? Did you finally share with him what I said to you as a good little girl would do, especially after saving your life from some very bad men?"

I laughed, surprised he would think that way. "Why would I share our secret? I'm not my father's puppet and never will be, and I am most certainly not a good girl. I do things that I want when I desire."

"Interesting. By all rights, I should toss you from my building."

"I think you'd regret that after I came all this way to see you."

He seemed amused at my comment, studying me intently. “Be careful tempting a bad man, princess. You’re far too vulnerable to know where that would lead.”

“If you’re trying to scare me, it’s not working.” I rolled a single finger down the side of his neck, noticing what appeared to be the tail end of a scar. I could only imagine how many he had after all the battles he’d found over the years.

His laugh, just like his booming, deep voice sent a shower of velveteen shivers all the down the backs of my legs. As he dug his fingers in my skin, keeping me crowded close, I was thrown by how many tingles remained furrowing inside. I wasn’t usually rocked by any man, including those with gorgeous bodies.

“I wouldn’t attempt to scare you, Sophia. You’re a very intelligent woman. You’re also completely aware of who I am and what I can do, which is why I’m more than curious as to why you stepped foot inside my club. Perhaps you’re only taking me up on my offer.” His growl was deep and throaty.

Why did it feel like I was suddenly a very tiny mouse, and he was a panther lurking in the shadows?

“Can’t a girl enjoy herself on her birthday weekend?”

His entire face lit up as if realizing what I was telling him. “One entire year ago I made you a pledge. I always make good on my promises, Sophia, even if they could be destructive. However, it’s best if you walked away. I’m telling you this because I care about you. You have one chance to leave, or I’ll make good on the deal I made you.”

“I didn’t know you offered anything. I thought you always took what you wanted.”

The way his nostrils flared kept explosive heat corroding every inch of me. “You do know me better than I understood. You are correct.”

“But as I told you before, I make my own decisions.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “You are quite the naughty little girl. Aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to find out? What if I don’t choose to leave?”

He narrowed his eyes, taking several ragged breaths. “Then you’ll be under my control for the remainder of the evening, obeying my every command. After that, your entire world as you’ve experienced it will change. It may not happen overnight, but there will be no turning back. You will belong to me.”

“A bird in a gilded cage. I’m not interested in going from one to another.”

“Do you think you’ll have a choice?”

“Don’t we all have choices?” I could tell I continued to amuse him. I doubted he was used to a strong woman standing up for herself, especially one so young.

“I know you know the answer to that, Sophia. We live in a jaded world of wealth and power, but our choices are limited.”

“But you chose me.”

As his nostrils flared, a low rumble formed deep in his throat. “You’re correct. I did.”

“The question is. Do you think you can handle me?”

“As I said cautioned before, be careful. This is your last warning, Sophia. I meant what I said last year.”

“I’m not leaving.”

The tension between us was palpable and when I licked my lips, I heard another distinct growl, the darkness enveloping it unlike anything I’d ever heard. He was doing it on purpose, trying to scare me off. He had no idea I didn’t scare that easily. However, I’d crossed a line that couldn’t be undone.

“As you wish.” He grabbed my jaw, digging his fingers into my cheek. “But you won’t go home to Daddy and ask for his protection.”

“I assure you that my father wouldn’t provide it. I mean nothing to him.” I could tell my comment caught him by surprise.

“Then perhaps you and I have more in common than I believed. Now, what can I do to make the special occasion something you’ll remember for many years to come?”

I thought about his question then laughed as I swiveled my hips, sliding my fingers down the length of his chest. “Perhaps I enjoy dancing with the devil.”

There was something primal about the way he continued looking at me, as if he would devour me whole if offered the chance.

“To suggest that you enjoy engaging in reckless and immoral behavior surprises me.”

“Why? Because you still believe I’m a little girl?”

He fisted my hair, forcing my head to tilt. Then he lowered his until his heated breath skipped across my skin. “I never said anything of the kind, princess. I’m simply allowing you a way out before it’s too late.”

“Are you threatening me, Mattia?”

“Does it seem like I’m threatening you?” He lowered his head even more until our lips were dangerously close. His were voluptuous, the pulses of light illuminating how rosy they were in color. I hated to admit it but I was mesmerized by the man, my heart skipping several beats from being in his arms. “I’ll give you an unknown truth, princess. I’ve done many terrible things in my life but threatening a beautiful woman isn’t one of them. I make decisions that rarely please everyone.”

“What about me? Do you long to please me?” I rose onto my tiptoes as I slid the palm of my hand along his chest, rolling my fingers behind his neck until I was able to tangle them in his hair. I was struck by how soft and thick it was, adding to the breathless moment.

He brushed his lips across mine before taking an exaggerated deep breath. Every sound he made held a hint of a husky growl, the sound something only I could hear. Then he brushed his lips across mine before rolling them across my jaw

to my ear. The dark whisper was more than just a promise of things to come.

It was a breathtaking statement that would create fantasies for years to come.

“More than you know. However, you will do exactly as I say, sweet princess. You’ll either be very obedient or I’ll take you over my knee.”

“I’m not a bad girl.” The thought of being pulled over his knee for a firm spanking was as exciting as it was ridiculous. Who did he think he was to suggest something so blasphemous?

“I beg to differ,” he growled before darting the tip of his tongue into the shell of my ear, creating a series of goosebumps. “I won’t be gentle, but I will leave you breathless.”

As he captured my mouth again, I arched my back, pressing my chest against his. He thrust his tongue inside, taking full control of my body as well as the situation. My pussy ached, the quiver creating wetness and heat between my legs. There was no doubt he’d gathered a scent of wanton desire, a need burning so brightly that I was throwing all caution to the wind. I wanted this.

I wanted him.

To kiss me like the savage he was.

To taste me as no man had ever done before.

To hold me close, pretending that he would never let me go.

To fuck me relentlessly, ignoring the warning signs.

And to steal a small part of my soul.

As he held me, the entire rest of the world faded away. There was just the two of us and the fall from grace into a moment of kindred, filthy sin.

CHAPTER 6



“Did you ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?”

—The Joker

Mattia

The question was almost rhetorical, something I’d heard in the background several times during the course of doing business over the years. I’d never thought much about it until now.

Sophia was certainly no longer a little girl, but the reason she was here was yet to be determined. Very few people had shocked me over the years, but she’d certainly managed to do so.

Granted, I was no fool. Dancing with the devil could get us both killed.

The air of peace between our two families was predicated by keeping our distance from each other. What I had in the back of my mind wasn’t doing either. In fact, it was fanning the flames that would ultimately lead to a massive explosion.

However, if I played it right, perhaps I could gain more control in my endeavor to take over the regime from my father. The thought was far too delicious.

And evil.

But that's what I was, a soulless and very selfish man, at least according to the few women I'd dated in the past. Still, the game had to be handled carefully. There was no reason to cause additional blood to rain in the streets unless absolutely necessary.

As I crushed Sophia against me, she moaned into the kiss and I captured the sound, my cock rock hard and throbbing. She was dazzling up close, entirely different than I remembered even from just a year before. She'd seemed sweet and innocent, her attire lovely but covering almost every inch of her. Tonight she was a true vixen, a seductress who acted as if she knew what she was doing. However, I could sense her vulnerability, enough so I would need to temper my actions.

The look she'd created for the evening was what every fantasy was made of. But it wasn't anything like the young woman I'd met before, a girl with wide, innocent eyes and a verve for life, music, and all things artistic. That much I'd discovered about her, a budding flower in a world of aging men who already had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.

Where life was harsh to most members of the Five Families, she was fresh and untouched, a commodity in our world that should be kept under lock and key. She was a tool to be used in the vilest methods and I was the man to do it.

Now I was sounding more like my ancient father. Arranged marriages were typical in the Five Families, an abominable tradition that the younger generation had plans of eradicating.

One day.

However, our marriage would add great power, something I couldn't ignore. Except the timing was all wrong. At this point, the only thing I could entertain was keeping her writhing underneath me and in my protected watch once I allowed her to leave.

The taste of her was far too sweet, a small part of me still arguing with my decision to allow her to stay. What I had in mind was degenerate by most standards and would take significant thought. She was far too young for marriage even

at nineteen. However, she certainly wasn't too young for a single taste.

Goddamn, I was a bad man. Could I do that to her?

Maybe there was a strange protective side of me with regard to her, although I had no idea why. She had a brother, although Enzo didn't make it a point to keep her protected from the likes of me. Why was she here alone with only a friend instead of her usual bodyguards?

If I had to guess, I'd say the former innocent flower had lost some of her virtuousness. That made the thought of adding to her debauchery that much sweeter.

The feel of having Sophia in my arms was far too enticing, boosting both my testosterone and my adrenaline levels. The thought of driving my cock deep into her tight pussy kept me on the edge of something close to what I'd call sanity. If I had any humanity inside of me, I'd turn her away on her heel, sending her home like a good girl.

But I wasn't that kind of man.

Why she'd dared step into my lair remained to be seen but who was I to refuse a beautiful gift? We were both legal and knew the score with our respective families.

Even if she was completely forbidden.

I cupped both sides of her face, rubbing my thumbs back and forth across her chiseled cheeks, marveling in how her scent had already stained my skin. As she clung to me, I could feel far too many eyes on us. I'd never tasted a single woman inside my club, preferring to separate business and what little pleasure I allowed myself. With Sophia, the aspect of everything being forbidden was too delicious to ignore.

While the thought of stripping her in front of my guests and having my way with her suited the kinky side of me, I refused to share any aspect of my possession or my good fortune with prying, lust-filled eyes. Seconds later, I broke the kiss, issuing a single husky sound before grabbing her hand and leading her off the dancefloor.

“Where are we going?” she asked once I’d led her to a private hallway leading to the rooftop vodka bar and lounge, which happened to be closed for the night.

“Wherever I say you’re going, princess.”

“Don’t call me a princess.”

“I’ll call you anything I want.” I headed for the elevator, pushing her inside. Leaving was preferable but there was still business to attend to, another meeting in little more than an hour. Business before pleasure.

Or perhaps during.

She held her head high as I pushed my way through the crowd, acting as if the eyes watching her meant nothing. She’d been trained well, taught to perform like a dancing seal. That added to the longing to strip away her innocent façade, allowing her to taste pure sin.

The club was situated in an ancient building that had once belonged to Roman soldiers, the exquisite architecture allowing for various styles of dance and entertainment clubs within the several story building. It was a signature business for the family, making more money than I’d originally believed was possible. It also served as one of our many legitimate businesses that catered to helping us launder money from our more profitable trades.

As soon as we were inside the elevator, she backed against the steel wall, studying me more relentlessly than before.

I pressed the button then shoved my hands in my pockets, taking two strides toward her, stopping only when she pushed her hand against my chest. She glanced down at my jacket, a moment of concern entering her eyes. When she rolled her fingers through the substance on my jacket, I took and held my breath.

“Blood,” she whispered, blinking rapidly. “You killed someone else. Didn’t you?”

Else. The fact she’d witnessed three necessary murders was yet another reminder that our lives were already intertwined.

“It’s part of my job, Sophia. You already know that.”

“Inside your club?”

“Wherever it is necessary. Tell me. Are you afraid of me because of what you witnessed in the past?”

“Should I be?”

I smirked, chuckling under my breath. “Absolutely but I don’t think you are. In fact, I think the thought of being with me excites you.” I rubbed my knuckle across her chin then took her hand, rubbing her bloodstained fingers across my jacket. Her slight smile was a beautiful reward.

“You are one arrogant bastard.”

“Absolutely, which is another reason you’re attracted to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re used to getting everything you want. Aren’t you?”

Her question made me laugh. “Isn’t that what being rich and powerful is about?”

She shrugged then tossed her long curls over her shoulder, glancing away as if bored. Or as if she believed she was in control of the situation. She was the only woman who’d dared act like I wasn’t in charge, which was another reason I found myself enamored with her. Nothing about me or my club impressed her. That was a powerful aphrodisiac.

“Not necessarily,” she said quietly as the elevator finally began to make its ascent.

“Then what does it mean to you?”

She wrinkled her nose, thinking about my question briefly. “It means being kept in a gilded cage with a crystal bubble surrounding it. A location where all the ugly people can bask in the beautiful opulence not realizing that with one rock tossed, their precious, protected world would be shattered, death for the protected bird possible depending on the size and velocity of the stone thrown.”

“Wow. For someone so young, you’re completely jaded. And here I thought you were protected from the dangerous,

unseemly aspects of the business our parents are in.” I planted one hand on the wall beside her turned head and she was instantly uncomfortable, her breath hitching.

“Then you thought wrong.”

“What a shame.”

“I’m a realist, Mattia. Just like you. Well, if you aren’t then you’re a fool and somehow, I don’t see you that way, more of an astute professional who doesn’t allow anything to get past him.”

“Quite a compliment. I would think you’d consider me a nightmare, Sophia. Isn’t that what your father has told you about my entire family?”

“Don’t be silly. My father called you a worthless piece of human flesh.” Her sparkling laughter lit up the entire dense space, her teasing mannerisms keeping the beast inside very hungry. He would need to be fed soon or I wouldn’t be able to guarantee control of that side of my sadistic personality.

“To be expected. However, did you know our respective fathers were once close friends?”

Her eyes shadowed in momentary confusion. “No. That I didn’t know.”

“Yes, the best of friends. Then everything changed. Now you have me curious as to what you see me as, sweet princess.” I couldn’t help but tease. I was enjoying the bantering as much as the company. Perhaps because I was used to being around flakes or thugs far too often in my life.

“A man who’s hard of hearing since I’ve told you more than once I don’t like being called a princess,” she pounced, giving me a hard look.

“And you’ve already determined that I don’t follow anyone’s rules. Besides, princess. As of this moment you belong to me.”

“Not a chance.” As soon as she tried to sidestep me, I grabbed her wrist, shoving her against the cold steel.

“Not so fast. You aren’t going anywhere.”

Her mouth twisted in frustration, but her eyes continued to flash total desire.

“It’s obvious you’re extremely entitled. You also expect the worst in people, never believing there could be at least some good in this world. You hate the person you’ve become, which is why you never smile. And you long for an out, something spectacular to take you away from what you consider to be a prison.”

“An interesting analysis.” She had an uncanny way of seeing right through the bullshit. She laughed again as if realizing she’d caught me off guard.

“I’m never wrong.”

The woman had already pushed several of my buttons, my hunger peaking.

I waited as the elevator pinged, allowing my gaze to drift to her luscious lips and back. She knew I was studying them, taking the opportunity to drag the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip. I don’t know why I expected her to be fearful of me, but I detected none of that, just eagerness. Another surprise.

When the doors opened, I took a step back, allowing her to move forward. She glanced into the gardenlike setting, pressing her hand across her lips. I could see excitement in her eyes. I placed my hand against the small of her back, easing her onto the roof.

“This is beautiful,” she said absently.

“One of my favorite locations in the club.” I pressed the button, allowing the elevator doors to close. Then I shoved my key into the lock, twisting it. I refused to allow anyone to bother us, not when I had the very prize I’d admired from afar.

The entire roof was covered in various trellises, all adorned with greenery and twinkling lights, flowering plants and vines. On one end there was a massive stone fireplace, various standing heaters located throughout the expansive space, tables and couches placed in intimate settings surrounding a bar situated in the middle of the roof. There was a small

dancefloor, music piped in from every direction. But tonight, it was silent, only the sounds of the city as background noise.

There were also various areas covered by a roof, the views just as incredible, the location serving as a focal point for more sinful acts of kink. Her eyes gravitated toward it and I could tell her curiosity was piqued. Then she drifted to the steaming oversized hot tub in the middle of the decked portion off to the side.

“A sauna. Of course you would have a sauna. Why not?” she cooed as she walked the perimeter, the water warm enough steam rose into the crisp night air. She bent down near the controls, biting her lower lip then pressing several buttons. Her laugh as the bubbles started, lights drifting from one vibrant color to the next forced me to grin. Where had she been kept all this time, a convent? Her reactions reminded me of a child on Christmas morning, dazzled by the lights on the tree, the presents underneath.

“A very sensual end to an evening, I would assume.”

“I wouldn’t know, princess. I don’t indulge in entertaining myself inside my own club.”

My cock continued to throb, which pushed my needs to the surface. Tamping back my sadistic nature was going to be next to impossible.

“Then how do you entertain yourself?” she asked, studying me intently.

“Would it surprise you to learn that I work eighteen-hour days?”

“Very little about you surprises me, Mattia.”

That sounded like a delicious challenge.

I watched from afar as she flitted through the space, touching almost everything, darting glances at me every few seconds. It was as if I was seeing the facility through her eyes, enjoying every moment. I shoved my hands into my pockets, heading to the bar as she continued her exploration.

I removed my jacket, tossing it on top of the bar, taking my time removing my tie as well. After unbuttoning my shirt partway down my chest, then the sleeves, I rolled the material past my elbows. She continued studying me, concentrating on my forearms. They were both covered in intricate ink, tattoos that had initially been meant to do nothing more than piss off my father.

She gave me a nod of approval and I laughed. The girl truly believed she had some measure of control. I grabbed two glasses, selecting a wine, blood red in color, pouring as she continued her tour.

When she finished near the X cross, running her hand over the smooth wood, I could hear her murmuring in Italian.

“Does the thought of being tied down terrify you?” I asked.

“Not necessarily. Almost everyone is tethered at some point in their lives. Aren’t they?”

“How astute, *bellissima gattina*”

“Now I’m a kitten. Me-ow. Just be careful. I do have claws.” She laughed, the sound exactly as what I’d remembered attracting me in the restaurant a year before. My cock was aching painfully, the need to thrust it deep inside increasing.

She studied the various implements kept inside two cabinets, and I could swear she was shivering as she realized what they were for. Then she turned toward me, dancing to unheard music, her smile holding another round of mischief. I brought the glasses of wine from behind the bar, placing them on one of the tables. She sauntered forward, continuing to tease me by sliding the tip of her finger around the rim of the glass. Seconds later, the reverb from the musical notes she’d created caused another lilting laugh.

“Very nice,” I told her.

“You’d be surprised what other talents I have.”

“Are you toying with me, Sophia?”

Everything about her was seductive, which she was doing on purpose. Still unsure why, I remained quiet as she took a sip,

shaking my head when she closed her eyes. After returning the glass to the table, she took two steps backward.

“Maybe so. Somehow, I don’t think you mind. Now you have me curious. What makes you happy, Mattia?”

“Power.”

“Exactly what I thought you’d say.” She spun in a full circle, her arms over her head. The throbbing had surpassed discomfort, pushing to the point of pain.

“What makes you happy, little princess?”

“Control.”

“Of which you have none around me.”

“You don’t understand that women always have the control whether men choose to believe it or not,” she half whispered then turned toward the street, moving quickly toward the edge of the roof, her laughter floating into the air. While there was a wall of stone surrounding the perimeter, iron railings keeping anyone from climbing on the roof’s edge, that didn’t stop her from stepping on the border and leaning over.

I shook my head as I studied her, marveling in the way the stream of moonlight added a stunning sheen to her long curls. She might be of Italian heritage, but she’d always had a hint of copper in her hair as if kissed by the afternoon sun. She leaned over even more, throwing out her arms as she lifted her head toward the night sky.

What the hell was I thinking? As if I was some kind of poet. I moved behind her, curious as to what she thought she was doing. When she released a howl toward the glowing orb, I shook my head. She acted as if she was going to step over the first ledge to the second and my protective nature rushed to the surface.

“Come here, princess,” I commanded.

“I’m enjoying myself.”

“Don’t do something you’ll regret. Remember what I told you earlier. You are required to obey me.”

“Something reckless. Like coming up here with you?” She twisted around to face me, bending backwards and staring up at the stars. Fuck. Her behavior was far too risky. She was doing this on purpose to push my buttons.

“Like tempting fate. Come here. Now.”

She barely glanced at me. I gave her a stern look then issued a growl when she refused to come down. “If you don’t come down, I’ll make good on my promise.”

“Mmm... I’d like to see you try.” She cocked her head then blew me a kiss, laughing as if this was nothing but a game to her. Perhaps she didn’t realize that I was the kind of man who would call her bluff. When I took long strides toward her, she jumped off the platform, racing several feet away.

Exhaling, I took long strides toward her, catching her easily, which had been her intent. When I grabbed her around the waist, she laughed. Until I tossed her over my shoulder.

“Put me down, you bully.”

“I gave you an opportunity to behave, princess. You ignored the rules.”

“Mattia. Put me down.”

I took long strides toward the bar, tugging out a stool then sitting down. When I pulled her over my lap, she gasped, which brought a smile to my face.

“Are you crazy?” she asked, a quaver finally appearing in her voice.

“Yes, I am. If you don’t behave, I’ll pull off my belt.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Like hell I wouldn’t.”

I jerked up her dress, marveling in the fact I had Sophia Lazarro across my thighs, her rounded bottom for my viewing pleasure. As I struggled to remove her matching thong, I took several deep breaths. She was wet, her panties already damp. The fact she was completely aroused kept my cock at full attention.

“What are you doing?”

“Removing your lacy thong. Women should be disciplined on their bare bottoms.” I snapped the thin material from around her ankles, knocking her heels off in the process.

“You are insane!” She pummeled her fists against my legs, which only forced my grin to widen into a huge smile.

“You’ll learn I’m many things, Sophia. That’s what you wanted to find out. Isn’t it? I think you were looking for a firm hand.” I brought my hand down with a sharp crack, the sound penetrating the space around us.

“Don’t!”

“Stop fighting me or your punishment will be much worse.” I brought her panties to my mouth and nose, drinking in her sweet essence. Her fragrance was far too intoxicating, her peaches and spice making me drunk.

After pocketing the treat, I brought my hand down several additional times and she jumped, doing her best to try to break free from my hold.

I refused to allow it, cracking my palm on one side of her bottom then the other, unable to keep from grinning. The act itself was delicious, but the sound made from skin connecting to skin was the sweetest music in the world.

“Let me go!” she pleaded as she ground her body back and forth, adding pressure to my aching cock.

“What were you saying about control?” I shifted in the seat, jerking her even closer. Then I continued the spanking, bringing my hand down in rapid, brutal motions.

“Ouch!”

“Maybe you’ll think twice about ignoring the rules.”

“Fuck you.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. That will come soon enough. That’s what you expected me to do last year. Wasn’t it? You wanted me to take you inside that filthy bathroom, fuck your tight pussy. Perhaps that’s exactly what I should have done.”

As soon as I issued the words, her body tensed. Maybe she was starting to realize she'd played a game she had no chance of winning.

The stream of moonlight allowed me to catch the blossoming color on her bottom as I continued the round of discipline. Heat built across her skin just as it was doing with my hand, my fingers tingling. I couldn't remember when I'd performed such an intimate act with a woman, most of my sexual escapades more sadistic in nature. This was pleasurable in an entirely different way, befitting the strong connection we shared.

As well as the vulnerability she continued to show.

Her moans increased and for a couple of minutes she continued struggling then finally gave up the fight, her arms dangling to the floor. I concentrated on her breathing as I peppered her bottom with one savage smack after another. When she parted her legs, I took a deep breath. She was wet, her desire wafting into my nostrils.

"You're wet, sweet princess. Discipline turns you on."

"You're crazy. Never!" Her attempt at denying it brought another smile to my face. She wiggled again and this time, the friction was almost too much.

A growl erupted from my throat and I rolled the tip of my index finger down the crack of her ass, flicking it back and forth across her clit.

Her moan was ragged and her body jerked into an arc, one hand wrapping around my calf as her entire body trembled.

"Does that feel good, princess?" I whispered, the tone husky.

"I... no. God, no."

"You're lying to me. I don't tolerate lies, Sophia. Your punishment will continue." I slipped the tip just inside her tight channel, my jaw clenching from another wave of desire. She was so wet, explosively hot.

Sophia shifted back and forth, digging her fingers into my leg.

I slipped another finger inside, pumping gently, which wasn't my usual behavior. However, with her, I wanted to take my time. I also had no intentions of hurting her.

At least not yet. She was far too innocent to introduce to my sadistic needs.

My entire body tingled as I spanked her long and hard, indulging in her whimpers.

Seconds later, I gritted my teeth as I pulled my hand free. My fingers were glistening, covered in her juice. As I brought them to my mouth, she twisted her body until she was able to watch what I was doing, the venom in her eyes short lived. She continued to quiver, but as she'd done far too many times in her desire to tease me, she dragged her tongue across the bottom portion of her mouth.

I sucked on my fingers for several seconds, savoring the sweet flavor of her. Then I resumed the spanking. When she flailed her arm, I pulled it against the small of her back, unable to keep the grin from my face.

Her moans increased, the stark whimpers keeping me on edge. I closed my eyes as I finished, allowing another round of filthy images to slide into the forefront of my mind.

"You've had enough, princess." I eased her onto her feet, taking several deep breaths. "Now you know you've danced with the devil in the moonlight. Is that you wanted?"

Every breath she took was ragged, the tension between us completely sexual in nature.

"Tell me, princess. Tell me what you crave."

She shook her head, narrowing her eyes. "I... I want more."

"How much more?"

"All of it."

"You'll need to be more specific, *bellissima principessa*."

"Oh, God."

"God can't help you."

When she lifted her gaze, her lovely eyes piercing mine, I was no longer surprised at the answer.

“I want you to fuck me.”

CHAPTER 7



*S*ophia

What had I just done?

Somehow, I knew I couldn't take it back even if I wanted to.

As I locked eyes with Mattia, a knowing settled in, as if he knew exactly what I was doing. Then I allowed my gaze to fall, noticing the flecks of blood on his crisp white shirt. There was no mistaking the substance. At least he hadn't lied to me.

His jacket had been spotted and stained from blood, the dark coloring of the material unable to hide the stains. Maybe I was used to seeing it more than any human should be. How often had I walked into my father's office only to find blood splattered on his desk or staining the terra cotta tile? The people who kept the mansion clean were used to scrubbing stains, none of the half dozen employees repulsed by the sight of blood or brain matter.

Why it bothered me tonight was beyond me.

Mattia had killed two men to keep me safe.

I fisted my hands, the light breeze keeping goosebumps popped along every inch of skin. Or maybe that was from the look he was giving me. My mouth was dry, the tickling electric sensations reminding me that he'd swiped my panties, shoving them into his pocket. I took a few seconds, enjoying the close-up view of his muscular forearms, the colorful ink accentuating his dangerous persona.

“I want you to fuck me.”

The statement hadn't shocked him. I was certain by the expression on his face, the sensuality crossing his brooding brow. He'd led me into admitting my desires. There was a sense of accomplishment in his smile, as if he was proving he'd always been the one in control.

Maybe he had been. Maybe I was a fool in thinking otherwise.

I'd found the nerve to tell him exactly what I wanted. Was it something I would regret later? Never. He was the perfect man, the only one I wanted to share my gift with. To dance with the devil in the pale moonlight. The words tickled the back of my mind. He was right as to my intention, the meaning perfect.

To do something immoral with full intent.

Yes, that's exactly what I wanted, although I wasn't entirely certain I could go through with it. The ramifications about what this could mean were planted in the back of my mind. The two of us would likely burn in hell.

He rose to his feet and I immediately backed away, trying to control my nerves. Without his jacket, he was even more powerful, oozing danger with every piercing gaze and every dark command. I was still in shock he'd spanked me, although I'd pushed him on purpose, longing to see what he would do. He took a deep breath as he lowered his gaze. Then he shook his head slowly, chuckling as he'd done before. He grabbed his glass of wine, pulling the rim to his lips and gulping almost half the glass.

It was easy to tell I'd unnerved him.

“Undress.”

The single word was said so quietly that it took a few seconds to register.

“What?”

“You heard me, Sophia. Remove your dress. Now.”

Apparently, playtime was over.

“I...” A nervous laugh bubbled past my lips and my stomach was suddenly in knots. As I raked my hand through my hair, I thought about the ramifications of my decision. “I don’t think so.”

“Don’t make me tell you again.”

Mattia DeLuca was many things. Powerful. Dominating. Ruthless.

He was also mesmerizing, his tone of voice almost hypnotic. I was thrown by the effect it had on me, a draw so intense that I couldn’t say no to the man. Swallowing hard, I eased one slender strap of my dress over my shoulder, never blinking.

You did this to yourself. This is what you said you wanted.

Hushing my little voice did no good. I was quivering all over, my brave façade fading. I’d thought alcohol would fuel courage. I was sorely wrong.

His nostrils flared and he finished off his glass of wine, never blinking as he observed from his perch. He was comfortable in his skin, happy in his place of control, even though his joy was ill conceived. When I slipped the other strap over my shoulder, he took a rattled, deep breath.

There was no doubt what he had planned on doing to me, which is exactly what I’d wanted but wasn’t entirely certain I could handle. After I pulled both straps to the sides, I held the dress against my breasts, hating how rapidly my heart was beating. I’d fooled myself into believing I could maintain control.

He would never allow that to happen.

“Drop it.”

His entire demeanor had changed, becoming even darker. I took a few seconds to think about my choices but when he slapped the glass on the table, I tensed, a single moan slipping past my lips.

“You will obey me. That was our agreement.”

Yeah, I’d played with the devil alright and had lost. I allowed the material to slip through my fingers, uncertain what to

expect. I'd never believed myself to be pretty, just an average girl with a gangly body. I hadn't grown breasts until I was sixteen, which had kept me looking much younger than my actual age.

The rush of air he took surprised me but I quickly covered my breasts with one arm.

“Never hide from me, *bellissima principessa*,” he growled, the bulge between his legs swelling as it had done before. Calling me his beautiful princess had an entirely different effect on me. I was swooning inside, my pulse quickening. There was no doubt I was beautiful in his eyes, his shimmering in the twinkling lights from above. “In time, you will learn that our bodies were meant to be together, that the sacrifices made will allow us to thrive where most couples fail. You'll learn to appreciate pain as much as pleasure, the two intertwining until you're uncertain where one begins and the other leaves off. I will show you what ecstasy is about, indulging your darkest needs. And in turn, you will surrender to my commands.”

My mouth was suddenly dry, the flutter of my heart increasing with every passing second. Every muscle was aching, the radical change in my desire for the brutal man something I'd question.

But not now.

Now, I wanted him to teach me.

Taste me.

Train me.

Fuck me.

Oh, God. Was I losing my mind or had destiny always known we'd be together?

He placed his hand on his heart, growling under his breath in such an animalistic way that I was certain he'd ravage me within seconds. When he took a purposeful step toward me, I held my breath. He stopped only inches away, muttering in Italian words that I could barely hear but did.

The most beautiful woman in the world.

A warm flush swept across my jaw, my legs shaking. He moved away from the table, walking around me in a wide arc, the simpleness of his action leaving me trembling to my core.

“Perfezione assoluta e tutta mia.” Utter perfection and all mine.

His words were frank, stated with little inflection but oh-so possessive.

“I don’t belong to anyone,” I told him, twisting my head to try to look into his eyes.

“That’s where you’re wrong. Arms by your sides.”

I swallowed hard then lowered my arm, fisting both hands. I’d never felt so vulnerable in my life, completely exposed for a man I was supposed to hate. But I didn’t. The fascinating truth was I admired him more than I should. He was everything my father wasn’t.

Powerful without being vindictive.

Incredibly handsome even with his scars.

Influential in his savagery.

He was everything a wet dream was made of and then some.

He inched closer, remaining behind me, his hot breath cascading across my shoulders. As he slowly moved my long curls from over my shoulders, I sucked in and held my breath. There was no ability to fight the dancing vibrations or the queasiness in my stomach. I closed my eyes, unable to stop several moans from escaping as he brushed the rough pads of his fingers down both arms, crowding my space.

“You’re nervous, *bellissima principessa*,” he whispered then lowered his head, pressing his lips against the side of my neck.

“Yes.” There was no reason to lie. “I’m...” I couldn’t mutter the words, shame tearing through me, which was ridiculous.

“I have every intention of making you feel so good, my beautiful princess.” He wrapped his hand around my throat, lifting my chin with his thumb as he rubbed his lips back and forth across my cheek.

I was suddenly weak, as if I wouldn't be able to resist any of his charms from now on. I'd surprised him with my needs, a hunger that matched his. As he pushed my head back until it was resting on his shoulder, I gazed into his soulless eyes and allowed myself to fall into the intense abyss of the man. Delirium tore through me, the warmth and heightened longing more intense than I'd anticipated.

When he thrust his tongue inside as he caressed my neck, I eased my hands to his outer thighs, stroking up and down in an aimless fashion. My fingers tingled from the interaction, my mind swiftly drifting into unimaginable dark cravings.

The kiss was all consuming, his tongue sweeping back and forth, the taste of the rich wine filling my senses. How could nothing more than a quiet moment of passion have such a startling effect on me?

Seconds later he pulled away and I heard the rustle of clothes, biting my lower lip and noticing the moment he tossed his shirt aside. Then he issued a series of animalistic sounds before raking his fingernail all the way down my spine to the crack of my ass. After kicking my legs apart, he slid his hand between them and I froze, terrified that I had no clue what the hell I was doing,

I shuddered audibly, tensing as he cupped my mound, allowing his fingers to tease my aching clit.

"My wet baby. You're hungrier than before." His dirty words were enthralling, keeping me on the very precipice of losing what was left of my mind. "Tell me. Do you hunger to have my cock sliding in and out of your tight little pussy? Do you long for me to sully you?" He chuckled after asking the questions then nipped my earlobe.

"Yes." The answer was far too easy to admit.

"Then that's exactly what I'm going to do. On your knees."

His command was not to be denied and I found myself doing exactly what he asked without hesitation. Still shaking. Still uncertain. But the hunger was too significant.

Every sound I heard seemed amplified. The rapid beating of my heart. The traffic and the hard thumping of the club music coming from below. And the sounds as he removed the remainder of his clothes. My nipples were rock hard, the breeze almost painful. I could easily tell he wasn't into romantic interludes or hiding behind the façade of foreplay. Our encounter would be rough and passionate, dirty and sinful. Just like I'd craved.

He was making a point, taking what didn't truly belong to him. Would he use it against me at a later date? Perhaps, but he'd face my possible wrath in doing so.

When he walked in front of me seconds later, the gift of seeing his body completely devoid of clothes left my mind spinning and my mouth watering. I was shocked at the insane sounds coming from my throat, the excitement as I gazed at his thick cock entirely evident. The colorful art continued crisscrossing over one shoulder onto his sculpted chest, the intricate scroll in black and red. I allowed my face to fall to the deep V between his hips, leading to the huge cock already fully aroused.

I was so fearful I whimpered, biting my lower lip before continuing my heated exploration. He had several scars that had been carefully hidden by various tattoos and I knew that all of them had a story, ones I suddenly wanted to hear.

He seemed pleased by my reaction, rubbing his hand against my cheek in a loving manner.

"Aren't you a wild little girl? Where have you been hiding all this time, Sophia?"

"In a prison."

"Mmm... Then I suggest we break you free of the chains keeping you in that gilded cage." He walked closer, wrapping his hand around the base of his cock then tapping it on one of my cheeks then the other. "Now, little princess. Open your mouth."

CHAPTER 8



*M*attia

Destiny.

Fate.

Karma.

Whatever you wanted to call it, that's what had brought us together every single time.

Fuck.

Sophia was everything I'd ever wanted, nothing I should dare taste, yet the single person in my life I refused to do without. Was that the weakness my father had warned me against? Was it the single reason my enemies could find to bring me to my knees? Perhaps, but if I was required to face the devil himself, I would die a happy man.

Sated.

The woman was beautiful, perfect in every way, so voluptuous that I was thrown by her stunning features. She was nothing like I'd remembered, growing into a gorgeous creature.

And all I could think about was fucking her, slathering her porcelain skin with strings of my cum. My beast was dangerously close to escaping. What surprised me as well was the fact my thoughts continued to drift into the understanding that she deserved better than being on top of a rooftop bar, but

there was no chance in hell I could stop what was about to happen.

The moment she wrapped her lips around the tip of my cock, I was certain I was going to lose my load right away. The heat was explosive, the inappropriate longing for her continuing to fester in the back of my mind. I'd gone too far with her already, but God help me, there was no stopping the beast once I got him started. Sophia was exactly what I needed to calm the raging bull inside of me. Did she have idea how dangerous a position we were both in?

I sensed that fueled her as much as it had done for me. As I fisted the back of her hair, I noticed she was keeping her eyes pinned on mine. Was it possible she was looking for praise from a monster?

“That’s it. Relax your throat, princess. Suck me. Take every inch of my cock into that hot mouth of yours.”

When she placed her hands on my thighs, I took a deep breath, staring up at the bright moon. It had been far too long since I'd had wet lips wrapped around my cock. She swiped her tongue back and forth before sliding her hand between my legs, cupping and squeezing my balls.

Her gaze never left me as she sucked, rolling my testicles between her fingers and adding enough pressure I was forced to laugh. Goddamn, the woman was turning me on, more so than any other one had in a long time. Years.

She took another inch then another and I rolled onto the balls of my feet, driving the remainder into the back of her throat. “Such a good girl. My good girl.” My hoarse whisper seemed to keep her turned on, her eyes twinkling in the moonlight. I kept my fingers tangled in her hair but allowed her to pull back, sucking on nothing more than the tip. Then she rolled her tongue down the underside, every sound she made as guttural as mine.

Flashes of light drifted in front of my eyes, every muscle tensing. She was going to drive me insane quickly and I wanted a taste of her. Hell, I craved making her come inside

my mouth almost more than I wanted to thrust my cock deep inside her pussy. When the hell had that ever happened?

The moment she pulled one of my balls into her mouth, my body began to shake from another adrenaline rush. “Fuck. Jesus Christ.” I allowed her to play, shifting to my other testicle, enjoying the soft moans floating from her mouth. Somehow, I knew I wouldn’t be able to take this for much longer.

As the crisp air filled my lungs, the need only intensified. I grabbed both sides of her face, holding her in place as I dropped my head. Then took over control, unable to stop myself from fucking her mouth like a crazed animal.

I heard her gagging sounds and didn’t care, continually stroking her hair as I peered down at her. “That’s it, princess. Relax and breathe through your nose.” When the tip hit the back of her throat, I almost lost my mind. I shifted my hand to the back of her head, holding her in place as her strong jaw muscles clamped around the thick invasion.

Exhaling, I finally pulled back, gasping for air as my control began to slip. I pushed her away gently, refusing to allow myself to take advantage of her hot little mouth. She took several deep breaths, staring at me through hooded eyes and I realized she was the sexiest woman I’d ever had the joy of taming. I couldn’t wait for her to learn how to surrender to every single need.

She swayed back and forth on her knees, staring up at me, her eyes asking for guidance. I wiped my arm across my mouth, craving the taste of her. When I managed to stumble forward, I scooped her into my arms, taking long strides toward the bar.

The moment I lowered her bottom onto the bar, I raked my arm across the surface, sending napkins and drink straws scattering to the floor. Then I eased her across the top, lifting and spreading her legs wide open, leaving her head hanging down on the other side.

She planted her feet on the edge, taking gasping breaths as I rolled my fingers along the insides of her legs. Goosebumps followed my trail of exploration and when I pressed my lips

against her heated skin, she jerked up from the bar, shivering more than she'd done before.

“Stay right where you are, my princess.” I pressed my palms against her thighs, pushing her knees to the bar's surface before blowing across her glistening pussy.

She fisted her hands, gasping for air as I lowered my head. I adored the way she chewed on her bottom lip while her eyelids fluttered from nervousness. Everything about the girl excited me.

Grinning, I planted my hands on either side of her, leaning over even more until I bit down on her lower lip. She squealed from surprise, pushing one hand against my chest. As soon as she did, she issued a strangled moan, digging her fingers into my skin.

“Such a tease. Aren't you?” I growled then slipped my tongue from one side of her jaw to the other before dipping my head over her chest. When I cupped her breast, I let off another series of growls, enjoying her stilted reaction. “You'll learn that's not in your best interest.”

She purposely pursed her lips then raked her hand down my chest, rolling the tip of her finger across my already sensitive slit. I reacted by taking her nipple into my mouth, swishing my tongue back and forth before biting down on the tender tissue.

“Oh,” she whimpered then wrapped her arm around my head, holding me in place.

The taste of her skin was just as sweet as her lips, a hint of peaches mixed with a dash of vanilla. I growled as I sucked, biting down twice before rolling my lips to her other nipple, repeating the brutal action. Then the need to feast on her slickened pussy was too great.

Exhaling, I lifted my head, my chest rising and falling. I studied her face as I rolled my thumb around her clit, delighting in the jarring vibrations slamming through my body.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her breathlessness a powerful draw.

“Feasting on your sweet pussy.”

There was no holding back any longer. I dropped my head, swirling the tip of my tongue around her already hardened bud as I brushed my fingers along her thigh.

She bucked her hips, tossing her head back and forth as I sucked on her tender tissue, the soft purrs she issued driving me crazy. Every sound she made intensified the moment, my mind blown by how incredible it felt having her in my arms.

There was something almost reverent about indulging in her wetness, taking my time lapping up her delicious cream.

If only her daddy could see me now.

I lifted my head briefly so she'd understand exactly what was happening here and that I wasn't playing games.

"Then, my beautiful princess, I'm going to fuck you. After that, you *will* belong to me. Body and soul. After that, I will claim your heart."

"You know that my father won't allow that," she whispered. "He'll kill you first."

The challenge was far too tempting. If my father wanted me to have a bride, I'd be happy to give him one, but it would be my choice. Why not rock the world of the Italian mafia while doing so? "Here's the deal, princess. I might not be able to make good on my promises at this exact point in time, but I meant what I said. You are still mine."

"What does that mean, Mattia? As I told you, I'm not for sale."

"Perhaps not. But I assure you that one day very soon you will become my wife."

CHAPTER 9



*S*ophia

His wife?

That's exactly what he'd meant last year. He'd planned this and if I didn't know better, I'd be forced to think he'd managed to lure me here with some crazy kind of magic. It was ridiculous, but how else could I explain what I'd already known somewhere deep in my heart? What had I done?

Reality check. I refused to be used as a pawn for anyone, including Mattia.

Even if this is exactly what you wanted all along? Even if marrying him would be a million times better than any brutal son of a bitch your father chooses?

I was still shaken, uncertain I could handle the aftermath, but knew Mattia had made up his mind.

Still, the marriage couldn't happen in a million years. My father would start a bloody war in the street before allowing it to go forward. Is that what Mattia had meant last year? Had he already made a deal with my father? Or was this a way of destroying my family once and for all?

Far too many ugly scenarios rushed into the back of my mind including that requiring me to come back to town for a birthday, which wasn't usually treated as such a big deal, was more than out of the ordinary. Had I been lured here? Would my father do that to me?

I stared at Mattia incredulously, certain I hadn't heard him correctly. This was sex, nothing more. I wasn't going to become anyone's wife, least of all a man considered an enemy to my entire family. I'd played into the game. This was partially my fault. Oh, no.

Somehow, I could tell he wasn't kidding.

"Na... No. Not a chance, Mattia." When I tried to climb off the bar, he pushed me down with a hard thud, immediately burying his face in my pussy. Gasping, stars floated in front of my eyes, the feel of his tongue driving into my tight folds unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"Now I taste what belongs to me."

His animalistic sounds were intense, the deep rumble he issued as alluring as the way he was licking me. I was thrown by how powerful the moment was, my mind a fuzzy blur as he dragged his tongue up and down several times, sucking on my clit as he'd done before.

"This is... crazy," I whispered, trying to skirt from his hold before things got out of hand.

Almost immediately he lifted his head, cracking his fingers across my pussy. The shot of electricity soaring through me was jarring, so much so my entire body tensed. He repeated the move and I gasped, trembling to my core. His powerful hold on me was more than I'd anticipated, the breathless wonder of what it would be like to share in our dark passion every day filtering into my mind.

What was I thinking? That was the issue. I hadn't thought this through. I'd opened Pandora's Box without realizing the harm it could cause. Being an impetuous child could cost more than just my virginity.

It could ultimately cost me my dreams.

And even my life.

"Mattia. I will... never... marry you. I can't. You're my enemy. You're..."

“No, *bellissima gattina* You are exactly what’s required to happen.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning the deal will be struck.”

I remained in limbo as he teased my aching pussy, the need for him not diminishing even with the horrible realization of what he had planned.

The brutal crack of his fingers three times in rapid succession was almost too much to take. When he soothed the ache, sucking as he shifted his head back and forth, there was no chance of holding back. I couldn’t think or breathe, the pain mixing with a moment of beautiful bliss, the experience incredible.

A climax roared into me, my breath stolen as I jerked up. Lights of various colors skipped along my periphery of vision, every beat matching the lights from outside. This time, my scream was silent, my body shaking violently. I’d never experienced anything so intense before, no man ever bringing me to raw ecstasy.

“Oh. Oh... Yes. I...” I jerked up as the wave continued, sweeping through me like a thunderous boom of sensations, every one of them so electrified I was lightheaded. He refused to stop, the man never taking no for an answer, driving his tongue into my core. “That’s so good. So... good.” I no longer recognized my voice, but echoes floated in my ears. I laughed nervously, pressing one hand across my mouth.

He growled in answer, pinching my clit between two fingers. The combination of pain and pleasure elongated the climax. I was wet and hot, exhausted from the rapture. When the orgasm finally swirled, slowing until it left a minor thump in the deepest part of my core, he pressed his lips against one thigh then the other.

“My bad girl,” he said in ownership, the words alone keeping the tingling sensations rushing through me.

“Never.”

“You will learn. When the time is right, you will be by my side. You will be made my queen. And it will be an honor to make that happen.”

I could not believe he was making that kind of promise. I shook my head but as the scenario played out in my mind, I knew I had to leave for Paris as soon as possible. What if he found a way to lord it over my father’s head? Oh, God. This had gotten out of hand so quickly.

He licked my clit, flicking his tongue back and forth, his grin as evil as I’d seen. I was so sensitive, my heart racing, but I knew he had no intentions of letting me go.

“I can’t,” I whispered.

“Yes, you can. I need you to come again for me, princess.”

When he slipped two fingers inside my tight pussy, I tensed, pressing my hand down on his.

He slowly lifted his head, searching my eyes. Then he pulled back, rising to his full height. “You’re a virgin.”

“I...”

His exhale was almost too much to take. “You’re a virgin. You’re giving yourself to me. How perfect.”

The way he repeated the words had them reverberating in my mind. I was driven into another moment of complete uncertainty, my pulse racing.

A cold chill quickly tore through me, embarrassment like I’d never experienced in my life pounding through me. Suddenly, tears rushed to my eyes, my mind a foggy mess. I pushed him hard, managing to jerk up from the bar then sliding off. When he reached for me, I shoved him savagely a second time, able to skirt around him, running away before I made a bigger fool out of myself. How stupid I was to think he was the right one. What was wrong with me? Was I brain dead?

“Stop!” he commanded but I refused to obey him, snatching my dress then racing toward the elevator. “You will not leave without my permission.”

I smashed my hand on the button, trying to get as far away as quickly as possible. After a few seconds, I pressed it again. I sensed he was getting closer but taking his time. As a second wave of shame jetted into me, I glanced around for another exit. There had to be a set of stairs by code. If not, I'd use the fire escape I'd noticed earlier.

And go where? He'll find you.

When I turned around, Mattia was waiting for me, jingling a set of keys in front of me.

"You won't get off the rooftop without these."

"You locked me up here?" I demanded.

"I didn't want us to be disturbed, Sophia. Nothing more. However, it would seem we need to have a discussion."

"Not a chance." I rushed around him, trying to find the other door.

"You're going the wrong way if you're looking for the stairs, my beautiful princess."

"I'm not your anything, Mattia. I was stupid to try and seduce you." I'd never been so embarrassed in my life, my mind still processing what I'd heard. God, I'd also been so childish, impetuous in making a decision that somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I'd regret.

But I stopped short, furious that I'd placed myself in this position.

"Look at me, *bellissima principessa*."

"Stop calling me that."

He wrapped his fingers around my arm, tugging me backward. While it was obvious he was in full control of the situation, he wasn't horrible or forceful, just encouraging. Why did I want nothing more than to obey him?

"Look at me, Sophia. It's okay. I'm not angry or upset."

"Yeah? Maybe I'm just feeling... stupid."

"Offering me something so incredible is beautiful, an honor."

Was he kidding me?

I threw a look over my shoulder, shocked at the glint in his eyes. Anger at myself remained but I had no other choice, turning around stiffly. He closed the distance, every move methodical, obviously concerned he'd scare away the little fawn.

When I was facing him, he cupped my jaw as he'd done before but the look in his eyes was completely different.

“Do you think I'm upset with you because you're a virgin?”

I was terribly uncomfortable, hating the vulnerability I displayed. It was impossible to look him in the eyes.

“Sophia. Look at me. Please. Look into my eyes.”

I closed them first, squeezing them shut as if I could block him out, turning back the clock.

“Sophia. Obey me. Now.”

The deep rumble of his voice left me aching as it had done before. Slowly, I opened my eyes, glancing into his. There was so much emotion in both that I was shocked, unable to stop trembling. “I don't know what to think other than I was a fool to come here.”

“You came here to give me a gift, an incredible, amazing gesture. Perhaps the most special gift that anyone has ever given me in my life. I won't take that for granted. I might be a monster in your eyes, but not about something like this.”

“I don't think you're a monster. I just...” Laughter bubbled to the surface. There was no way he was being serious. And I refused to be made fun of. I'd had enough of that in my life. I slammed my fist against him, shaking my head.

“You belong to me, Sophia. That is the way of our world. I will protect you. I will kill for you. I will die for you.”

“Don't do that to me, Mattia. I won't take it. I'm not a fool.”

“*Farò tutto ciò che è in mio potere per assicurarti di goderti la tua prima volta. Devi fidarti di me.*” I will do everything in my

power to ensure you enjoy your first time. You need to trust me.

His words in Italian didn't make the situation any easier or more palatable. I'd tried to fake something that I shouldn't have. Shame on me. "I can't." Where had my voice gone? Why was I trembling? I wanted to run far away, yet when he pulled me close, I couldn't move. Another wave of desire slashed through my system, my core igniting as it had never done before.

"Sshhh... My beautiful baby. Let me make you feel so good." He blew a swath of hot air across my cheek, sending a wave of tingles all the way to my toes. Then he pressed a series of kisses against my forehead and nose, brushing his soft lips ever so slowly down to mine. It was as if he wasn't in a rush, determined to help me relax. When he rubbed them back and forth, I kneaded his chest.

Then he fisted my hair, pulling my head back at an awkward angle. "Mattia."

"You want this, Sophia. This is exactly what you came to me for. You wanted me to be your first. Say it. Tell me I'm not wrong. Tell me that's what you thought about last year. That you wanted me to kiss you, touch you, and fuck you."

"I..."

"Tell me now!"

"Yes, I wanted you to be my first. That's exactly what I wanted. I waited. I saved myself for you. How stupid is that? How ridiculous does that make me seem? You've had every woman in the world you've ever wanted."

"You might be surprised about the number of women I've had in my life, Sophia. However, I haven't had you. You are the woman I've craved for far too long. You are the one I want over everyone else." He hovered over me, his hot breath creating electric vibrations. Then he crushed his mouth over mine and I knew there was no turning back.

Was it possible he wasn't lying to me?

Oh, God. What was I doing?

He drove me against the side of the building, yanking first one arm then the other over my head, wrapping his long fingers around both my wrists. Then he crushed his weight against my heated body, pressing his throbbing cock into my stomach. I was lightheaded, still swooning from both his rough actions and his tantalizing words.

As he thrust his tongue inside, his need to taste me was more insistent, pushing us both toward the moment of indulging in carnal sin. I couldn't think straight, had no defense mechanism against his blazing hot needs. And in truth, I no longer wanted to run away. He was the one I'd wanted for far too long.

His tongue dominated mine, sweeping back and forth as he ground his hips, adding to the volcano of tingling sensations. Every inch of skin was on fire, my mind drifting into a beautiful golden moment where nothing could go wrong. Everything was shoved aside. The fear. The nervousness. The danger. For these few precious minutes, we were as one.

Or so that's what the fantasy had suggested. I struggled in his hold, the desire to touch him even more powerful than before. The kiss drifted into something more intense, adding shimmers of light to my periphery of vision. I arched my back, wrapping one leg around his, the scent of our combined desire a wanton aphrodisiac.

Mattia rolled his fingers down my side, growling into our shared intimacy, capturing every moan I issued as he explored my body. His touch was light, fingers barely dancing across my skin. How could such a brutal man be so gentle? I shuddered from the thought alone, gasping for air as soon as he broke the kiss, pressing our foreheads together.

He chuckled, the ominous sound sending another wave of vibrations straight to my aching pussy. "Are you ready for me, baby?"

"Yes."

"You're certain?"

I was surprised that he would even ask instead of taking what he wanted. When I didn't answer right away, he slid his hand

under my jaw, pushing up until I was forced to look into his eyes.

“Do you want my cock filling your tight pussy?”

“Yes, I do.” I hated the uncertainty in my voice, the anxiety threatening to keep me from enjoying the moment.

“Nice and slow, baby. But only for the first time.”

Did that mean there would be another? I wasn't certain and in truth, couldn't even think about the possibility of more.

“This is my birthday present, sweet princess. And I plan on indulging for hours.” He squeezed my neck then dragged his tongue from one side of my jaw to the other, every sound echoing in my ears, so animalistic that I couldn't stop trembling.

I laughed even as tears formed in my eyes, both emotions from utter anxiety. As he nipped my lower lip, growling as he bit down, I closed my eyes, doing everything I could to savor the moment. I knew it wouldn't last yet I wanted the memory to stain my mind forever. “Fuck me, Mattia. Please just fuck me.”

When I felt him pressing the tip of his cock against my pussy, I arched my back as much as possible. There were no sudden movements, no rough demands as he pressed his cockhead just past my swollen folds. I was so wet, so hot that I bucked my hips with enough force he laughed, the dark sound floating into my ears.

“Relax, princess. I won't hurt you.” He pushed another inch inside and almost instantly my muscles clamped around the thick invasion, pulling him in deeper.

“Oh, yes.” I opened my eyes, tossing my head back and forth as the pleasure rolled into me. I'd heard there would be blood, but I wasn't certain what to expect or if I cared.

He took a deep breath as he pushed again and I could tell he was doing everything to keep control. As he lifted his head, his eyes piercing mine, I sensed he was giving me a few seconds before taking what he wanted.

All of me.

I was right.

As he thrust the remainder of his cock inside, the slight flash of discomfort was quickly replaced with something that had to be close to euphoria. I was thrown by the tingling sensations of pleasure that were entirely different than what I'd experienced in the past. No vibrator would ever equal the explosive ecstasy provided by a man's cock.

"Yes. Yes."

He issued a growl of approval, pulling out then sliding into me again. Then he yanked my leg around his hip, squeezing my bottom as he began to fuck me. With every hard stroke, I became even more breathless, fighting to be able to touch him.

Seconds later, he finally released his hold and I threw my arms over his shoulders, never blinking as I watched his facial expressions change. He was so expressive, his dark eyes showing more emotion than I'd seen in them before.

He tugged my other leg around him, rolling onto the balls of his feet as he developed a rhythm, thrusting in and out. His eyes never left mine, constantly searching but the smile on his face brought a series of additional shivers.

"So tight, little princess. I could do this all night." I could tell he was holding back, treating me as if I would break.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, doing everything I could to buck against him. The heat and electricity between us continued to build, prickles of white-hot current keeping me breathless. I'd never thought sex would be this incredible, and letting go with him was more than I'd ever wanted.

He held me tightly, driving me against the wall as his actions became rougher. I wrapped my feet together, doing everything I could to meet every thrust.

"I can tell my baby likes it rough," he murmured.

"Yes." He knew me far too well, the man finding a way to yank away my armor. I was suddenly more alive than I ever

thought possible, the longing for him unlike anything I'd imagined.

"Be careful. If I lose control, there is no getting it back."

"I don't care. I want to feel everything."

His upper lip curling into a dangerously addictive smile, he pulled me away from the wall, keeping my arms and legs locked around him. He moved toward one of the tables, yanking out a chair and sitting down. With his cock still buried inside, the second I was pulled into his lap, I shifted my hips back and forth.

"My baby is hungry," he barely whispered.

I pushed up onto my toes, planting my hands on the back of the chair. Then I bucked against him. Every nerve ending in my body stood on end, the whirlwind of pleasure almost overwhelming. He rolled both hands down my spine, gripping my hips and digging his fingers in.

"Uh-huh," I muttered then tossed my head back and forth.

"Then ride me, princess. Take what you want."

Perhaps this was his gift to me, allowing me to take a moment of control. Somehow, I knew it wouldn't last. I rose off his cock, lowering my head as he stared into my eyes. Then I dragged my tongue across the seam of his mouth before easing down and rocking against him.

Every sound he made was guttural, so primal that goosebumps floated in waves across my skin, the light breeze keeping me trembling. I repeated the action, thumping down on his muscular thighs.

"Such a bad girl." His laugh was melodic, enticing the naughty woman inside of me even more.

After repeating the move once again, he took back control. "I can't hold back, baby. You're far too tempting."

As he pulled me up and down, I kept my head lowering, brushing my lips across his. When I darted my tongue inside his mouth, he pulled it in deeper, sucking as if needing the taste of me to continue breathing. I was overwhelmed by how

passionate he'd become, still floating on air from the waves of ecstasy. My muscles clamped and released several times and I sensed he was pulling me closer to pure nirvana.

He pushed me away gently, his chest rising and falling. "That's it, Sophia. Come for me. I need you to come on my cock."

I took several gasping breaths, shocked from the intensity, tossing my head back as I rocked against him. Then there was no holding back, a wild and powerful climax sweeping through me, capturing my breath.

"Oh. Oh. Oh..." I was thrown by the electric jolts tearing through me like bottle rockets, no longer able to put a coherent sentence together. He never blinked as he lifted his hips from the chair, driving into me with enough force my entire body was jarred.

When the orgasm finally began to subside, he pulled me against his chest, wrapping one hand around the back of my neck. I clung to him, still trying to catch my breath, keeping my eyes closed as the flickering vibrant lights began to subside.

Then I smiled as he eased onto his feet, keeping his tight hold.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, as if I cared.

"Somewhere wet and hot."

I gazed with hazy eyes as he headed toward the hot tub, walking into the water without ever taking his eyes off me. As the bubbles almost immediately began to soothe my aching muscles, the sting from the heated water slicing across my bottom made me yelp. That allowed the man to grin, exposing a dimple in his chin for the first time. I couldn't help myself, pressing the tip of my index finger directly in the center, marveling at the way his sexy three-day stubble tickled my skin.

"What is it?" he asked as he dipped down, the bubbles splashing up to my shoulders.

"Before today, I've never seen you smile."

“Maybe that’s because I didn’t have a reason.”

“It looks good on you.”

My comment brought another wide grin to his face, but there was a new, very strange look in his eyes, as haunted as the glassy one I’d seen in mine far too often.

“And nothing looks entirely too delicious on you, my *bellissima principessa*.”

As his cock pulsed inside my pussy, I toyed with his hair. I found it interesting that where I’d hated being called a princess before, now the word meant more to me than it should.

There was no hesitation. He continued to ravage my body, keeping his thrusts long and even, the water sloshing over us. Beads of sweat dripped down his face, glistening in the golden light of the moon. And at this moment, everything was perfect. The timing. The location. The lighting.

And the man.

Maybe I had found my Prince Charming after all, dressed in expensive clothes and always carrying an arsenal of weapons.

I wanted the fairytale, the one where the hunk refused to allow anything to happen to me while also sweeping me off my feet. Was it possible that’s what I’d found in the man holding me, already claiming me as his possession?

“You’re sweet innocence,” he said in a husky voice, one filled with so much emotion I was instantly stunned. “And I’m utter dangerous chaos. I’ll ruin you if given the chance.”

“Maybe I want to be ruined.”

His expression turned even more carnal, his entire face contorting as his muscles tensed. I could tell he was close to orgasming, erupting deep inside of me. That’s exactly what I wanted, to be filled with his seed.

As he narrowed his eyes, his chest rising and falling, the possessive side of him became overpowering. Then he began to shake and I squeezed my muscles, lifting my head toward the stars as he climaxed deep inside.

And when he issued the same word I'd heard a year before, I believed him.

“Mine.”

CHAPTER 10



*M*attia

Sweet. Fucking. Innocence.

That described Sophia perfectly. However, the description I'd used of myself offered little more than an opaque glimpse of the man protected behind sheets of armor. I was danger personified, evil without a conscience. I wouldn't just ruin her. I'd destroy every bit of goodness inside of her.

Yet I'd reminded her once again that she was mine.

I stormed into the foyer, rage outranking my feelings of warmth for the beautiful girl. That happened every single time I heard from my father.

Business.

I certainly hadn't been called to the main house of the estate for a friendly conversation. As always, just walking into the place where I'd grown up was oppressive. The employees never talked, never cracked a smile because there was no light or laughter in the house. That had died a long time ago, the fading memories ones I couldn't stand any longer. They reminded me of hope. There was none in the DeLuca family.

Today, the young employee I passed in the foyer scuttled away with a look of terror on her face. That usually meant my father was in a foul mood.

“What do you need, Pops?” I asked my father as soon as I strode into his office. He barely looked up from his paperwork, acting as if I was a bother for interrupting him. That was easy to tell by the look of disdain on his face.

“You’re attending the Lazarro gathering tonight. There’s an informal Five Families meeting at Roberto Lazarro’s estate.”

“This is the first I’ve heard about it.” The timing was off, a special meeting outside of the regular quarterly ones rare. My father never made requests and he also never asked me to go in his place to a meeting of the Italian *famiglia*. It was unheard of, the old school ways preventing even the firstborn sons of the Dons from attending.

“Because you didn’t need to know before now,” he snapped, glaring at me as if I’d broken a cardinal rule. He tossed a paper file aside, rubbing the stubble on his face. He looked every bit the aging man, likely given his penchant for scotch, cigars, and whores. And not necessarily in that order.

I found it interesting I could tell he was worried about the meeting, which in itself was unusual, but I sensed something was different.

While I was curious about the real reason he wanted me to attend the meeting, it took all I had not to punch my fist into his face from the way he’d treated Tommaso. I knew better than to act on my desires, biding my time until I could end my father’s life with no ramifications. Still, the fucker always put me on edge, enough so a single visit usually required something tangible to soothe my anger.

Another taste of the stunning Sophia would certainly help, although I doubted history would repeat itself so soon. Now was the time for prudence, using her gift as a weapon deplorable but possibly necessary. The bottom line was that within two years, she and I would be married.

Period.

My thoughts remained with the woman I’d laid claim to and I sighed. Her father, Roberto Lazarro, rivaled my father in terms

of brutality, but he always made certain his daughters had the best of everything.

The why as to her sudden appearance was still lingering in the forefront of my mind. Why did I have the distinct feeling that her father had said or done something to set her off?

I'd taken her virginity, something that continued to surprise me. Perhaps because she'd offered it up like a commodity. No, it had been a gift, but I'd taken advantage of it. Granted, I'd held back from being the savage brute I normally was, but I had a feeling I'd left a bad taste in her mouth afterwards.

Or maybe I was unused to dealing with innocence. My blood boiled just thinking about it.

"You have me curious. What kind of event is this?" I asked, realizing that the coincidence was too dangerous. I didn't believe in them.

"A fucking birthday party for one of his daughters. Can you believe the son of a bitch? If you ask me, he's parading her in front of the Dons in hopes of finding her a husband." He glanced at me quizzically.

I bristled from the thought. No one could touch what belonged to me.

Of course the fucker would do that. I was surprised her older sister hadn't been married off yet. While Lucia Lazarro might be enjoying the time of her life in the United States, that didn't mean she was immune to the concept of arranged marriage. Still, I'd sensed the night before that Sophia had agreed to return home for a single reason and it had very little to do with the party.

"Quite frankly, it sounds like something you'd do as well." If I had a sister. Sometimes I thanked whatever God might be above I didn't. I couldn't imagine the shit my father would have done to her in order to keep her in line.

While the regular quarterly meetings were held in various locations, it seemed as of late most were done at family events. Perhaps the change was based on the ridiculous belief that the members wouldn't be targeted and attacked. I knew it was

only a matter of time before the tradition was shattered. There'd been rumors of a takeover attempt, a new enemy taking shape.

I was one of the few players who believed the Russians were an issue. The brutal soldiers were close to being animals, Neanderthals with weaponry skills and nothing more. Although, they were getting smarter in their use of technology, learning to hack computer systems. Maybe I needed to hire a hacker of my own to discover their plans before they made a formal strike. I had no doubt they were behind the skirmishes and hijackings, something my father had laughed at me for suggesting.

Up until this point, the Russians hadn't been an issue, the strength of Italian numbers enough of a control factor. Maybe that had allowed the Five Families to become too soft, wallowing in wealth and power while rats and cockroaches trained for battle.

“Fuck you, boy. I'm giving you a taste of everything I know you're pining away for. I have other business to handle but refuse not to be represented at this glorious affair. You can be my eyes and ears. If you don't fuck it up.” His laugh was bitter, condescending. “You fucking do and you can all but kiss me allowing you to ascend to the throne. D'Artagnan is more of a traditionalist anyway.”

The fucker was always pitting the two of us against each other. This time I refused to take the bait, even as he burst into laughter.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning,” he said as he walked closer, “you refuse to accept that often the old methods of doing business have validity.”

“What do you want?”

“For you to find a wife and produce an heir. That will strengthen our position inside Italy and beyond.”

I stared at him, surprised we were on the same page for once. “You think marrying one of Roberto's daughters would be an excellent idea.”

He chuckled and rubbed his jaw. “Whether you believe so or not, Mattia, I am a pragmatic man. The greatest kings embraced their enemies.”

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I’d amused my father. However, as usual, he’d disgusted me. It wouldn’t matter who I chose as my wife, she would never be anything but a possession to use for our family’s benefit. Up until now, I would have considered his idea acceptable. Or at least understandable. Now? Fuck. I wasn’t certain.

I held my tongue for one simple reason. It was possible I should test the waters regarding a family alliance. But I would do it my way, not my old man’s. Yet I knew that the sadistic, obsessive man inside of me had full intentions of keeping the promise I’d made to my beautiful Sophia regarding our impending marriage. It would happen one day. I would see to it.

And once we were married, she would become my greatest weapon.

I smirked in response, allowing my eyes to reflect how repulsive he’d become.

He headed toward his private bar, pouring two glasses of scotch, a man’s drink or so I’d heard more than once.

At thirteen, I’d been taught how to shoot. At fourteen, I’d killed my first enemy. And at fifteen, a glass of Macallan scotch had been shoved into my hand. Then a second. I’d learned how to handle drinking in a public situation, but only after being beaten for getting intoxicated.

Weaknesses weren’t allowed inside the DeLuca household.

Then at sixteen, he’d taken me to a brothel.

Maybe now that I was twenty-six, he was finally attempting to hand over a portion of his empire. *Non essere sciocco*. Of course, if I followed his rules. Reminding myself not to be a fool increased my sense of self-worth. I was many things, but a fool wasn’t one of them. It would take his death for me to acquire additional power.

“Is there a specific point to the meeting other than pushing me into taking a bride?” I asked as he handed me a glass. I stared at the amber liquid, chuckling under my breath. The man’s actions and reactions were easily calculated, which would make targeting him that much easier.

He took his time savoring several sips before bothering to answer. “Unfortunately, yes. There’s talk of an enemy who has an inside view on more than one regime.”

Now my thoughts drifted to what Marco had tossed out moments before his death. “How is it manifesting itself? If you don’t buy it’s the Russians, then who?”

“Possibly the Americans.”

Now I laughed. “Bullshit, Pops. Neither the New York nor Chicago Cosa Nostra give a shit about returning to the old country.”

“Maybe not but there are others. The Armenians. The Greeks. The fucking Irish. They’ve all hungered for what the Cosa Nostra has to offer. Our land. Our grapes. Our oceans.”

And the Bratva, although he would never admit it. Still, I could tell he was more worried than usual, which meant the threats received weren’t being taken lightly. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I told him.

“Just like our shipments have been hijacked, so have some within the Rizzo and Romano syndicates. Don Rizzo is asking for our full support in developing a plan to flush out whichever enemy is dead set on undermining us.”

I laughed. “There’s not a chance something like that could be done as a singular person. You know that as well as I do.”

He swirled his drink, studying me intently. “Your fresh eyes and ears will help. But do not mention your brother to them.”

“Tommaso or D’Artagnan?” I’d always known there was more to the story of why a stable boy had come to live with us, adopted when my father hated children with a passion. It was a secret that my father would likely carry to his grave. Dar was rarely allowed outside of the compound, kept in a prisonlike atmosphere. Any time I’d dared to ask, I’d been beaten to

within an inch of my life. Maybe it was time I found out the truth.

“Do not test me, boy. D’Artagnan. He is not ready yet, still grieving.”

Grieving a tragedy from almost thirteen years before, a fire that had taken his entire family. At first, Dar had lived in the streets, already too old to be considered adoptable. Then he’d made his way into our world, fighting his way until earning the right to be a soldier. The adoption was something neither Tommaso nor I had understood, although the history Pops had with Roberto Lazarro was a thing legends were made of.

I had the distinct feeling there was more to this than just a fact-finding mission. At least he was admitting my keen observation skills were worthwhile. “Alright. Are we offering our assistance?”

“Yet to be determined. However, if you want to ask for something in return, then do so.”

The fact his eyes held amusement surprised me. Something else did as well.

His hands were shaking and I doubted it had anything to do with fear. Maybe I wouldn’t need to slice his jugular after all, disease doing the job for me.

“Just remember, Pops. If I’m right, then the Russians will become a force to be reckoned with whether the other members of the Five Families choose to accept that or not. I’ve studied the Bratva’s actions. They’re getting stronger every month.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, almost as if he was looking right through me. Then a look of resignation crossed his face.

“Then we’ll need to make plans to stop them. But I’ll require proof before I go off halfcocked. For now, be my eyes and ears at this goddamn meeting and nothing else. I don’t mind aiding the other Dons, but there needs to be something in it for our family. Do you hear me, boy?”

Boy. I glared at him, fisting the glass with enough pressure I sensed I could break it easily. “Not a problem, Pops. I’ll see

what I can do.”

“Report back to me,” he insisted. “Perhaps you will find yourself a beautiful wife in the process. Maybe then my soldiers will take you seriously instead of seeing you as the fucking playboy.”

Why did I have a feeling he was challenging me? Was he hoping I’d pull out my weapon?

“Fine. I’ll be there.” I powered back the rest of my drink, holding the liquid in my mouth. If the man wanted me to choke, he had another think coming. After swallowing, I slammed the glass on his bar then headed for the door of his office.

“Incidentally, I’m sending that worthless brother of yours away. Tommaso has no stomach for the business, a weak link just like your mother.”

His statement stopped me short. “What do you mean away?”

“Like I said, he’s worthless, just like that bitch of a mother you had. He can spend his life in solitude for all I care.”

Fisting and flexing my hand, rage broke through the surface. I’d had enough. I took two long strides, issuing a hard punch to his jaw, another to his gut. The force was enough to topple him backward, slamming him into his precious bar. As glasses rattled and slipped to the floor, shattering into hundreds of pieces, I moved closer, standing over him.

The asshole was dazed but attempted to get up, taking a single swing. I pummeled him in the stomach, tossing him into the wall with ease.

Then I heard footsteps, bristling when two of his Capos came into the room.

“*Uscire!*” Get out! I snapped at both without bothering to look at them. When they hesitated, I ripped out my weapon, pointing it in their direction. “You won’t get another chance. Leave.”

The soldier in front held up his hands, glancing at my father who obviously gave him the nod to leave. He backed away,

pushing the other soldier. I knew Raphaelo and Sergio better than most of the other men working directly under my father. They were good guys, loyal to a fault, but I had no doubt they'd be the first to eat my bullets when the shit came to a head.

After they left, I returned my attention to my father, lowering my weapon but not out of respect, more because this was the wrong time to commit patricide.

"If you fucking touch Tommaso ever again, I will kill you. Do you hear me, old man?" I'd never laid a finger on my father, which was obviously a mistake. I should have pushed my weight around sooner.

He lifted his head, obviously winded. Then he grinned as if he'd pushed me into the action, testing what I was made of. It was something else he was damn good at doing and both D'Artagnan and I fell for his bullshit every time. Goddamn, I hated the man.

"Solo uno dei miei figli sopravviverà, prendendo il timone. Vuoi scommettere su chi sarà?"

I stared at him, shaking my head as the meaning slipped into my mind. Only one of my sons will survive, taking the helm. Care to place any bets on who that will be?

"Fuck you," I hissed, turning around and taking long strides, determined to get the hell away from him before I used the weapon still in my hand. He had far too many loyal soldiers or I would have no issues in doing so.

"Be careful, son. Often what you think you want is nothing more than a viper ready to bite."

I thought about his comment and chuckled. "It would seem the only snake in the house is you, Pops. Maybe it's time to eliminate rodents. Heed my warning. You touch him and you will die."

"I should have killed you when I eliminated your whore mother."

Now he was goading me. He'd murdered my mother in cold blood, accusing her of having an affair with someone else,

both Tommaso and I sons belonging to a different monarchy. Yet there was no proof. However, it was the reason D'Artagnan was in our world.

“Then why didn't you? Oh, yes, because you thought I bought your lies.”

When I walked out, I was fuming. I headed outside, my mind already processing the choices I had for the night, still seething. If I played my cards carefully, I could take control in less than six months. However, that could mean I'd need to put my intentions with Sophia on hold. The thought of waiting until she was twenty-one might work to my benefit.

As soon as I was outside, I heard a rustle from beside me and turned around. Tommaso remained in the shadows staring at me, his hands in his pockets. D'Artagnan stood off to the side, glaring at me as he usually did. The two of them had developed a friendship where I'd found it impossible to talk to my own flesh and blood without arguing with him. Tommaso and I had never been but so close, the divide getting wider since our father hadn't seen fit to consider him soldier material. Sadly, my younger brother's face was still swollen, his eyes almost devoid of emotion. I was sick that the kid with the indelible laugh had lost his spirit.

Correction, that it had been beaten out of him.

He searched my eyes, both of us uncertain what to say. Once we'd been close, but it seemed everything had changed because of my father and the loss of our mother. The murder of our mother. What the hell was I saying?

I'd moved on. Tommaso hadn't. He looked exactly like our beautiful mother, his eyes the same color, his hair lighter as hers had been. Only now, his handsome face was marred by bruises, a split lip from the beating our father had given him.

For not measuring up to being the soldier our father expected him to be.

“Leave him alone, Mattia,” D'Artagnan snarled. “He doesn't want your brand of crazy right now.”

There was also no love lost with Dar and me. He knew I would fight to take the throne, even if he was older and had been groomed to be a killer. “I understand you’re leaving.”

We walked closer at the same time and I sensed his anger bridging the surface. “Ordered to do so, which is fine by me.” His voice held no emotion either.

“You’re going back to school. I’ll make certain of it.” D’Artagnan folded his arms across his massive chest.

After glancing at Dar, Tommaso laughed, his lips pursed as he glanced toward the house. “I was never good enough for the fucking asshole.”

“None of us are,” I told him. “Don’t let it bother you, brother. Think of it this way. Now you’re free now to live your life the way you want. Dar and I aren’t so lucky.”

“Free? I will never be completely free, Mattia. I have tainted blood.”

“All three of us do.” I glanced at D’Artagnan, realizing that the three of us were damaged in entirely different ways. Sadly, we’d never be friends.

“Live your life, Tommaso. Make it matter. That’s my best recommendation.” What the hell good advice could I offer? Our father had shunned him. The truth was likely something neither brother would believe.

I was jealous as fuck of the fact Tommaso was completely off the hook. He didn’t need to worry about ridiculous protocols or family obligations. I’d once believed all that mattered in life was money and power.

Now I knew differently.

Shit. All because of a single taste of innocence.

When Tommaso said nothing, I yanked out my sunglasses, turning away.

The ache for family would never leave.

CHAPTER 11



*S*ophia

Innocence personified.

The expression had repeated itself in the back of my head several times during the course of the last few hours, one of the last things Mattia had said to me.

I'd thought about leaving for Paris, skipping the birthday party. I wanted the sanctity and safety of my dorm room, my music, and my computers. My father had no clue that on top of engaging in becoming the perfect wife material, which is what I'd overheard him telling the teachers when guiding them to select my classes, I'd educated myself in the art of hacking into computers. It was a failsafe for the future, something I'd learned on my own just like martial arts training, which I'd begun in earnest.

To see myself as a child dressed in floral material was disgusting. Maybe I'd wear jeans instead.

I glared at myself in the mirror, doing my best to keep from yanking out the scissors and making some minor changes. Snickering, I wasn't certain I could stop myself once I got started.

"That's a gorgeous dress." Celeste said, but after a quick glance in the mirror, I could tell she was lying.

"Mrs. Santiago, my father's business associate brought me three dresses to choose from. Unfortunately, I think they forgot

I was turning nineteen, not nine.” I also didn’t mention Mrs. Santiago was my father’s main whore although not his only one. What was it about men in the mafia? Philandering assholes.

That’s what Mattia will be like.

True. For all the giddy sensations I’d felt from his statement I belonged to him, I no longer had to remind myself it would be as a possession only. Marriage. The way of the Cosa Nostra. How long had it been since a union had been celebrated throughout Italy? Or at least in one of the territories held by the Five Families? Since I was a very young child. I’d watched the televised wedding as millions had, enthralled at the pomp and circumstance. Then I’d learned what the union really meant, the poor girl taken from her home country of Spain, forced to marry a man almost twice her age. I had to wonder what had happened to her.

Celeste pressed her hand across her mouth then laughed. “Okay, it’s awful. You could wear the one from last night.”

“Right. That would go over oh-so well.”

“You wanted to stir the pot last night. Why not at your birthday party?”

Tempting. Very tempting.

Hissing, I stormed toward the window of the bedroom that had looked the same since I was thirteen years old. That’s the last time it had been painted. Of course, that had been right before my mother had started taking a turn for the worse, my father pushing her into a shell. She rarely came out of her room, almost never smiled. I couldn’t stand seeing her the way she was.

I’d always known the real reason for her slide into darkness, even though I’d been told she’d had different diseases over the years. The lies had been too easy for Enzo and my father to tell me. Even Lucia had found it difficult to look me in the eye after all the horrible things that had happened in this house.

“What’s wrong? I mean other than the godawful dress,” Celeste asked from behind me.

“Who said anything is wrong?” Everything was. Except for the beautiful moments I’d had the night before. Even those had been tainted, reality setting in moments after Mattia’s phone had rung, calling him back to duty. While he’d been amazing, tender during all the right moments, my body still ached.

But not nearly as much as my heart.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” I asked absently.

“Uh-oh. Please don’t tell me you’ve fallen in love with Mattia.”

Exhaling, the truth was I wasn’t certain at all how I felt. “I don’t know. Just answer the question.”

She thought about it for a little while before answering. “Yes. I do. You’ll know if you love him, Sophia.”

“Yeah, I guess. And yes, I’m fine.”

All the things I’d heard about a girl’s first time were true. The fact he’d simply waited as I’d gotten dressed, guiding me back to the club without saying anything romantic like he had an amazing time, or he couldn’t wait to see me again had driven a stake through a portion of my heart.

I was no fool. I hadn’t expected roses and diamonds sent to me, but maybe a quick call.

“Uh-huh. That’s what you told me six times last night, once on the phone this morning and three times since I arrived. Why don’t I try a different tactic? Did the bastard hurt you? Should I hunt him down with a huge butcher knife in my hand?”

Celeste was the epitome of a good Catholic girl, so her statement brought laughter. I turned around, wagging my finger at her. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me. You aren’t the only one who’s sick of oppressive parents.”

“I would love to see you try.” The sound of another car arriving at the party drew my attention. I’d suspected my father had invited every dignitary and corporate mogul throughout Italy, never missing a chance to flaunt his wealth. Or showing off one of his prized possessions. When I turned

around, I realized the car rolling into the circle then careening to a full, sudden stop in front of the valet station was a red Ferrari.

Both the color and the fact it was a sports car drew my attention. Guests at my birthday parties had never been younger than fifty if not older, their vehicle selection usually dark in color and boring. Even what few friends I'd had growing up hadn't been allowed to attend. I pressed my hand against the window, eager to see who would dare drive something so incredible youthful.

I didn't need to wait long.

Mattia DeLuca stepped out, only instead of wearing what seemed to be the required formal suit and cocktail dress, he was dressed in all black, a shirt opened halfway down his chest. I sucked in my breath, holding it as butterflies immediately formed in my stomach.

He tossed his keys to the young man, taking two strides toward the front door. Then he stopped, taking his time to lift his head toward my window, yanking off his sunglasses.

Then he smiled, giving me a slight nod, his expression one of knowing.

And one of hunger.

"What are you looking at?" Celeste rushed to the window, peering over my shoulder. "Whoa. Did you invite him?"

"Are you kidding me? I might be bold but I'm not stupid." What in God's name was he doing here? I refused to back down, offering him a smug look that I wasn't certain he could see.

There was no reason he was here unless... he wouldn't dare try to force my father's hand into marriage. Not now.

I shrank back from the window, trying to think about what to do.

"What is going on?" Celeste asked.

"I don't know why Mattia is here."

“What happened last night? I’m your best friend. I demand you tell me.”

Groaning, I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep it from her forever. “We had a wonderful time. He was quite the... gentleman.”

“Oh, bullshit.”

“Okay. We fucked like bunnies.”

Her face remained pinched. Then a smile broke out on her face. “No wonder you’re glowing, asking me about love. You’ve always wished for your own Prince Charming. Was he... everything you wanted?”

“That and so much more.” I allowed myself to squeal for a few seconds. She grabbed my arms, doing a little dance until we both heard a knock on my bedroom door.

I made a face and glanced at the clock. The party had officially started twenty minutes before. My guess is good ole Daddy had sent someone to retrieve me. Appearances were everything. When I opened the door, I was surprised to see Lucia. Since she’d yet to arrive, I was certain her plane had been held up in New York.

“Lucia!” I threw my arms around her, ecstatic to see her. “I didn’t think you were coming.”

“And miss my baby sister’s birthday party? Not a chance. Hey, Celeste.”

“Hi, Lucia. Why don’t I leave you two alone. I’ll get an advance taste of the boys at the party.” Celeste winked before walking out.

It had been far too long since I’d seen her. We’ve been separated for more years that I could count, her time spent in Paris our first separation. Now, taking over the diamond brokerage business in New York had made her happy but I also never saw her any longer.

Lucia grinned until she pulled back from me, lifting her eyebrows as she glared at the dress. “Oh, my God, sis. What are you wearing? That looks like drapes.”

We laughed together. At least we had the same tastes.

“Don’t ask. Unfortunately, I don’t have anything else unless you think jeans with the knees ripped out will be acceptable. I didn’t know the party was so huge until after I arrived.”

She held up a dress bag, the store logo from America. “Why not open your present now?”

“You didn’t!”

“Of course I did. Try it on. You’ve changed in a year. I hope it fits.”

I grabbed the bag, barely able to contain my excitement. Then I looked at myself in the mirror. I was no longer a skinny minny as my friends used to call me. I’d become a woman, which is why Mattia had... A warm flush crept up on my cheeks. I had to shut down my emotions, at least for tonight. “For the better, I hope.”

“You’re beautiful, sis. You should know that by now.”

“Not like you.”

Lucia rolled her eyes. “You are so full of it. Tell me what you think about it. The moment I saw it in the store’s window, I ran in and bought it.”

Grinning, I opened the bag and exhaled. The gorgeous dress was perfect for the evening. “It’s magnificent.” The deep purple was elegant, regal in color. As I held it up, a tiny shiver coursed down my spine. If only I were getting ready for a date with Mattia.

“I thought it would highlight those gorgeous lavender eyes of yours.” She sat down on the edge of the bed, running her fingers through her long hair. She’d been the gorgeous princess her entire life where up until now I’d felt like the ugly duckling. “Go. Try it on. We don’t have much time.”

“I know. I can’t wait until this party is over.”

Before I opted to skip off to the bathroom, I noticed an odd look on her face. Lucia didn’t hide her emotions well. She never had. She’d tried so hard to keep the horrors away, even when we were young, taking me to a safe place and singing to

me when my father would go off the deep end, beating Enzo or our mother. But I'd seen the terror in her eyes. She was our big sister, but her heart had broken into thousands of pieces when she'd been barely a teenager.

For as long as I could remember, I'd seen sadness tainting her lovely eyes, her love of someone from a long time ago haunting her even today. I wasn't entirely certain I wanted to feel so strongly about someone if losing them meant having my soul crushed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Maybe just tired from the flight. I had to cancel some meetings, Papa insisting I get here in time for the party. I barely had time to make it."

"You too, huh?" I sat on the bed beside her.

"You know how Papa is."

We both did. Saying no would only result in something horrible happening.

"Mama looks good today. She was in the garden when I arrived." Lucia's eyes lit up briefly. She'd also felt guilty that she hadn't been able to protect our mother, which was ridiculous.

The subject was one we rarely talked about. Our father's abuse had broken her heart.

"She barely remembers who I am any longer." I also felt guilty for staying away, but even my mother had begged me to do so just like she had with Lucia. How many families could say the same thing? "Tonight has nothing to do with my birthday. Does it?"

She shook her head, trying to keep a smile on her face. "You've certainly grown up since being forced to live in Paris."

"I don't mind being there any longer. Sure, I was terrified at first, but I've made friends. Besides, you did."

"That's true, but I wasn't happy being away from home, even as much as I hated it here."

"Are you happy now?"

Another distraught look crossed her face. “As happy as I can be. I love New York, the vibrancy of the city and the peace I have. Do you enjoy college?”

I could tell she was certain the new life she’d built would soon be ripped away.

“I do. It’s much better than boarding school. Besides, there’s very little reason to return to Italy now that you’re not here and Mama is lost in her own world. Papa won’t let me get her any real help anyway. This just isn’t home here any longer.”

“I understand. New York is my home now. But I did want to see you even if Father insisted I arrive promptly. Trying to get you to New York was like pulling teeth.”

We laughed again but there was a strange tension between us that had never been here before.

“Why did Papa insist you come, Lucia? Do you not know or you just don’t want to tell me?”

She took a deep breath, looking away.

“I’m not a child any longer, Lucia. Let me guess. Papa wants to marry us both off. Doesn’t he? The highest bidder so he can replenish his wealth and grab another portion of power and influence.”

The smile curling on her face brought one to mine. “You are far too smart for your own good. Yes, that’s what I’m assuming is happening. The power of the Five Families is diminishing. At least that’s what I hear in the US.”

I tried to stay away from politics, but I wasn’t immune to them. I couldn’t be. With my hacking skills, I’d taken a few interesting jobs that paid decently and had allowed me an inside look at various crime syndicates. The various Cosa Nostra branches were not well liked throughout the world.

“We won’t need to agree for Papa to try and force us into a contract.” I watched her face provide the truth. The way of the old regime. I didn’t care what I had to do, that wasn’t going to happen to me.

Lucia lifted her eyebrows. “We might not have a choice, but I plan on ensuring that you can at least finish college. Perhaps by then things will be different.”

“Wait a minute. What did you do?”

“I’d done nothing yet, sweet sister, but I refuse to allow you to be hurt by this insanity. I am going to volunteer to be wed to whoever our father has in mind.”

My thoughts drifted to Mattia. “What if he’s a member of the DeLuca family?”

She immediately burst into laughter. “That’s not going to happen. Not a chance in hell.”

“What if there is?”

Lucia’s mouth twisted. “The two sons are horrible. That I won’t agree to.”

“Mattia isn’t.” The two words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“What are you talking about? Don’t you dare think either Mattia or Tommaso are decent men. You’re far too innocent.”

“I’m not innocent, Lucia. And I can take care of myself.”

“Maybe you can, baby sister. Get dressed. It is your party whether Papa thinks so or not. There are presents and a cake. Even champagne.”

I’d never seen her so sad in my life. “You know something else that you don’t want to tell me.”

She hesitated, chewing on her bottom lip. “Members of the Five Families are here.”

“That’s why Mattia arrived.”

“Mattia? Did something happen between the two of you?”

I wasn’t very good at keeping my foot out of my mouth at times. “What do you mean by something?” A warm flush had already started creeping up my neck. I hadn’t planned on telling her anything. I’d known she’d hated the entire family, not just the patriarch, but she’d never told me exactly why.

“How the hell do you know him?” she demanded, which was also out of character.

“How could I not know him? He travels to Paris from time to time. He’s all over the news in Italy. You know, an eligible bachelor and all?” When a flash of anger crossed her face, I was shocked.

“Stay away from him,” she insisted. “He’s bad news, Sophia. I mean it. That entire family is horrible.”

While she’d rarely talked about what had happened so long ago when I was very young, I’d heard enough about a horrific fire at the old barn on my father’s estate to know she’d lost someone she cared about. A boy she’d once considered her knight in shining armor. I’d put the pieces together without her having to tell me. That’s why she’d never found anyone special. “Is this about D’Artagnan? Is this about the fire?”

Exhaling, Lucia moved toward the window. “I thought you’d forgotten.”

“Of course not. D’Artagnan meant the world to you.”

“He did. His death was... neither he nor his family deserved to die. It was cruel and tragic. Horrible.” She remained quiet for a few seconds. “Mattia was there. That night.”

“What do you mean he was there?” I tensed, my pulse instantly quickening.

“I tried to get help for Dar’s family, but no one would help me. But I saw several soldiers who worked for Franco DeLuca. They tried to hide from me, but I know what I saw. He was there.”

“That’s not possible. Why kill D’Artagnan and his family?”

“I don’t know why. Papa certainly has never said anything about what happened. All I knew is that I wasn’t going to allow them to die. I was determined to help. When I went back to the barn, I watched someone blocking the exit.”

“Who?” I already knew the answer, at least one that she wanted me to believe. I was sick inside, confused and angry.

She turned toward me and I shivered, my heart broken.
“Mattia.”

CHAPTER 12



“The beauty of a woman is not in the clothes she wears, the figure that she carries, or the way she combs her hair. The beauty of a woman is seen in her eyes, because that is the doorway to her heart, the place where love resides. True beauty in a woman is reflected in her soul. It’s the caring that she lovingly gives, the passion that she shows & the beauty of a woman only grows with passing years.”

—Audrey Hepburn

Mattia

I’d known beauty before, including seeing my mother as a young child. I’d thought her the most beautiful creature in the world. But her exterior beauty had faded along with the light in her eyes and that had left her a shell of a woman. I’d been too young to understand initially, acting as cavalier in some regards about women as my father had. But with her death, a seed had been planted, only I hadn’t realized what it meant or how it would affect my life.

Maybe I still didn’t.

However, as I stood with a drink in my hand, watching Roberto Lazarro parade both of his daughters in front of every eligible man, I’d realized just how incensed I’d become. Enraged. Sophia was a creature of beauty and innocence, but

her flesh and blood had already actively sought bids for her hand in marriage.

It took all I had not to overreact.

She was a girl who'd grabbed at everything inside of me, the good and bad, the wants and needs, her presence keeping me hostage in the palm of her hand. And she had no idea that the passion we'd shared had awakened a beast. Sadly, I'd need to be patient a bit longer.

After the discussion with my father, I'd laid out a plan of my own that would require patience, something I wasn't good at but was necessary if I wanted to rule.

Taking actions into my own hands wouldn't do either Sophia or me any good at this point in time. I had to continue being prudent, planning out how I would handle the situation carefully, although I certainly wasn't considered a man of practicality or discretion. Would I be able to stay away from her for two years? Doubtful. However, first, I had to gather information regarding the recent threats from the other members of the Five Families.

That would give me a better idea of who would use her as a weapon against me if possible.

Seeing her again had made certain decisions more difficult. She'd never agree to stay in Italy let alone accept a marriage proposal now. But if a hefty deposit was made now, perhaps I could convince her father to take her off the market. Then I would send two of my men to remain with her until she turned twenty-one. That was a fair compromise. Plus, I could indulge in her any time I wanted. Hmmm... not a bad idea in my mind.

I took a deep breath, holding it as Sophia darted a glance in my direction. She was tense, which was understandable, yet I sensed something else was wrong, although I wasn't able to put my finger on what.

"What a pleasure to see you, Mattia. How is your father? Well, I hope."

I turned my head toward Giuseppe Romano, the Don of Sicily considered a true savage. The truth was he more likely hoped

my father would succumb to illness or worse. I smiled and lifted my drink, nodding out of respect as I'd been trained to do. "He's doing well, thank you. And your son?" Antonio would soon enough take over Giuseppe's throne, although it would seem at this point the aging man had no desire to retire.

He chuckled. "An apple doesn't fall far from the tree, now does it?"

Keeping my smile, I nodded then scanned the room outside Roberto's office where the members of the Five Families had been sanctioned. There were at least three hundred people at the party, Sophia's father pulling out all the stops to cater a glorious affair. I wondered who he thought he was fooling. There were men here who'd created issues for all of us, including judges and prosecutors. What in God's name was Sophia's father attempting to do?

And why didn't the other Dons seem concerned given their presence?

It was apparent my father had known about the guest list. It was also apparent that he'd planned on forcing a marriage of convenience. Why now? Had he cooked something up with Roberto Lazzaro behind the other members of the *famiglia*? Knowing my father, it was more than just possible.

I'd heard more than once through the illustrious Italian grapevine that Roberto's holdings were dwindling, certain bad business decisions creating a hardship. Only Lucia's powerful holdings on the diamond empire in the States had kept him afloat. It must be difficult having your daughter handle a significant portion of the business. If our families combined, the powerful hold could be a crushing blow to the remaining territories. Maybe my father was more cunning than I'd given him credit for.

"I'm surprised he sent you," Don Rizzo from the northeast corner of Italy said with a smug look on his face. "No offense, of course. I know you're busy with business of your own. From what I understand, you're doing very well for yourself."

"No offense taken, Giuseppe and yes, business had kept me from attending various events," I told him, calling him by his

first name a slight. “I am surprised at the guest list tonight myself.” I studied his expression, noting that there was no sense of disturbance in it.

“Yes, well, Roberto has no issue showing off his... assets.”

“As the heir to my father’s throne, it’s important that I share in every aspect of my father’s business, including handling threats when necessary. Is there something I should know?”

“Ah, so you’re aware of why we are meeting,” Don Rizzo piped in.

“To a point. However, I wasn’t expecting such an illustrious guest list.” My answer was short as my patience was waning.

“Don’t worry about the guests, Mattia,” Don Romano recommended.

“It would seem your father is turning over a new leaf,” Don Caldone offered seconds later, laughing along with the other men. With Don Lazarro yet to join us, the reason for our meeting had yet to be disclosed, although I gathered it was about everyone’s concern over an unknown enemy.

The uneasiness remained amongst all of us. Being in the same location certainly had its share of concerns. I’d ordered four of my soldiers to arrive only minutes after I had, walking the exterior of the estate. If word of our meeting had gotten out, we were all sitting ducks, something I refused to become. I wasn’t in the mood to play games or remain at the estate for longer than necessary.

“My father is concerned about news of the Volkov Bratva making an appearance in Italy. To that end, he’s handling a fact-finding mission of his own. But he does send his apologies that he was forced to send his son as his replacement.” There was disdain in my tone, which all three of them picked up on, glancing from one to the other.

It would seem I’d taken them all by surprise with my unusual outburst.

“What have you heard about the Volkov clan?” Don Romano asked, the amusement in his voice disappearing.

“That they are growing much stronger, their army well over five hundred men. And I’ve heard Grigori Volkov has a very capable son who is currently serving in the Russian military. It’s my belief that when Aleksei returns, that’s when they will endeavor to make an appearance in Italy.”

“The timing?” Don Rizzo asked.

“Less than two years.”

“Plenty of time to react,” Don Caldone said, laughing.

“If we sit by and do nothing, Caldone, the Russians will come for us, taking everything that we hold precious. We can’t allow that to happen. We must be stronger,” Giuseppe hissed.

I was surprised at hearing Giuseppe’s vehemence as well as thought-provoking comment. “You are right,” I told all of them. “That’s why we need to ensure that our borders are solid and our ties to each other are strong.”

Don Romano glanced at me slyly. “I’m curious, Mattia. What do you suggest we do as a *famiglia*? We are the most powerful syndicates in the world. If you’re suggesting we’re in danger, then please tell us your thoughts.”

If I was to prove my worth sitting at the table of the big boys, I had to grab onto a leadership position.

“Certain alliances have proven to be beneficial over the years, Don Romano. Yes?” I tipped my head in his direction. Then I glanced at the others, taking my time to look them directly in the eyes.

“Definitely. What did you have in mind?” Don Rizzo had a twinkle in his eye.

I took a sip of my drink first, allowing them to stew. “It’s very simple. I suggest we form closer alliances within the Five Families, highlighting complete peace between our families while building additional infrastructure to aid in protecting the territories we adore. We are wealthy men, gentlemen. We can afford to give back to our communities in exchange for their loyalty.”

Don Romano snorted. “An excellent idea. If we have the love of the people, they will be our eyes and ears for us, also becoming foot soldiers if necessary. I applaud you, Mattia. You have the chutzpa your father used to have.”

As if any of them could talk. They’d not only gotten soft around the middle, they’d also shown lack of leadership to the point they had discontent amongst their ranks. I kept up with how their businesses were operating.

“What else? I can tell there’s more to your idea,” Don Caldone encouraged. “What are you suggesting for strengthening our partnerships?”

“By ensuring our families are close of course,” I said in passing. Personally, I couldn’t care less about getting close to any one of them with the exception of Sophia. “And by using the Cosa Nostra in America, especially inside New York. With the Bratva attempting to invade their territory, they will welcome our assistance as we will theirs when the time is right.”

“Hmmm,” Don Rizzo said then lifted his glass. “An interesting proposal. With some time on our side, we could engage in additional lucrative business practices as well.”

I shot him a look, offering a slight smile. I’d barely thought it through but in truth, it was a damn good idea and one I’d use to take over my father’s throne if necessary. World power. I liked the thought of it.

“Yes, something we’ll need to discuss with Don Lazarro but an idea worth exploring,” Don Caldone said in approval.

Good. I’d done more than I’d set out to do. Now it was time to handle my personal reasons for coming. Seeing her standing in the window had reinforced my desire, the longing remaining enough my balls ached.

I took a sip of my drink as I moved toward the doorway to Franco’s office, catching another glimpse of the woman I adored. She was even more beautiful tonight, the dress she’d selected in a vibrant shade of violet. She stood under a series

of shimmering track lighting, the copper-colored highlights in her hair making my cock swell.

Seconds later, her entire body stiffened and she tipped her head over her shoulder. There was another flash in her eyes like the one I'd seen before, an almost luminescent glow that had me ready to head into the living room. Her chest rose and fell as she studied me, which forced a tightness in my gut. There wasn't a man in the room who wasn't staring at her, wanting her.

Undressing her.

The fuckers were counting their dollars to try to convince her father they were the right fit.

I took a deep breath, holding it. Then her expression changed, becoming colder, full of anger. When she suddenly laughed, placing her hand on the arm of a senator's son, I bristled, a snarl rushing from my throat. I felt a presence from behind and knew the bait I'd tossed out had been accepted by the three sharks.

"The Lazarro girls are very beautiful," Don Romano said, suddenly beside me, obviously attempting to read my mind.

"Yes, they are quite lovely. Highly intelligent as well."

"Intelligence is only somewhat useful in our world, Mattia. That is something you will learn. Taming a woman is much easier if they are of weak mind."

Anger boiled inside of me. I would enjoy killing the man myself. Perhaps one day. He moved beside me, enjoying his beverage of choice while his eyes wandered to Lucia, undressing her with his eyes.

It would seem all five Dons had a penchant for beautiful women, refusing to stay faithful. That was a weakness in my eyes. My mother had taught me that if I had a strong woman beside me, I could rule the world. That's what I had in mind. I smirked from the thought.

"I've had my eye on Lucia for my son Antonio. As you mentioned, our alliance would strengthen the Five Families significantly. However, if you are interested in Sophia, I

suggest you make an offer. I doubt she'll be on the market for long."

"She is barely nineteen. Hardly wife material at this point."

"Not according to Franco. As a virgin, she is worth a significant amount and producing an heir quickly is of a benefit. With Lucia, she has other... benefits at this point."

I glared at him. "Benefits?"

"Why, yes. She is making a significant amount of money for the family. My son can afford to wait. Soon, I'll retire and can announce the wedding and his ascension to the throne at the same time. When the time is right, we'll have a place handed to us in America." He laughed softly as if getting one over on Roberto.

My God. A deal had already been struck between Roberto and Giuseppe. I wondered if either Lucia or Sophia had any idea? Did that mean Roberto had also selected someone else for the woman I refused to let go? Fuck.

I glanced into his face, loathing the politics and the lies that had been an integral force within the *famiglia*. My suspicions had been correct. Sophia had learned of her father's plans, hence the reason for her visit. She'd used what little power she had to try to gain control. I had to give the girl credit, although if it was discovered that I'd been the one to deflower her innocence, the bad blood between the Five Families would be significant. That would allow an in for the Russians.

I couldn't allow that to happen. I'd need to talk to Sophia. And I'd need to place a bid now versus waiting. Fuck. I didn't like to be forced into making decisions. She'd played me, although I wondered if she'd understood what her gift could mean.

Doubtful.

When she tossed another look over her shoulder, I could see anger in her eyes. Her father was pulled away and that was my cue to try to talk with her. "If you'll excuse me, Don Romano, I would like to wish Sophia a happy birthday."

"Of course. I'll be curious how this turns out."

He laughed as I walked away, and I couldn't help but continue thinking he had something up his sleeve. Of all the Dons, personally I trusted him the least. As usual, my father didn't agree.

Before I had a chance to get any closer, she noticed my approach and immediately walked away. Either she'd been playing me the night before or something was wrong. I handed my drink to a passing waiter, prepared to follow her outside when Roberto stepped in front of me. He didn't appear happy that I'd made an appearance.

"What are you doing here, Mattia? You weren't invited. This is a private party." He wasn't a very good actor. He'd planned on my arrival. I shoved aside my rage. I'd deal with my father at a later time.

"I've come in my father's stead, Roberto, as allowed by the rules of the *famiglia*." Although I was stretching that a bit.

He smirked and glanced toward his office. "Unacceptable but I refuse to interrupt my daughter's party."

Fuck. I was right. Sophia had already been offered to someone else as well as tossed out to my father. I should applaud Don Lazarro. He was simply searching for a high roller. Who was the other player? I glanced at the other Dons, who were watching the exchange with fervent interest. This was getting more interesting by the minute.

"Please, Don Lazarro. You and I both know this party was carefully orchestrated not only to provide suitors a lengthy opportunity to indulge in the beauty and grace of Lucia but Sophia as well. Your current financial situation has necessitated selling off your daughters like cattle."

"How dare you!" He made the mistake of getting in my face.

I took a deep breath as I crowded closer. "I suggest you remember who you're talking to, Roberto. I'm no fool. I'm a businessman who has every intention of making you a proposition that I suggest you listen to." He didn't want to push me any further.

The sparkling lights of the festivities highlighted Sophia's tense form. She stood with the same friend who'd been at the club, watching me intently. There was no mistaking her look of scorn.

Her father acted as if he was appalled at first then chuckled under his breath. "Touché, Mattia. You are very much your father."

"You'll pardon me if I don't take that as a compliment."

He laughed and took a step backward. "What a shame you don't get along with your father. He was always a brilliant businessman."

"One you sought out when attempting to drag your ass from your misfortune?" I took a sip of my drink, watching the myriad emotions crossing his face.

"*Gli uomini potenti sono spesso i più deboli.*" Powerful men are often the weakest.

The sentiment was one I'd heard my father say more than once.

"To that end, I have a business proposition for you, Don Lazarro."

"And that would be?" He suddenly acted as if he was bored.

I'd prepared a check in the event I felt it prudent to follow through with my initial plan. While it was still a risky endeavor, at this point I refused to allow anyone to ever have the opportunity of getting their hands on Sophia. She was mine. It was time to make good on my promise. However, he would play it my way, or I would ruin him. I pulled the check from my pocket, glancing at it for a few seconds.

"I would like to marry your daughter," I told him quietly.

"Lucia?" He laughed, glancing up and down as if I'd told him a joke. "She would eat you alive, Mattia. You aren't man enough for her."

"I'm well aware that Lucia has already been promised to Antonio."

He took a deep breath before huffing slightly. “The way of our world.”

“Which is why I’m interested in Sophia. Not only am I prepared to supply her with an incredible life, but I also intend to ensure the exchange is very lucrative for you as well, Don Lazarro.”

“Sophia?” he repeated, narrowing his eyes. “What are you offering?”

He was too smug, which meant he had played one suitor against another. I should be more appalled than I was.

I could see dollar signs in the man’s eyes and it disgusted me. Then again, what the fuck was I doing? “Consider this a down payment. Sophia will be allowed to finish school prior to our wedding. Once she turns twenty-one, then she will become my bride. At which time, I will provide the other half of the payment.”

As I handed him the folded check, I could tell he was anticipating perhaps a couple hundred thousand dollars for her hand. When he glanced at the check, I could see immediate shock, which meant his funds were in trouble.

“You’re serious.” He was already salivating.

“Very. In addition, I will be glad to provide additional funding for your brokerage firm in the States, as a silent partner of course. I’ve had some experience dealing with the Brazilians who are testy about who they sell to.”

“And this is a deposit?”

“Yes. Of course, there will be a contract drawn up that will spell out all the particulars. However, there is one caveat to the agreement. She is not to know. No one is. My gift to her is allowing her to finish college. That is the least I can do.”

Little did he know part of my reasoning was to allow time to rid myself of my father. In turn, she would appreciate that I offered her a chance at freedom, something she seemed to crave desperately.

He locked his gaze on the check, dollar signs in his eyes. Then he folded and pocketed the check.

“So we have a deal, Don Lazarro?”

“Yes, we have a deal, Mattia.” He held out his hand and I took a deep breath.

When I grasped his hand, I sensed I was being watched. I gave the handshake the appropriate amount of time before pulling away and turning.

And out of the corner of my eyes, I noticed Sophia had been watching. How long had she been standing there? There was no mistaking the fury on her face. Whatever she believed she’d witnessed had set her off, which was the last thing I wanted to have occur.

He noticed my gaze and sighed. “She is rough around the edges, Mattia. It will take you time to discipline her. I don’t know what I did so wrong with her. Lucia is compliant, a perfect child. But Sophia is like a filly who needs to be broken.”

His choice of words was disgusting.

“Beautiful women need to be nurtured, Don Lazarro. Not broken.”

“Don’t be a fool,” he said. “Without breaking them in, they do their best to tread all over you and your estate. You can’t have them making a fool in front of you. Sophia. Come here. Now. There is someone you need to meet.”

When she didn’t respond, he took two long strides toward her, grabbing her by the arm and yanking her toward me. I could tell by the look on her face that she was in pain.

“This is the future Don of the DeLuca Empire. It would be best if you’d acknowledge his presence,” Roberto hissed.

She glared at me, chewing on her bottom lip. When she muttered something in Italian that even I didn’t catch, Roberto moved closer almost instantly.

As soon as he raised his arm as if he was going to slap her, I snapped my fingers around his arm. “Don’t you dare touch

her,” I growled.

“For the time being, she’s my daughter,” he barked. The man had no idea the kind of mistake he’d just made.

Sophia gasped, struggling to get out of his hold. “Let me go!”

After yanking his arm away, he acted as if he would dare attempt to defy me. That’s when I yanked her from his grasp. “Don’t do it,” I told him, glaring into his eyes.

He was enraged but took a deep breath, finally backing down.

The horrified gasps from other guests almost made me laugh.

To the man’s credit, he turned around, throwing out his arms. “Just a little disagreement. Please, enjoy the party.” He immediately grabbed a drink, acting as if the tussle had never happened.

Sophia hissed, keeping her voice down. “What did you just do?”

“What was necessary, my princess. No man will ever treat a woman that way in my presence.”

“I hate you, Mattia. I thought you were different but you’re nothing but a violent man with a desire for blood. What did I see in you?”

“Everything you craved, *bellissima principessa*.”

“Never. Don’t fool yourself, Mattia. I was just fulfilling a need. I assure you that you’ll never touch me again.”

“We shall see about that, princess.”

I’d never known obsession until now. The strange sensations that were tearing through me were uncomfortable. The dark cravings. The unrequited need, one so intense that I knew they’d never be sated. The longing for her had already furrowed into my blood, weaving a strangled set of vines that would eventually consume every inch of my soul.

Sophia had no idea what she’d unleashed with her gift. But there was no going back.

When I looked in her direction, she disappeared into the shadows. I took a deep breath, raking my hand through my hair. Then I made her a silent promise, one I had full intentions of keeping.

Don't worry, my bellissima principessa. Soon, I will make good on my promise and when I do, I'll make you my queen.

CHAPTER 13



*S*ophia

Mattia.

Strong.

Gorgeous.

Sensual.

Monster.

Jesus Christ. The man was psychotic, his violent tendencies making him nothing more than a feral animal. And every ounce of my being had been affected by the venom. I needed a cure or I'd lose more than just my virtue.

That's the way I needed to think about him. I was still reeling from what my beautiful sister had told me, that this man was the reason for all her heartache, the loss of the only man she believed she could ever love. The real reason she'd only been home two or three times in several years was because she couldn't relive the memories of the horrific fire.

Or the fact our father had done nothing substantial to either stop the fire from occurring nor had he insisted the perpetrators be captured.

A horrible knot remained in my stomach, my mind still trying to grasp onto the news. He'd acted as if he owned the entire world as well as claiming me for his queen. Was the bastard out of his mind? He had to be if he believed I would ever

consider being with him on a permanent basis. And here he stood in all his decadent glory, basking in the limelight of the Five Families, determined to become king of the world.

Whatever business he'd entered into with my father had been sealed with a handshake, a quick smile, and a glance in my direction.

"Are you okay?" Celeste asked from beside me.

"I am perfectly fine." I smiled as sweetly as possible, allowing my anger to creep to the surface.

"Are you going to talk to him?"

"No. In fact, I'm going to disappear. Enjoy the party."

"Are you kidding me?"

I turned toward her, trying to ignore the electricity that continued to tether me to the bastard. "I need some space. I'm going to my room. If he leaves, come and get me. Okay?"

"What do I tell your father?"

"That I wasn't feeling well."

She nodded, concern in her eyes as he glanced over my shoulder. "He's coming this way."

"I'll call you." I backed into the shadows, determined to lock myself in my room. I rushed toward the other side of the house, heading toward the employees' stairs. I moved through the corridors into the residential side of the house, my heart racing.

How could I fall for the man's charm, believing for one minute that a single part of him wasn't a greedy, arrogant murderer? Tears formed in my eyes and as hard as I tried to keep the anger, it was almost impossible. I still had feelings for the man.

I slowed down, trying to catch my breath.

Then I heard footsteps.

Oh, God. Someone was trying to follow me. I knew exactly who that was.

I tried to stay as quiet as possible as I headed for the stairs. When I reached the bottom, I threw a look over my shoulder.

There he was in all his glory.

“Sophia. We need to talk.”

“We don’t have a single thing to talk about, Mattia. Just go.”

“I can’t do that.”

I gave him a hateful look then rushed up the stairs, flying toward my room. He was right behind me.

“Sophia. Why are you running away? I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Yes, you will.” My feet pounded on the floor, my heels slowing me down. But I reached my room, able to slam and lock the door. Then I backed away, trying to catch my breath. “That’s what you do. You hurt people. You kill those important to others. Why?”

“You already know what I’m required to do, which isn’t something you don’t understand. But I would never hurt you or anyone you consider special in your life. I’m a bad man, maybe even evil. But not with you. Not around you.”

God, I wanted to believe him. I cinched my eyes shut, my body tensing to the point my joints ached. “Just go away.” If he didn’t, my resolve would crumble. I knew it. I felt it.

I hated myself because of it.

He tried the handle, rattling it several times.

“Sophia. Let me in. I just want to talk.”

“Get out, Mattia. I don’t want you here. We have nothing to talk about.”

I could hear him mumbling in Italian. “This is ridiculous. We’re adults.”

“So what? You’re a murderer.”

He said nothing, but I sensed his continued presence. As the seconds ticked by, I pressed the back of my hand across my lips. Then I took a deep breath. Maybe he’d left.

At least I'd be returning to Paris within a couple of days. I could avoid him until then. Then I'd do everything in my power to shove the memories into a padlocked box, never to be opened again.

Swallowing hard, I felt the tension begin to leave.

Then I heard a slight crack seconds before the door was kicked in, Mattia taking a long stride into the room.

I threw my hand out, shaking my head. "I told you to get the hell away from me and stay away."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, *bellissima principessa*." His grin was seductive, as evil as the man.

And I wouldn't succumb to him no matter what he did. I stood my ground, glaring at him as he advanced. "I don't belong to you and never will."

"That's where you're wrong." He closed the door behind him, advancing like a predator. He wore a knowing smile, as if there was something he needed to tell me but would keep it a secret until the last minute. As always, he was insanely gorgeous, his dangerous persona adding to the incredible electricity sparking between us.

I couldn't deny my attraction or the fact it felt as if we were meant to be together. Even though the tiny voice in the back of my mind nagged at me, adding reminders that I shouldn't want him, my body was a treacherous bitch.

Frozen on the spot, I struggled to try to breathe while my heated gaze fell down the length of him, finally settling on his salacious smile.

My nipples ached, hard as diamonds as they pressed against the silky material of my dress. I was wet, my panties damp and as he approached, I could feel the pulse in my neck ticking, increasing to the point lights were flashing in front of my eyes.

"You are the most beautiful creature on the face of this earth." His words reverberated, sending another wave of tingles spreading like wildfire throughout my body.

I licked my parched lips, shaking my head slowly. “I don’t want you.”

Mattia took a deep breath, holding it while his long eyelashes skimmed his chiseled cheeks. My God. To think I was mesmerized by this man was insane.

Yet I was.

“Your scent tells me otherwise, sweet kitten. You’re as famished as I am. Tonight, we continue what will be the beginning of the rest of our lives. Together.”

Now I knew for certain he was insane. As he reached for his belt, the spell was finally broken. I jerked backward, realizing that there was no way I could reach the door without going through him. I snapped my hand around the lamp, jerking the cord from the wall and tossing it at him.

He laughed, deflecting it easily, the thick brass tumbling several feet away, crashing onto the floor. Then I grabbed the book I’d been reading, pitching at his head. A glancing blow was struck and he gave me a stern look, a single thick, sexy eyebrow lifting.

“What a bad girl. You’re going to be so delightful to tame.” He continued to unfasten his belt and I shifted from one foot to the other.

Then I bolted, trying to go in a huge arc around him. But he caught me easily, wrapping his arm around my waist and jerking me against him. Then he issued a tsking sound as he shook his head again, allowing an explosive breath to cascade across my cheek.

I shivered to my core, slamming my palms against his chest. Somehow, I knew I wasn’t going anywhere. Screaming was useless, the bedroom wing on the opposite side of the massive estate, the music also preventing anyone from hearing me.

And in truth, I didn’t want to escape, the man’s presence keeping me fully aroused. How could I want this? I bit my lower lip, glaring at him hatefully. When he tugged on his belt, a tiny part of me wanted to run my fingers across the grains of leather. His eyes remained hooded, his chest rising and falling.

When he jerked the thick strap free, I was certain he was going to spank me with it. Instead, he tossed it onto the bed, fisting my hair and lowering his head until our lips were almost touching.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“First, I’m going to kiss you. Then I’m going to fuck you.” He intertwined his fingers in my hair, keeping our lips only centimeters apart.

My entire mind was foggy, the twinkling lights shimmering in front of my eyes changing colors. I wanted to hate the man, to push him away, but the explosive heat was the only thing guiding me.

He crushed his mouth over mine, holding our lips together as he ground his hips. I couldn’t stop shaking, no longer able to feel my legs. He opened my mouth slowly, capturing the first moan I issued. I wondered if he’d catch them all. He shifted back and forth as he slipped his tongue inside, mimicking the sensual dance we’d done the night before.

The strangest thing was that I felt safe in his arms, as if nothing and no one could ever hurt me. Even though I remained tense, I slid an arm over his shoulder, brushing the tips of my fingers across the thick cords in his neck. There wasn’t a single inch of his body that wasn’t muscular, honed to perfection.

I shuddered audibly, his growl following. We were nothing but primal animals fulfilling an intense need. He continued swaying back and forth until finally, I started to relax. That’s when his tongue dominated mine, sweeping back and forth as he explored the dark recesses. The tangy taste of scotch mixed with a hint of cinnamon this time, the combination of flavors keeping the fire burning red-hot.

Everything about the moment was as confusing as it was exciting. I felt as if I was betraying my sister yet the thought of never seeing him again was unacceptable. He lifted me off my feet, spinning me around as the heated kiss continued. First one heel was tossed aside then the other. When he lowered me

to my feet, he crawled one hand down my side, sliding his fingers underneath my dress.

I tensed, gasping into his mouth the second he swirled the tip of his finger around my lace-covered clit. Then he broke the kiss, taking several ragged breaths, pushing his hand under my chin.

“My wet baby,” he growled then raked his teeth from one side of my jaw to the other.

“Never.”

“You’re such a bad liar.” His chuckle was dark and unforgiving, setting another wave of electric jolts dancing down my spine. I kneaded his chest before struggling to unfasten a button, allowing me better access to his carved chest.

“Remember, *bellissima principessa*, you will never be in control.”

The words should be a turn-off, but they were just the opposite, pushing my thoughts into a blissful fog.

Before I realized it, he’d moved me to the edge of the bed, using his upper body strength to gently ease me down ever so slowly. Then he backed away, yanking off his shirt within seconds.

I remained trembling as I watched him undress, this time taking his time as if there was no one else around but the two of us. The fact everything about him remained intoxicating was no longer a surprise. He was always in complete control of his actions, his emotions and everything and everyone around him.

In truth, I could learn something from him, studying his methodologies in handling people. For now, I was allowing myself another gift, basking in his stunning physique. When he was fully undressed, I licked my lips involuntarily in appreciation. I leaned back on the bed, my mouth watering at the sight of his purple cockhead, his shaft throbbing. Even the veins on both sides were attractive, just like the slight curve I hadn’t noticed before.

Maybe that's why I'd orgasmed so quickly.

"No woman has ever looked at me with such intense desire."

"I doubt that."

"It's true, baby girl." When he approached, I didn't tense, instead reaching out, using the tip of my index finger, sliding it ever so slowly down the vein on his cock to his balls. Then I glanced into his hooded eyes, caught up in the shimmering darkness as he offered a glimpse of his soul.

While brief, I was stunned by the depth, something I hadn't expected. Yet as soon as I allowed myself to be mesmerized it was gone. He placed his knee onto the bed, quickly removing my dress. Then he cupped both breasts as he slowly lowered me to the bed.

"The filthy things I want to do to you. And I will in time." He straddled my thighs, lowering his head and swirling his tongue around one nipple then the other. "Hands over your head."

His voice was dark, barely a whisper and for some crazy reason, I obeyed him without hesitation. I couldn't blink, refused to take a deep breath as I watched him caressing me, biting then licking my hardened buds, taking his time.

Seconds later, I closed my eyes, biting my lower lip to keep from making a single sound. He felt the weight change and when he pressed his lips between my breasts, I arched my back.

"Oh..."

"My good girl. Don't move." He laughed softly and continued kissing and licking my overheated skin, tickling sensations following.

I took several scattered breaths, fighting to get enough air into my lungs as he continued his exploration. The need for him only increased as he eased down, dragging his tongue down my stomach, rolling the tip around my bellybutton. When he slipped his fingers under the thin elastic of my thong, I bit my bottom lip to keep from screaming.

I didn't want to risk the chance of anyone interrupting us, the private moment something I would keep secret.

Just like the one from before.

Admonishing myself wasn't on the menu and I shoved it aside. I was a big girl. I could make my own decisions. Beseechingly slowly, he eased my panties down my legs, freeing me of the hindrance only a few seconds later.

Blinking rapidly, a sudden wave of embarrassment washed over me as he lifted and pushed my knees against the comforter. Yet if he noticed it wasn't obvious, or maybe he was far too thirsty, dropping his head and burying his face into my wetness.

"Oh. God. Oh. My. God." I laughed nervously, tossing my head from side to side. Tonight, there would be no tender touch, no gentleness as I'd experienced the night before. On this night, he was commanding my body to become his, refusing to accept that I was the innocent flower as he'd called me before.

And I certainly didn't want to be, preferring to bask in the wave of filth and sin as he claimed every inch of me. I kept my back arched, struggling to hold my arms in place as required, forced to clasp my fingers together or my obedience would fail.

He issued a series of guttural sounds as he swirled his tongue around my clit several times. Then he pulled the tender tissue into his mouth as he wrapped both his arms around my thighs, keeping me wide open. I'd never felt so exposed or vulnerable, yet it was freeing, which wasn't something I'd expected.

"Oh... that feels so... good." I was almost incoherent, tossing my head back and forth as he licked all the way down the length of my pussy before burying his tongue into my aching channel. Then he licked me as if a man who'd spent a year in the desert, so thirsty he couldn't stop.

With every animalistic sound he made, every swipe of his rough tongue, I was pulled closer to nirvana. When he dared add a single finger, pumping in and out slowly, I bucked my

hips, now gasping for air greedily. I heard my scattered moans and didn't care, the bliss the man was providing something I'd fantasized about, trying to achieve with my cheap vibrator.

It had never worked.

The man's tongue was lethal. The moment he added two additional fingers, flexing them open as he thrust hard and fast, I was pushed to the point of no return.

"Oh. Oh. Oh! I'm going to..." I couldn't make out the single word before the orgasm shattered through me like glass pummeled by a hammer. I jerked up from the bed, no sound coming from my throat. I couldn't see, couldn't think clearly, and if this was what ecstasy was like, I never wanted it to end.

"That's it, sweet kitten. Come for me. Let it go."

It was as if I'd never be able to ignore his command. I bucked hard as another wave of sensations tore through me, thoughts in my mind spinning out of control. How could anything so dark and dangerous feel so spectacular?

He refused to let me go, feasting until he obtained his fill, my body ravaged into exhaustion. When he finally pulled back, he rose onto his knees, glancing down at me with a hard-edged look.

The man was a true savage but he'd let his guard down with me. Perhaps it was his gift in return, allowing me to catch a glimpse of the broken man inside, someone who'd never been allowed a chance at happiness. He raked his hands through his hair before moving between my legs.

As he lowered his body, our eyes locked together and suddenly all time stopped. There was no pretense, no additional foreplay as there had been the night before. He was far too taken by the beast that lurked inside of him, experiencing a dark craving that I knew would eventually consume us both.

A gasp rushed up from my throat as he thrust the entire length of his cock inside, my pussy muscles spasming almost immediately.

"God, even tighter," he muttered, taking several deep breaths. He pulled out, plunging into me again, the force he used

rocking the bed.

I threw both legs around him, wrapping my feet together. He pulled away, a dangerous smile curling on his lips, his eyes darting back and forth.

“You’re such a bad girl. What will I do with you?”

The question was rhetorical. He would do any damn thing he wanted to me. We both knew it. I was his secret little prisoner, a kitten held captive, longing for a bowl of sweet milk. He was my gluttonous craving, a taste of forbidden fruit. And he’d be my greatest secret, one I promised myself to take to the grave.

Mattia developed a rhythm, driving in long and even strokes, pressing one hand against the bedding so he could study my every reaction. I adored the glassiness to his eyes, the way his pupils had dilated just like mine. The ache in my pussy from the night before was quickly replaced with such euphoria I couldn’t catch my breath.

I rolled one hand over his shoulder, marveling in how his muscles felt under the tips of my fingers. Being lost in him wasn’t nearly as horrible as I’d believed.

“Oh, yes. So good.”

He grinned after hearing my words, yanking one of my legs up even higher. Then he pressed his lips against the inside of my thigh, driving the tickling sensations to a higher level. I couldn’t believe the continuous jolts of electricity soaring from one of us to the other, keeping us tethered together. Would that last? Would I feel his presence any time he was close? A part of me wanted to, hoping that we would always feel this close.

Even if I knew better.

People like us weren’t destined to be happy. That wasn’t allowed, karma precluding the chance to capture joy. I willed the ugliness away, raking my nails down his chest. I wanted to leave a mark, to have something he could remember me by.

He might think I was his prisoner, but I would escape his clutches one way or the other. Maybe I wanted to see if the predator would initiate a hunt. Or just keep me in close

proximity until the time was right, attaching a leash to a collar. The thought was as exciting as it was intriguing.

As his muscles continued to tense, I was certain he was ready to fill me with his seed.

But I was wrong.

He pulled all the way out and I reacted immediately, whimpering as I experienced the loss. Grinning, he wagged his finger.

“Don’t worry, *bellissima principessa*. I’m not finished with you yet. My appetite is far too significant.” He backed away, easing me up from the bed then tossing me onto all fours.

Squealing, I reacted instinctively, fighting to crawl and claw my way off the bed. I was quickly handled, the man yanking his belt from the comforter, wrapping the thick leather around my throat, shoving the end through the buckle. Before I could react, he’d pulled the strap all the way through, encircling my neck. Then he tugged with enough force, I was jerked back by a few inches.

“Bad little girls are chained. Is that what you want, my little kitten? Do I need to restrain you when I fuck every hole?” He cracked his hand from one side of my bottom to the other, the stinging sensations instant and I yelped. “Do I need to punish you every day until you surrender?”

I pushed up from the bed with one hand, using the other to try to dig my fingers under the strap. He was having none of it, allowing me to see when he wrapped the end around his hand, his grip firm. I wasn’t going anywhere until he allowed it.

“Now, I’m going to finish fucking you just like you deserve. Next time, I’ll take your tight asshole.”

His filthy words were such a powerful aphrodisiac that I couldn’t react. When he pulled on the belt, squeezing my neck, I should have become terrified, but another wave of excitement tore through me, my core heated to an explosive level. My reaction was crazy, my behavior totally unusual, but everything about the man brought such incredible desire that I was simply left breathless.

He reared back onto his knees, using his other hand to return the tip of his cock just inside my aching pussy. Then he slowly pushed the full length into my womb.

Gasping, I closed my eyes, kneading the bed like a kitty cat would do, mewling softly as he started to fuck me. Within seconds, his actions became more brutal, the hard slapping of his hips against my bruised ass mixing with our animalistic sounds. He tightened the belt even more, narrowing the passage of air until another series of stars floated in front of my eyes.

“Un giorno potrò fotterti a qualsiasi ora e in qualsiasi momento che desidero. E lo farò, dolce principessa. Lo farò.”

His words created an entire wave of moans, my heart thudding against my chest.

One day I’ll be able to fuck you any hour and at any moment that I crave. And I will, sweet princess. I will.

With my eyes cinched shut, my heart reverberating in my ears, his whispered words echoed. They also scintillated. And I wasn’t just lost in the man. I was spun in a web of gold, cocooned until the time was right.

Whether a month, a year, or longer, I would wait for him.

The man who’d taken my innocence and in turn, provided me with the greatest gift of all.

An awakening of my soul.

As he fucked me long and hard, the belt tightening even more, I was reminded how alive he made me feel. And how wanted.

“My beautiful baby. My perfect princess. Come for me. Come with me.”

His command was husky yet driven, his needs as intense as mine. And there no way I would ever disobey him again.

As a climax slowly drifted into my body, I knew without a doubt he was ready to erupt deep inside. I squeezed my muscles, the powerful orgasm sweeping through me like another torrent of wildfire.

The sweet release was entirely different, the tumultuous flames crisscrossing every inch of my body likely leaving permanent scars. He twisted his hand around the thick strap, cinching the belt around my neck, erupting deep inside as a single orgasm turned into a cataclysm of electricity. And in those glorious moments as surreal ecstasy powered through me, I knew without a doubt the monstrous man with the eyes of a devil had already captured my heart.

After all, I'd fallen hopelessly and recklessly in love with the enemy.

Now there was no going back.

CHAPTER 14



“There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.”

—Aldous Huxley

Six years later...

Mattia

Business as usual.

Another day in paradise.

I chuckled at the thought. In truth, I was a lucky man, or so I continued to hear.

“What is so urgent?” I asked as I strode into D’Artagnan’s office. The Don stood behind his desk, tenser than I’d seen him in months. Even the look on his face suggested imminent danger. Our combined regime had been experiencing a controlled growth, enough that we’d doubled our wealth in less than a year.

The DeLuca–Lazarro Empire was the strongest of the Five Families in Italy, our powerful hold on portions of our beloved country secure. In the almost five years since the alliance had been entered into, things in our respective regimes had changed significantly.

We were respected. We were wealthy.

And we were feared.

Especially since we'd beaten several of our enemies both on home turf and abroad. No one dared fuck with us for fear of retaliation.

Including torturous death.

We'd beaten the Russians not once but twice, sending hundreds of their soldiers to early graves. We'd fought off the American scum who'd become determined to not only enter our country but attack our America Cosa Nostra brethren as well. And we'd become powerhouses in several industries.

However, I'd never allowed my guard to fall, especially since none of us could place our trust in the remaining three regimes of the Five Families. We continued to work together, but the peace would always been a thin veil of pretense and nothing more. Seeing Dar this way meant trouble was brewing. He knew I'd have his back, which was a far cry from what I'd said six years before.

Wherever I went, I created destruction, what some would call mayhem, but it was required in our brutal world. Being forced to tamp down my natural urges had been difficult.

Somehow, I could tell by the expression he wore that it was all about to change.

Things had turned out very differently than I'd anticipated years before. I'd been a bitter fool after my father's death, blaming D'Artagnan when he'd been the one to save my life. It had taken me months to pledge my allegiance to him, but in the end, working together had created a much more powerful empire.

"We have an issue," my brother snarled then fisted his hand, his brow furrowing. While he and I had sparred over the years, my distaste for bringing a stable boy into our *famiglia*, he'd proven his worth, allowing for my continued loyalty. In turn, I held an empire of my own, controlling every aspect of both our legitimate and more lucrative business in several countries.

And I did so with an iron fist.

I also held a seat at the Five Families' table along with Enzo DeLuca at D'Artagnan's insistence, the old regimes soon to be a thing of the past. Even Dar's wife, the lovely and very talented Lucia was considered a consulting member of the *famiglia*. It was a good time to be alive, even though there would always be enemies determined to take a part of our lucrative territory.

Italy was still in significant control of the majority of mafia syndicates, almost every other country little more than a representation of our business model. The original Five Families had taken recent hits, but with the changes made, every regime was more powerful than before.

"That much I could tell. What is it? The Russians rearing their ugly heads again? The hacker causing issues?" The Bratva out of Moscow had made two plays to crush Italy, the last time resulting in the Pakhan losing his life. Now his worthless son was in hiding, regrouping or so we'd heard through our sources. If the insect of a man showed himself again, I'd be the one to chop off his head, serving it up on a silver platter for his people to see.

"The hacker has been quite... formidable," he said more in passing, which meant that wasn't the situation he was worried about. However, it was something we'd need to deal with on a more formal basis at some point.

Given the nature of our business, computers played a significant role, our security systems tightened over the years but not enough that leaks weren't continually occurring. A hacker had found a way in, certain information leaked on the dark web. While the details provided could be damaging, including offshore account numbers that I had no doubt had been found, it would seem the hacker was playing a game with us. Stepping in and leaving a signature, taking nothing more than a token. Merely to let us know they'd been there.

And to embarrass the fuck out of the most powerful crime syndicate in the world.

"Then if not our infamous hacker, what could be so troubling? Does this have anything to do with the Russians or the

Brazilian Cartel?” While nothing was as I thought it would be after the alliance, I’d made good on using my contacts to provide a connection with the Brazilian diamond mines, allowing for additional trades to occur from other countries.

“I don’t know who but yes, our various suppliers are being threatened, our brokerage firm as well.” He planted his hands on his desk, taking a deep breath as he looked into my eyes. Hard. It was as if he was searching my soul for answers. He knew better than most I didn’t have a soul. However, not knowing the danger facing us was a death sentence, more so than normal.

“Okay. Then what’s the full issue?”

“Two things. Through several of our reliable sources, I received information that someone is attacking us from different sides, including through our diamond brokerage firm in America. Their maneuvers are clever, so much so that if we didn’t keep a tight hold, items would be missed.”

The lucrative diamond brokerage had been brought from the ground up then risen from the ashes after another attack. It was worth billions, our most prized legitimate business. “Meaning what? Leaking information?” I’d provided a report that indicated our sales had taken a hit, recommending he take a closer look. Evidently, his findings indicated I’d been right. It wasn’t something I was happy about.

“Not that I can tell. However, our sources are drying up. We’re being refused shipments. To that end, Enzo left for the States yesterday to try and find out the person or corporation behind the threats. You can make contact with your people as well, but I have a feeling they won’t tell you anything.”

“They’re being threatened.”

“It looks that way. We’ve been through this before, but I don’t like where it’s headed. The person responsible is undermining our operations from the ground up instead of the other way around. Brilliant and dangerous.”

In truth, what he was describing was a typical day at the office, but sensing he was more concerned than usual raised my

hackles. If the person found his way in through the ground floor, then the sky was the limit. The old adage worked far too well in this sense. “Fuck. Then we need to throw out a tempting web for them to climb into.”

“Yeah, but first things first. That leads us to the next and bigger issue,” he continued. “And right now, this needs to stay between you and me. Do you understand me?”

I walked closer, narrowing my eyes. There was nothing he didn't tell Lucia. They were closer than any two people I'd ever known before. Her influence on the entire regime was highly respected, her adoration for Dar what freaking novels were made of.

For D'Artagnan to be this deeply concerned meant I should be as well.

“Talk to me, brother.”

When I called him by the familiar name, he usually grinned since we had a contemptuous relationship.

Not today. His face was grim, his eyes full of anger.

“Lucia's sister is in danger.”

“Sophia?” I asked, taking a deep breath.

He nodded.

Jesus. Fucking Christ.

I was almost gutted with the news, a wave of anxiety tearing through me. A fleeting series of images rolled into the forefront of my mind, something I'd tried to avoid for months now.

Her face.

Her smile.

Her voluptuous body.

The obsessive need I'd felt before came crashing down again, threatening to crush my resolve. Fuck. “How?” My growl was dark, ominous, and extremely possessive and I could tell by the shocked look on Dar's face that he'd had no idea.

The fact the woman I continued to crave was in danger brought an immediate level of rage that I hadn't experienced in a long time. I took a deep breath, holding it in my lungs. But I sensed my body was shaking involuntarily, dissolving the promise I'd made to her sister under duress.

"If you dare touch my sister, I will do everything in my power to destroy you, Mattia. Now I have the method of doing so. All I need to do is explain the situation to D'Artagnan and you will be exiled."

"I don't give a shit about money or power, Lucia. I care about Sophia."

"Fuck you. You're nothing but an animal. I will never allow you to touch her."

The ugly words had remained in the forefront of my mind on purpose. I'd finally honored a pledge I'd made to her, even though everything in my soul had balked against it. Fate was a cruel beast.

I allowed the six years to retreat if only for a few seconds, the contract I'd signed with her father for her hand in marriage something I pulled out of my safe every so often. Fuck. The dark craving I'd had for her years before returned in full force, something I'd promised myself I wouldn't allow and couldn't afford at this point.

Dar studied me carefully, narrowing his eyes. "I hadn't remembered you'd thought of her fondly. In fact, I was told you couldn't stand her. Interesting."

"Don't go there, Dar. Let it alone."

"Unfortunately, that's not possible." He narrowed his eyes, studying me carefully. "This danger can't be avoided."

He had no understanding of what had occurred between us six years before. Sophia had sworn she hated me, running away from everything including her family. Then the shit had hit the fan less than two years later, her father murdered. Since then,

I'd tried to stay away even though I wasn't entirely certain why. I had an ironclad contract. Fuck. The past was coming back to haunt me.

"What the fuck happened?" I hissed.

"The circumstances are sketchy at this point."

I closed my eyes, rubbing the ache behind them. She'd made it perfectly clear all those years ago that she'd never wanted to see me again. What Lucia had threatened meant little in comparison to the vile hatred Sophia had of me.

While I wasn't entirely certain of the reason, given what had occurred over the last few years with both our families facing tremendous tragedies, I'd honored her demands. Given the fact we'd formed the alliance, the additional uptake in business taxing as well as the battles with the Bratva, I'd had little time to think of a personal life.

But that hadn't kept me away from her, at least not entirely.

I'd stalked the beautiful princess, remaining obsessed with her, my hunger often out of hand. And it had taken every ounce of strength in what had been left of my blackened soul to walk away. It had seemed necessary at the time. Now I wasn't so certain. She'd remained a sitting duck, a weak link to the entire family.

After her admittance of hatred, I'd thrown myself into keeping one woman on my arm or another, my blind attempt at soothing the ache that had never healed. No one could compare to my beautiful princess so I'd stopped trying. Christ. I still had it bad for the woman but my sense of obligation to the alliance had prevented me from fulfilling a promise I'd made to her. Hell, I wondered if she even remembered or cared at this point. Other than hating me, of course. "Why is she even on the radar?"

"I'm not entirely certain of everything that went down, but she was abducted. Of that I'm certain."

"What the fuck? For what?" I slammed my hand on his desk.

"Calm down, Mattia. Ransom doesn't seem like the reason, but so far, her disappearance remains a mystery."

“Was she still in school? Was she taken from the campus? Doesn’t she have a security detail?” I’d purposely done everything I could to shut her out of my life. If not, I’d have lost my mind. However, I still knew every detail about her existence, but that wasn’t something I was willing to disclose to Dar or anyone else for that matter.

He looked at me in amusement, his brows furrowed. “She’s almost twenty-five, old man. She’s a highly successful business owner, her art brokerage firm making millions. She also dabbles in security. And yes, of course I keep soldiers watching her. But you already knew all this. Didn’t you?”

I looked away.

“Didn’t you?” he demanded.

“Yes. What kind of security is she involved in?” That part I hadn’t known. Security. That was out of the blue. I’d learned about her penchant for computers years before but had assumed she was doing so because of college.

“Clueless. Even Lucia doesn’t know. Sophia was determined to have a life entirely on her own and I allowed it with Lucia’s encouragement. What don’t I know?”

“I said leave it.”

“And I said that’s impossible. Sophia is a member of this family and because of that would be considered a valuable commodity to any one of our enemies. Granted, I still don’t see her brokerage firm as being the reason for her abduction. However, we need to figure out the reason quickly if we have any hopes of keeping our women protected.”

“The two situations aren’t coincidental,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Doubtful.”

Maybe she’d been taken because she was a mafia princess, one of the few remaining within the borders of Italy. The Five Families likely knew of the contract given Roberto had taken her off the market at my request. Whether or not they’d fit all the pieces of the puzzle together didn’t concern me in the least. A hell of a lot of things had changed in the last six years.

What did trouble me was that D'Artagnan had no idea about the contract. There was no doubt in my mind it would create a rift between us given Lucia still didn't trust me. She had her reasons, including what happened years before with the death of our fathers, but this would set her off. Fuck. Secrets and lies were the one thing that would always derail a family.

"What do you need me to do?" I asked. "Maybe I should ask, who do you want me to kill?"

"For you to take a team and extract her. Bring her to this estate where she can be placed under twenty-four-hour surveillance. And do so quickly. You're the only one I trust who can make this happen, Mattia."

Fuck. Now I was taking orders like a typical soldier? Exhaling, I did what I could to shut down my attitude. I was angry at myself.

"She won't want to have anything to do with me, Dar."

"Uh-huh. Now we're getting somewhere. Maybe that's the case, but it's not up to her. As I said, she's a member of this family and as of right now, I'm the Don. Which means she is required to follow my rules."

It was interesting he wasn't suggesting that I did as well. He knew what would happen.

"You don't know her very well," I said, laughing at his words. Our family by way of marriage. The word held an entirely different meaning to me. Sophia likely didn't know that I'd employed soldiers over the years to keep track of her, ensuring her safety even though her father had employed two and D'Artagnan had continued to do so after our alliance was formed at Lucia's insistence.

"And you do?" he asked. I could easily tell his curiosity was increasing. He drummed his fingers on his desk, waiting for my reply.

I'd wanted my own eyes and ears kept on her, which had done nothing but enlarge the significant rift between us. So I'd backed off after our last confrontation, Sophia making it very clear that she didn't want anything to do with me. She'd even

held my men at gunpoint until I'd arrived. That was almost two years before.

However, while she and I were less than friendly, that didn't mean her abduction wouldn't cause significant strife to the family. I wasn't foolish enough not to understand the ramifications if that were to happen. Goddamn it. I'd gone against everything that I knew to be right. In doing so, I failed the only woman I'd given a damn about.

"Yeah, I do. How do you know she's been threatened?"

He glared at me, his eyes spinning into darkness. Then he tossed a single piece of paper in my direction. "Because this was delivered by courier early this morning."

I grabbed the note, the words written in what appeared to be blood.

The youngest daughter will be sacrificed because of the choices you made.

Exhaling, I tossed it onto his desk. "The courier?"

"Grilled and sent away. Nothing more than a kid working for a living for a company who has no clue what's inside various envelopes and packages," he said, gritting his teeth.

"But you're certain she's been taken."

"Yes."

"How?"

He seemed put off by my constant questions.

"Because I can't get in touch with Sophia or the two soldiers protecting her. But I did receive this message an hour ago." He held up his phone, replaying a voice recording. The woman's voice held a tremor of fear.

"D'Artagnan. I can't get in touch with either one of my soldiers. Something is wrong. Oh, my God, I—"

The call was dropped, but not before hearing a dark, male chuckle in the background. My blood boiled. Who would dare fuck with my family? I'd sworn to protect the regime and would do so without question.

“I must admit, I’d surprised at your reaction, Mattia. I know you too well. Given Lucia mentioned Sophia isn’t fond of you now, I feel I need to know the reason why. You’re the only one I can trust with this mission, but I won’t place Sophia’s life into additional jeopardy if there’s a larger issue. Lucia would kill me.”

Sighing, I glanced out the window, remembering how incredible she’d looked the night she’d stepped into my club. I could swear the taste of her lingered in my mouth. And every time I gathered a scent of vanilla and jasmine, I looked to see if she was close. “She and I have a history.”

“Meaning?”

Fuck. I’d never been so uncomfortable in my life.

“Meaning I was her first. And I told her she belonged to me. That was when she was nineteen.”

The silence was exactly what I’d expected. “Well. Fuck. Let me guess. There’s more to the story.”

Laughing bitterly, I scrubbed my jaw. “Isn’t there always?”

“Tell me the truth.”

“I have a contract signed by her father for her hand in marriage. I refused to allow any other man to touch her.”

“Then why didn’t you marry her?”

“You mean other than suddenly our respective families found themselves in the middle of a war and you suddenly crossed our paths with the DeLucas?”

He snorted. “Yeah, other than that. Nothing stops you from taking what you want.”

“I honored a promise.”

He closed his eyes, shaking his head. “Okay. Tell the rest.”

I did. And when I was finished, I turned my head toward him. Seeing the twinkle in his eyes was interesting given I’d expected anger. The tension was awkward until he chuckled under his breath.

“Do you love her?” he finally asked.

The question was one I’d asked myself a dozen times. Until today, I’d never admitted it, including to myself. “Yes.”

When he looked away, his brow hitching, I could tell he was putting some pieces together.

“What is it?” Now I was demanding.

He closed and rubbed his eyes. “Lucia led Sophia to believe you were responsible for my death.”

His death. The truth was that D’Artagnan had been used as a pawn, our father making good on a promise made by adopting him. It had been nothing more than a business transaction, but for years Lucia had believed he’d died in the fire. “That’s why Lucia didn’t want me with her.”

“She still believes you had something to do with my family dying.”

“Do you?”

Dar looked into my eyes then shook his head. “I did once, but no longer.”

The lies had taken years from both of us, greed because of our father’s need for power almost stripping us of everything that had been important. Even rotting in his grave, our father still held some sense of control.

“Then you’re the only man for the job, Mattia. You’re the only man I can trust completely. I’ll handle Lucia when the time is right. Bring Sophia home to her family. And to the man who loves her. Then we’ll see about planning a wedding.”

“She won’t agree to it.”

“You’ll learn something quickly, Mattia. Women are strangely in control yet ruled by their hearts. If you have a connection, it was never broken, just lying in hibernation. It’s an area I have expertise in.”

For once, I could agree. Still, he didn’t know Sophia like I did.

“We shall see. She is a tough girl. Beautiful. Ballsy. Opinionated.”

“Which makes her perfect for you. So is Lucia, by the way.” He laughed. “One thing is certain. This family shit is tougher than I believed. Trust me, you’ll see.”

Family. It’s nothing like either one of us had been able to understand, the brutality of our upbringing preventing anything remotely normal. I’d watched him from afar as D’Artagnan had fallen for the woman he’d been sent to kill. She’d broken through the barrier and I’d wanted the exact same experience.

Once upon a time I’d allowed the woman I’d fallen hard for to slip from my fingers. That would never happen again.

Sophia Lazarro had always been mine.

I stared at him for a few seconds then nodded. “I’ll leave within the hour. And don’t worry, Dar. I will bring Sophia home.”

Even if I had to burn down Paris to do so.

CHAPTER 15



*T*wo days earlier...
Sophia

Panic.

I'd been prone to panic attacks for several years, hiding them behind a fake smile and a pretense that I was a good girl while my insides were churning. There were always reasons for me to look over my shoulder, less in the recent months, but that didn't mean I didn't follow my instincts. Every. Single. Time. At least usually. Why did it suddenly feel as if I'd gotten too careless?

After all, I came from a wealthy, dangerous, and brutal family with dozens of enemies in every corner of the world. Yet I refused to remain a pampered pet, living behind closed and locked doors in Italy. Paris was the only city where I wanted to live. At least it was far enough away from my past.

And someone I was determined to hate.

Just thinking about Mattia and his possessive nature made me cringe and my heart flutter at the same time. I hated him. I wanted him. The dichotomy continued to drive me crazy even after all these years. He'd wanted control over me. I'd refused. He'd been my first.

And my last.

Maybe that meant he had control after all.

I glanced into the rearview mirror, trying to keep my wits about me as I weaved through heavy traffic.

My father had tried to protect me, as much as the savage beast could do. My sister had hidden me away from as many horrors as possible with our family. And the bodyguards who'd remained with me over the years had been a shield from assassins and other thugs. Sadly, they'd both retired, the two new guys about as animated as concrete statues. Still, they'd provided a level of comfort, two shadows allowing me to enjoy my life.

Now I almost wished that I'd allowed Mattia to keep his men in the background. Shit. Why was it that any time I felt uncomfortable or worried that I was in danger, the larger-than-life man rushed into the forefront of my mind? I'd shoved him out of my life completely after realizing he'd entered into business with my father years before.

Or so it had seemed even though it had never been confirmed. However, what Lucia had told me about when D'Artagnan had lost his family had been enough to enable me to realize the man was pure evil.

Too bad my body continued to crave him.

I shoved aside the thoughts, forced to accept he wasn't here to save me. I had to do so by myself. I'd trained for this, had worked hard to maintain an anonymous persona, known as the Spider for my ability to get inside the most secure computer systems. While I adored working with art, my bread and butter was working in the middle of night, hired by various sources to hack into mainframe systems. My fee was significant, but there were plenty of people willing to pay the exorbitant sum. I'd gone to great lengths to maintain my anonymity, including leaving clues every so often that had allowed a magical mystery identity to form across the dark web.

I was seen as a man living in the United States. Even the Feds believed that to be the case.

But there was something wrong. I was certain of it. As if I'd been discovered. How? If I was right, there wouldn't be any

second chances. I'd played a game of Russian roulette and this could be the last bullet in the weapon.

My skin crawled from the knowledge, tremors skating through my system. As I glanced into the rearview mirror again, I didn't see the SUV that usually followed behind. While my bodyguards had been told in no uncertain terms to keep their distance, this was ridiculous. I'd tried calling both numbers provided in a case of emergency. The calls had gone straight to voicemail.

I had to get back to my apartment where I kept a weapon. I didn't hesitate to jam my foot down on the accelerator, trying to keep my wits about me as I drove through the streets of Paris. I loved everything about the city including the festive atmosphere, the food, and the Parisian people. While I missed being in Italy where I grew up, especially my sister Lucia, I'd been there so rarely that I considered France my home now.

Liar. Liar.

The little voice hadn't pestered me in months. Okay, so I was lying to myself, doing my best to keep my distance from Mattia. If I didn't, I wasn't certain I would be able to keep my resolve around him.

College was far behind me, but I'd parlayed both the significant time spent away from my family and my education into a multimillion-dollar regime of my own. I didn't need the family fortune or their connections, enjoying all that Paris had to offer. Unfortunately, I sensed it was all coming to a crashing halt. Maybe I'd been living in my bubble for far too long, refusing to acknowledge that dangers existed all around.

Especially for a girl from a savage family.

My thoughts drifted to Mattia again. The man had been a shadow in my life until recent years. I'd grown accustomed to seeing him on corners and inside bistros. It had been almost a game of cat and mouse. Now even he wasn't here to protect me.

My breathing labored, I did everything I could to keep from fainting, which is what happened when I was overwrought.

My fingers were white knuckled around the steering wheel as I drove, ignoring the speed limit. I was shocked that I didn't once see the SUV trailing behind as usual, just another day in my life, their service done without complaining.

But I did see a dark red vehicle remaining three car lengths behind. I had to know if the driver was following me. I knew the streets like the back of my hand, concentrating on how to try to get away from whoever was following me. I waited until the last minute to make a sharp right turn, speeding down the road then making another turn quickly. There was more traffic, forcing me to slow down.

I kept looking in the rearview mirror. After two minutes had passed, I couldn't see the car any longer and breathed a sigh of relief.

Until I went through the next intersection, noticing the same vehicle waiting to make a turn to be able to follow me. Now I knew the only hope I had was getting to my apartment, an address only the most trusted people in my world knew. I had a roommate, but she'd been checked and rechecked over the years, becoming a good friend, helping keep the loneliness away. I knew I could trust her. I also needed to try to get her to safety.

Maneuvering my car at a high rate of speed, I managed to place a call to her cell phone. "Fuck. Fuck." It went to voicemail as well. As soon as I heard the beep, I started rattling off.

"Margot. It's Sophia. Get out of the apartment. Now. Just do it and I'll call you later. Please listen to me." I lived in a gorgeous apartment in the heart of the city, enjoying the company having a roommate provided. Now my attempt at being normal had likely placed her life in danger.

Issuing a warning was all I could do. I tossed my phone and became a crazy driver, barely missing two cars in my attempt to get away. Every few seconds I glanced into the mirror. At least given the traffic and my insane but trained driving, I was making headway. When I pulled onto my street, I wasted no time, thanking God I found a close parking space.

I was out of the car and running down the sidewalk in seconds, bolting up the two flights of stairs, my hands shaking but managing to drive the key into the lock. Then I flew in, slamming the door and locking it, breathless with terror.

When I turned around, my entire world fell apart.

I'd been tracked down, a monster sitting in a chair waiting for my arrival.

"Hello, Sophia. I'm glad you could make the party." The dark voice held an unrecognizable accent, but the intent was clear. "Or should I call you the Spider? You and I have a lot to talk about. Don't we?"

I'd been right. Danger had found me.

The masked man held Margot at gunpoint, her tiny whimpers muffled by the gag shoved into her mouth.

"Who the fuck are you and what do you want with me?" I snarled, trying to pretend I had no clue what the assailant was talking about.

"My, such a nasty mouth for a beautiful princess."

I couldn't place his accent, nor could I make out his features, but even though I'd been trained in self-defense, I was no match for the huge man and I sensed he'd kill my roommate without hesitation. He waved his gun at my friend, acting as if he was going to shoot her.

"Leave her alone. She has nothing to do with this." While my skin crawled, I refused to allow anything to happen to her. She didn't sign up for my world.

"Only if you agree to come with me."

The man was nuts, but I had to do something. I shifted closer, able to head toward the kitchen given the layout of the small apartment. "Fine. Let her go and I will."

Either the assailant was a fool or an arrogant asshole, but I used it to my advantage. When he shoved her away, coming for me, I reacted without hesitation. We both raced into the bedroom and I slammed and locked the door, grabbing my phone immediately.

“What’s happening?” Margot asked.

“Leave by the balcony. Do it!” I flew toward the closet, struggling to find my weapon as I dialed D’Artagnan’s number. I had to let someone know what happening.

The door seemed to explode, kicked in with explosive force.

The rush of adrenaline was rushing through my system was immediate, and I wrapped my hand around the weapon. I kept it loaded but I struggled to remove the safety as he advanced, Margot screaming.

“You bitch,” he snarled.

“D’Artagnan. I can’t get in touch with either one of my soldiers. Something is wrong. Oh, my God, I—”

I didn’t get a chance to finish the sentence. He raised his arm, the glint of the weapon in his hand shimmering from the bright sun and I saw a tattoo: a cross with an upside-down skull dripping with blood.

Then he smashed the weapon against my...

CHAPTER 16



S ophia

“Je dis qu’on baise la chatte.”

I say we fuck the cunt.

The words echoed from somewhere, a deep foggy haze of ugliness nipping at my ears, drawing me from the black abyss where I’d been. But I heard them clearly, not the first nasty comment made in French by one of the three men who occasionally came and went from the cinderblock prison I’d been shoved in.

Time meant nothing, days and nights indistinguishable, but I was certain I’d been held hostage for at least three days. My body was weak from lack of food and water, my muscles aching. But my mind was sharp. I’d paid attention to everything that had been said, the monsters enjoying throwing out insults and threats every time they entered the space.

I dragged my tongue across my cracked lips, loathing the fact I’d issued a strangled whimper. The last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to myself.

“The little bitch is awake.” The comment was made in English this time. Did they think I couldn’t understand? I almost laughed but wasn’t at the point of being able to fight them.

Yet.

But I would.

One of the guards dared to walk closer, crouching down in front of me. “That’s not what the boss wants. She’s being saved. She’s useful.” His voice held a hint of kindness, more so than the other pig who’d groped me more than once when he thought I was sleeping.

“Women are only useful for fucking.” The fucker’s laugh had already gotten on my nerves.

“She’s a hacker. Do you believe that?”

An icy chill coursed through my veins.

The pig snorted. “Her? That’s fucking crap, man.”

“The boss wants her saved. That’s all I know.”

I remembered everything about being taken, including being shoved into the trunk of a vehicle. But the fucker staring at me with lust in his eyes would die first, and I would enjoy every minute of driving the shank I’d made from the springs of the iron bed into his eyes.

One slice after another.

I still had no understanding of the identities of my captors, the various languages being spoken confusing, but at this point it didn’t matter. After being dumped inside the wretched prison, I’d screamed at first, until the soldier leaning against the wall had shut me up with his fist. It didn’t matter that I was a woman. There was no code of ethics for monsters.

I kept as quiet as possible, stretching my fingers until I was able to wrap my hand around the sharp blade I’d hidden, the barbs digging into my flesh. The dumb bastards had thought they’d bested me, not bothering to install cameras inside the dingy space. Little did they know what I had planned. Whatever rival had challenged my family was holding me as ransom, which meant I wouldn’t survive the abduction.

The stench in the space was overwhelming, the heat brutal. Sweat beaded across my face and neck, what little I was wearing soaked. How long had I been here?

“One taste won’t hurt.” The first soldier advanced, shoving the other one away. “Now, if you tell anyone, you die. You got it?”

“Your funeral, man,” the second muttered.

I tensed as the second soldier cursed in yet another foreign language. Where were these dudes actually from? And where had I been taken?

The first laughed as he crowded my space, cupping my breast painfully. “Your family will pay for what they did, you stupid bitch.”

I opened my eyes, darting them from the second man back to the pig leering at me. “*Vous allez mourir.*” You’re going to die. I grinned after issuing the succinct words, studying both men, hunting for recognition on their faces and in their uniforms. Their French was crude, which meant they were attempting to hide their true nationality from me. Their clothes were black with no markings.

They were little more than hired thugs, no finesse to their techniques. That meant they were low level in whatever organization’s rock they’d crawled out from under. Even though women were considered commodities in the world of organized crime, few savages joyfully tortured them.

Unless one had betrayed them.

While the person responsible knew I was the infamous hacker, I had feeling they wanted my brother-in-law’s attention and that of every other soldier inside the DeLuca–Lazarro Empire. They obviously had no idea what they’d asked for.

“The little bitch thinks she can hurt us,” the first one snarled, throwing the other guy a hard look.

“Yeah, I can,” I admitted because I’d been taught never to tell a lie.

“Maybe I break her legs. Nothin’ said I can’t do that.” The bastard soldier laughed. “I guess your family ain’t gonna come to your rescue. We’re gonna fuck you up real good.”

“Bring it on, baby,” I hissed. There was no doubt that this was all about gaining control of my family’s empire. There would always be bloodthirsty enemies determined to bring us down. I would always have a target on my back, which was why I’d wanted to disappear, but it wasn’t allowed in my world. I

would likely be forced to marry some fucking piece of scum to proctor a peace between my family and whatever enemy was trying to annihilate it. It was all I'd ever known.

"Leave her alone, Sasha," the second soldier hissed. "She's not ours to fuck with. How many times do I need to remind you of that?"

"I'm going to do exactly what I want. It's my fucking right."

"Yeah? Well, it'll be your fucking funeral. Whatever you do, you need to keep her on this side of alive. She's still the prize."

"Why, because her daddy thought he was a god? The fucker is rotting in his grave."

I hated my father. In fact, I'd spit on his grave more than once for the abuse he'd given my brother, Enzo, through the years, but I was also a good Catholic girl. No one talked about my family harshly. No one.

Not if they wanted to live.

Perhaps the asshole realized his mistake in allowing me to know his name. Sasha snapped, lunging toward the other, issuing a savage punch to the second's face. That allowed me to crawl to my knees, dragging my tongue through the dried blood on my swollen lips.

"Fucking asshole." Sasha was livid, snarling like some animal.

The second soldier resisted throwing a punch in return but reached for his weapon as the man named Sasha cursed under his breath.

Sasha returned his full attention to me, grinning as he allowed his lust-filled eyes to rake down from my face to my partially exposed breasts. I rose to my feet, raking one hand through my stringy hair, waiting until he advanced. Then I grinned and dragged my tongue across my lips. Let him see how strong the blood was running through my veins.

"Wait outside, fucker," Sasha told the other guard. "I'm going to spend some quality time ensuring she understands that she has no control."

Like hell this was going to happen. I wasn't going down without a fight. The man just didn't have any idea what I was capable of.

"It'll be your funeral, man," the younger of the two repeated, his cold eyes shifting in my direction once again. I was hoping he'd walk out the metal door. That would make my job easier.

With his boots stomping on the concrete, he followed orders, slamming the door behind him.

"Now you're mine, bitch. And I'm going to make you feel real good." He swaggered closer and I held my breath, egging him on by curling my fingers and beckoning him.

When he dared grab my breast, I'd had enough of being manhandled. I jammed the shank into his eye first, enjoying his crazed howl. "No one talks about a girl's daddy like that and lives." The moment I twisted my hand, I knew the blade had driven into his brain.

Then I stormed toward the door just as the other soldier threw it open.

"Profitez de passer toute l'éternité en enfer," I rasped out as I sliced his jugular.

Enjoy spending all eternity in hell.

* * *

Mattia

I motioned to my three soldiers, waiting as they dropped down beside me. We were in a thick forest, the trail taking several hours before I found what I was looking for. The compound was secure, although I was surprised there were only a few soldiers guarding the location. Either this was a trap or the person holding Sophia believed his world was impenetrable.

He would soon learn a valuable lesson.

I'd brought Vincenzo, Carlo, and Luis with me, uncertain what we'd find once we arrived in Paris. There'd been evidence of a struggle inside Sophia's apartment, her roommate terrified and almost incoherent while attempting to describe the events that had occurred. Evidently, a man in a mask had knocked on the door. The second Margot had opened it, he'd taken her hostage at gunpoint, using her as bait to lure Sophia into agreeing to come with him.

The shaken girl couldn't describe the asshole other than he was tall and well built, dressed in all black including the face mask. She'd mentioned Sophia had fought back. Blood had been spilled on a rug inside Sophia's bedroom, an unfired weapon on the floor. If the motherfucker hurt Sophia, he would die a slow, very painful death.

The stench of her blood lingered in my nostrils.

I'd checked her apartment. What I'd found inside one of the rooms had shocked me. She had a massive computer system, the kind used by... hackers, not security. Margot had assured me it belonged to my beautiful princess.

On the flight over, I'd gone down the trail of looking for the person responsible for hacking into major computer systems, often doing little more than leaking prime information. The Spider had become a nemesis to dozens of corporations. While I hadn't had the time to try to break past her codes, my gut told me I didn't need to.

My beautiful princess held many secrets in her pretty little head. She certainly had garnered my respect. That was certain. Once I saved the girl, there was no turning back. She would become my wife.

Vincenzo moved closer, continuously scanning the facility. "Where do we go from here?"

I'd determined the location where Sophia was likely being held, the building little more than a cement hut. We were miles outside of Paris, the countryside sparse, very few people around. There was no one to hear her screams of agony. An unsettling feeling remained in my system. While she was likely bait and nothing more, given the fact her two security

guards had been slaughtered, the amount of violence used almost decapitating them, that meant the person responsible had no qualms about killing her.

Up to this point, there'd been no demands made or proclamations made. This wasn't about ransom. A game of cat and mouse was being played. It was as if the enemy was waiting to see how far we'd go in to claim what belonged to us. "Send Luis and Carlo to flank the two sides of the building. You and I go in. Kill everyone on sight with one exception."

He chuckled beside me. "I do love to watch you interrogate the bastards."

I was good at what I did, my father teaching me well how to extract the most information in a limited time. I usually carried what my Capo and friend called a 'goodie bag,' various body parts and bones requiring sensitive handling in order to extract the greatest amount of information. I had no doubt my dead father would admire my techniques, insisting I'd learned from the best.

Even my Capos had gleaned a thing or two over the years. We were a sick group of human beings but that was the way I'd been raised. In my world, there was no second guessing, no room for a conscience or remorse.

And anything considered a weakness had to be destroyed.

My first weapon had been provided at age seven, my father insisting I learn how to shoot accurately. I'd been beaten when I failed enough times that I learned to be a perfectionist at everything I did.

He claimed it was something to be proud of.

I snickered at the thought, the bastard of a human being rotting in his grave. I'd been the dutiful son and where had it gotten me?

"On my command," I said, shifting further forward and listening for any unusual sounds. The darkness was our friend, the night vision goggles one of the best purchases I'd made years before. My men were trained like soldiers in the military, skilled in all phases of reconnaissance and weaponry. It was

vital in the brutal times in which we lived, our number one enemy the Russians always improving their game.

The three men moved behind me, waiting for my order. I crept even closer, noticing two enemy soldiers sleeping near a small fire. We were dressed in all black from fatigues to combat boots, our faces blackened with ink, the night vision goggles hiding any chance of identification. We'd been successful in getting close, not a single enemy soldier the wiser.

While our training had been years in the making, our skills constantly honed, I didn't like the fact we'd managed to slide into their camp without being detected by a single enemy.

That meant we were either dealing with amateurs or my concern about a setup was merited.

After scanning the perimeter, I motioned for Luis and Carlo to take the two soldiers silently, which they did using their knives, slitting their throats without hesitation. With two men down, I'd calculated eight remaining. The odds were getting better.

"Go," I said quietly, waiting as the two soldiers shifted to the right and left. Vincenzo and I went straight ahead. Before we managed to get to the padlocked door, gunshots broke out. Fuck me. They'd managed to see us coming or there'd been a tripwire surrounding the building.

"Shit," Vincenzo said from beside me, immediately jumping in front and popping off several shots. Suddenly, there were more soldiers than I'd anticipated. I dropped and rolled, firing at will, catching at least two in the chest. Then there were more. What the fuck? Where were they coming from?

Goddamn it. I hated being right.

This had been an ambush. It was obvious they'd known beforehand how we operated, which meant someone from the inside had betrayed us. There was no time to regroup. It was kill or be eliminated.

Several bullets slammed into the building behind me. I rushed forward by fifty yards, yanking out a grenade, tossing it toward a group of at least four soldiers. The blast was exactly

where I'd aimed, their bodies catapulted into the air. Sounds of men being pummeled with bullets came from every direction, my soldiers successful in claiming at least a dozen or more lives.

My rage increased, the fact we'd been pulled into a game not settling well in my mind. There would be hell to pay when I returned to Italy, every soldier grilled until I found the bastard who'd traded his loyalty for money. Greed was the root of all evil. Whether it was power, money, or blood, it didn't matter.

When the sound of gunfire died down, I took a deep breath. Vincenzo dropped by my side, wiping sweat and blood from his face.

"What the fuck?" he hissed, although he knew the answer as well as I did.

"Any sign of the others?" I huffed through clenched teeth.

"No. Do you want me to look?"

"No. There's no doubt someone sent a warning. We won't have long before backup arrives. We go in." I moved toward the door, standing back and firing at the padlock. Then I swung open the heavy steel, stepping back.

When a soldier's body fell face forward, it threw me off guard. I crouched down, taking the time to roll him over, the goggles allowed me to see one vacant eye staring back at me. The other didn't exist, a sharp instrument taking care of that.

Vincenzo crowded against the door, taking labored breaths, nodding when he was in position. I was the one who went through the entrance first, preparing to fire.

The loud growl sounded like a wounded animal and within seconds, I was pitched to the cement floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a glint. Whatever had killed the other soldier was in the assailant's hand. I slammed my fist into the person's jaw, pummeling him back by several feet, jumping to mine. I wasn't surprised when the asshole clamored to his feet, lunging toward me as any well-trained soldier would do.

Vincenzo jumped into the foray, grunting as he issued a hard punch under the soldier's jaw. Then another popping of

gunfire occurred outside the hut.

“Go. I have this,” I snarled through gritted teeth.

The unknown soldier shifted the weapon into his other hand, crouching low and moving from foot to foot. I tried to get a good look at the man who’d covered his face in dirt and blood. He was smaller than I’d expected, but still managing to pack a punch.

Since our arrival, I’d heard at least six different dialects, which was unexpected. I imagined it was required to keep me from learning the rival’s identity. The fact this soldier remained quiet wasn’t shocking.

My instinct told me that this was the one I wanted to interrogate, and it would be an absolute pleasure doing so. I took a deep breath, calculating the distance. Then I pitched my body forward, able to surprise the enemy. We both went down with a hard thud, his weapon flying out of his hand, but he was determined to continue fighting. Pitching and twisting, he did everything he could to regain control.

That just wasn’t going to happen.

I was shocked when he managed to grab another knife from his jacket, but I was too quick, pounding his arm against the cement, waiting to hear bones crack. The full weight of my body was pressed against his, the enemy’s breathing ragged, becoming an effeminate wheeze.

I slammed his hand several more times then twisted his wrist, prepared to snap it.

After few grunts, I was finally rewarded with a plea.

“Stop. Please stop.”

The cry stopped me in my tracks, the melodic voice decidedly female.

CHAPTER 17



S econds before...
Sophia

I hovered in the shadows, the sound of gunshots screeching through the air from all directions. Was someone coming to save me? I continued digging the knife into the soldier as I tried to catch my breath. Fear was a great motivator, the threat of being raped then slaughtered pushing my adrenaline to ungodly levels. After I was certain the second assailant was dead, I yanked off his hat, tugging my long hair into a ball and shoving the thick canvas on my head. It was too large, but that was fine.

The only way I might be able to get out of here was if I was disguised, only that was almost impossible. I glared around the prison, noticing a small portion of the floor wasn't covered in broken cement. After scraping my fingers through the soldier's blood, I shifted toward the dirt floor. It was wet from recent rains and a leak in the roof, the mixture now mud. I painted another portion of my face with that before returning to the soldier, my breathing still labored as I fought to remove his jacket. Then I grabbed his weapon, moving to the corner a few feet away from the steel door.

Waiting.

Listening.

There were additional shouts, more gunfire. Then all was quiet. Dread tore through me as beads of sweat mixed with grime and blood, trickling down both sides of my face like war wounds. I tried to hold in my scattered breathing, but my nerves were shot, the severe tension even forcing my teeth to chatter. Seconds later, I could swear I heard voices.

Another wave of terror tore through me, but I did everything I could to shove it aside, my father's voice whispering in my ear.

“Never allow your enemy to smell your fear. They will eat you alive because of it.”

I scanned the area then rushed to the smaller of the two soldiers, struggling to get him to his feet. Goddamn, the asshole was dead weight, but if I could use his body as a shield or if it could buy me time, it was worth the struggle. I'd just gotten his body in jerked in front of me when another loud single pop of a gun shattered my nerves.

The lock had been shot off.

I remained where I was, shaking like a leaf. As soon as the door was thrown open, all I needed to do was pitch the body forward. Then I scuttled backwards, retreating to the corner once again, waiting to see who or what walked through that door. When he did, I sucked in and held my breath.

The bastard was at least six foot four and outweighed me by an easy one hundred and fifty pounds. He was dressed in all black, his face obscured by what appeared to be night vision goggles. I was hopeful yet not stupid. This could be another enemy, another ploy. I had no way of knowing.

He stood just inside, peering at me as if uncertain what to do. For a second, our eyes locked and I was frozen, my mind nestled in a fog.

He studied the area then returned his gaze toward me. I issued a throaty growl, keeping my fingers wrapped around the makeshift knife I'd created. I lunged forward, shocked when he threw a hard punch against my jaw. Pain exploded in my head and I was pitched backward, gasping for air. I remained

quiet, biting back any sound as tears formed in my eyes from the intensity of the pain. Any yelp and he'd know I was a woman.

You can do this. Fight. Keep fighting.

I didn't hesitate, launching myself toward him a second time.

Suddenly, there was a second man, just as large and menacing as hell. I couldn't risk who they were.

"Go, I have this," my mystery man snarled. Wait a minute. Did I detect an accent? Italian?

We stared at each other for a few additional seconds, sizing each other up. He wasn't certain what to do with me. Then he reacted without hesitation, pitching himself in my direction, knocking the weapon from my hand. Another wave of agony tore through me, but I refused to allow him to beat me.

I struggled under his massive weight, fighting him with everything I had, scrambling for a few seconds to try to reach the gun but it was no use.

I'd snagged a knife from Sasha's cold, dead body and somehow by the grace of God, managed to drag it from the jacket. My new assailant knew exactly what I was doing, grabbing my arm and slamming it on the cement. The pain was intense, his body weight crushing me. He smashed my arm again, then twisted my wrist to such an awkward angle, I was certain he'd snap it into. Suddenly, I couldn't take it any longer.

"Stop. Please stop." Even though I'd spouted off before I could stop myself, I did what I could to keep from showing him any additional fear even though my stomach churned inside. I didn't want to die. I wasn't ready. I would still fight, even though every muscle ached.

He tensed immediately, rearing back. Then he ripped the cap from my head, cursing in Italian. Seconds later, he yanked off the goggles, the ugly single orange light allowing me to see his face.

"Sophia," he growled. "What the fuck?"

Oh, my God. I was shocked, more so than I'd been in a long time, relief flooding through me. I was in a crazy moment of limbo, blinking several times until I could believe my eyes and my ears. Him. They'd sent the bastard to hunt me down. I was angry. I was relieved. I was sick to my stomach.

Unwanted tears rushed into my eyes.

My hero. Oh, Jesus.

Memories rushed to the back of my mind, a darkness that I'd done everything in my power to ignore. To avoid.

To run away from.

I'd managed for years, lying to myself about why I'd remained in Paris. Now him. Now this.

My hero.

My monster.

My first.

The only man I could ever love.

The one I desperately wanted to hate. The man who'd... No, I'd shut down any possibility of loving him long before, after I'd come to my senses. And after Lucia had described a second time what she'd seen on a horrible night when she was barely twelve.

"Mattia. It's..."

"Hello, princess. Did you miss me?"

My throat was suddenly tight, my mind a horrible blur. I couldn't stop shaking and it had nothing to do with what I'd gone through during the last few days. "It's fucking you."

"In the flesh." He gave me the same kind of heated look I remembered from the last time I'd seen him, the night in Paris one that continued to haunt me almost as much as seeing him shaking hands with my father on my nineteenth birthday. I reacted out of fear and fury, doing everything I could to shove him away.

"Get off me."

“Is that what you really want?” he asked, his voice nothing but a dark and dangerous purr. Just like I remembered.

“You son of a...”

“Be careful, princess. I’m the only man who can save you,” Mattia responded. “I think you know that.”

God, I hated his egotistical attitude. But I craved him just as desperately as I had before. “What are you doing here? I told you to stay out of my life.”

“It seems like you need some help.”

“Not from you. I’m going to tell you this one more time. Get off me.”

“Or what? What are you going to do?”

Everything about the man was infuriating. “Try me and you’ll find out.”

The grin on his face was as irritating as it had been all those years ago when we’d tangled for the first time. “What’s wrong, princess? Finally realizing you can’t handle me?”

Oh, my God. The man was as arrogant as I remembered, maybe even more so. “I don’t think it’s a worry about whether I can handle you, asshole. It’s whether or not I’ll need a flashlight or a telescope to find what you’re offering.”

The look on his face turned carnal, the fire in his eyes adding a stream of luminance. “Be careful what you ask for, little girl. I’m not the kind of man you want to challenge. That’s something you should have learned years ago.”

I wasn’t the kind of girl to be put under any man’s spell, but Mattia DeLuca was larger than life itself, so brutal that there wasn’t a man alive who didn’t fear what he could do. He was by far the most handsome man I’d ever seen, but someone I’d promised myself to hate for the rest of my time on earth. And here he was saving my life.

Again.

And the crazy girl inside of me longed to share the same intimacy we had all over again, pretending as if six horrible

years hadn't passed. We were no longer the same people, our lives taking different paths. Could I place my trust in him? A huge part of me wanted to but I refused to get hurt all over again.

Then he grinned and I sensed his mockery, which made the anger and unresolved feelings swim to the surface. Goddamn the asshole. He thought he was God's gift to everything, especially women. I took a deep breath, allowing a smile to cross my face. "Thank you for saving me, my darling man." I tried to have the sweetest tone possible.

He narrowed his eyes, easing back and studying me. "You're mine to protect, *bellissima principessa*." After he nodded, he pulled back even further.

Beautiful princess. His words brought back another strangled wave of memories.

Mine. It was the single word I hated most.

Dropping his guard was a mistake he'd not soon forget. Giving him a hard shove, I crawled away quickly, kicking him in the chest. Then I issued a brutal punch to his jaw, the force not only nearly destroying my hand but also pitching him against the hard floor just like he'd done to me. He rubbed his face, grinning like some oaf before throwing himself on top of me again.

"Jesus Christ," he huffed, immediately lunging forward again.

I let off a ragged squeal as he yanked my arms over my head, holding them in one hand then pressing his groin between my legs. This time he was hard as a rock, his cock throbbing. I was horrified, trying to keep my wits about me. The man was completely aroused by the fact I'd hit him? Then he'd absolutely love me when I drove a knife into his gut.

Very slowly he lowered his head, his eyes now hooded as desire roared through them.

"You're very beautiful, Sophia, but also a very bad little girl."

"Fuck you."

“Such a mouth. I was told you were a prim and proper princess. Look what I found instead. Perhaps you need a harsh round of discipline to embrace who you owe your life to.” He lowered his head another two inches until our lips were almost touching. I was both horrified and completely turned on, furious at any feelings other than disgust for the man. I knew exactly how he handled his business operations, the brutality he used rivaling my father’s. But that wasn’t nearly as repulsive as the way he treated his women.

And he had lots of them.

I’d meant nothing to him; the gift he’d acted as if it mattered more than anything had been a joke.

“Are you out of your mind? I can take care of myself. Or hadn’t you figured that out? Two men down and I would have handled the others with no issue.” Even smelling like sweat and blood, a hint of exotic spices filtered into my nostrils from his masculine aftershave. The fact I was lightheaded further infuriated me. How could I find this... horrible, reprehensible man attractive in the least?

“Uh-huh. I’d love to see that, princess. Hell, I’d take a video of the bloody action for a keepsake,” he whispered in a husky tone and I hated myself and my body’s betrayal as longing tickled every one of my senses. The fact he continued to laugh at my skillset was only making me hate him that much more.

“Get off me,” I struggled to say, although there was no conviction in my voice.

“Is that what you really want, or would you prefer me to plunge inside, sweet princess, ripping away your veil of innocence? Did you wait for me to take what you always wanted to belong to me? What you offered all those years ago?”

I struggled hard in his hold, mortified that he thought I wanted anything from him. He was goading me on purpose, just because he’d almost been bested by a woman. I could see it in his eyes. “Fuck you, Mattia.”

“We’ll get around to that, princess. Just like old times.”

When he crushed his mouth over mine, I was floored how much my body reacted, the tingling sensations shifting into a red-hot heat of fire threatening to expose the yearning I'd had, the fantasies that had infiltrated my sleep every week. I did everything I could to get out of his hold, pitching my body back and forth but it was no use. He was far too strong, my strength all but shot, and the last few days had drained me almost completely.

But that wasn't really why I couldn't get away. I was electrified, jolts of current making me feel more alive than I had in so long.

As he thrust his tongue past my pursed lips, the taste of him was shockingly refreshing, as if he'd just popped a peppermint candy before rescuing me. Seconds later, my body relaxed against his and I was thrown into a strange, frenzied state of mind, blocking the reality of where we were from my brain.

He gyrated his hips back and forth, creating the kind of friction that pulled at my defenses. I was so wet and hot, my pussy quivering, the reaction crazy. Every synapse exploded, our connection unlike anything I'd ever experienced. I was losing the tiny bit of self-control, which just couldn't happen. I couldn't want him. Not now.

Not ever again.

When he rubbed his hand down my side, crunching his large fingers around my thigh, I was certain he had plans on fucking me right here. That couldn't happen. Somehow, I'd find the strength not to allow it.

He was out of his mind if he believed for one second that I'd give him anything, let alone allow him to take anything from me. I lifted my leg, pressing it against him, arching my back so he was certain that I was complying with his repulsive needs. The kiss became more intense, the taste of him keeping my senses tingling.

Then I forced my body to relax, even moaning into the kiss as a *good little girl* would do, one that was completely and stupidly blind to his womanizing characteristics.

The moment I sensed him relaxing, I used the last of my strength, rolling him over and managing to break free of his hold. The second I snapped one arm under his jaw, using a move that could easily crush his windpipe, his eyes allowed me to see how delighted he was with my behavior.

My God. He'd anticipated my move, even allowing me to thrust him into this position. Fuck. Fuck.

"You bastard."

He laughed and I pressed my arm down even harder.

"What the fuck?" The voice from behind was obviously one Mattia knew by the look on his face.

"Boss?" the guy asked, moving into my periphery of vision. Only then did I realize the man standing like a lurching vulture was the soldier who'd been with Mattia before. "Need help?" he teased.

Mattia took that minute to reverse the action, straddling my thighs and pitching both my arms against the concrete. "Stop, Sophia. This isn't time for games."

"Who said I was playing a game?" I hissed in retort.

"Jesus Christ." He cupped my face, rubbing his thumb across my cheek where he'd punched me before. "You need to listen to me. Okay? We can continue this later."

Why did I want to believe in his sincerity? "We're not continuing anything, Mattia. Just leave me alone or take me home."

"I can't leave you alone, princess, and you know it. But you're safe now. That's all that matters. However, we need to get the fuck out of here. I assure you that I will take you home."

I knew home meant back to Italy. I grimaced, cursing in Italian under my breath.

He gave me a hard look before turning his attention to the other man. "Vincenzo. Tell me they're all fucking dead."

"I think there are a couple vigilantes still out there, boss. They're coming from everywhere. What the fuck is going on

here?” The man tossed me a look.

Mattia swung his head around, glaring at his soldier. “Fuckin’ hunt them down. And where the hell are Luis and Carlo?”

“Cleaning up. We need to get to the truck or we’re going to be in shit trouble.”

“Trust me. There are dozens of them crawling through the camp,” I offered, having learnt that almost immediately. Whatever the fuckers were doing, this was a base of operation.

“Who are they?” Mattia snapped.

“I don’t know. French. Greek. Spanish. Russian.”

“Fuck. Then we have no time to waste. We’re leaving.” Mattia cursed under his breath in Italian before lowering his head toward me.

I peered into his eyes, uncertain what to think or how to act. When he lowered his head, his breathing as ragged as mine, I was certain he was going to kiss me a second time.

“If I let you go, are you going to play nice?” he asked.

“Fuck you.”

Chuckling, he got to his feet, throwing out his hand. “Come on, princess. Time to get you to a safer location. Then maybe you and I can spend quality time together much like before.”

Why did I have the feeling I wouldn’t be any safer with him? The man was little more than an animal.

“Jesus,” Vincenzo said as he hunkered down, studying my handiwork from before. “Not bad. Who the hell is this girl?” he asked as he lifted his head, giving me a nod of respect. Maybe I could tolerate Mattia’s soldier if nothing else.

“Trouble,” Mattia snarked.

“That’s right. You should see what happens when I’m really pissed off.” I couldn’t help but grin then saw a flash out of the corner of my eye. “Look out!”

Suddenly, there was a loud banging noise and Mattia reacted as the savage soldier he’d been trained to be, throwing the arm

holding the weapon toward the door, firing off two shots. The enemy soldiers went down.

“Fuck. Where are these assholes coming from?” Vincenzo growled under his breath.

“We need to get the fuck out of here. Stay right here, princess. I need to make certain we have a clear path. It seems someone wants you pretty badly. I guess they don’t know you,” he told me as he took two long strides toward the enemies, immediately kicking the first one who tried to struggle to his feet. Without hesitation, he shot one of them in the face before turning his attention to the one attempting to crawl out the door.

Vincenzo laughed and kicked him backwards, the hard thud as his body was slammed into the wall jarring. “The fucker actually thinks he’s getting away.”

“Yeah, well, he has another think coming,” Mattia said under his breath. I could tell he was enraged as well as perplexed why we were still being attacked. It would seem he underestimated whoever had taken control.

“Give me a weapon,” I demanded, refusing to play the victim for anyone.

“Not a chance, princess. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

To hell with this man. I scanned the floor, finding what I was looking for. As soon as I had the weapon once held by an enemy in my hand, Mattia jerked it away from me. “When I tell you no, I mean no. Got it?”

I glared at him then backed against the wall, trying to control my breathing. I’d never seen the powerful man in action and it was a thing of beauty. Mattia reached down, grabbing the soldier by the scruff of the neck, tossing him against the cement wall. Then he yanked a knife from his jacket, crouching down beside the broken man.

The stench of blood and urine assaulted my senses, finally becoming overwhelming. But I couldn’t take my eyes off the moment of carnage as he drove the blade under the soldier’s chin.

“Who did this?” he asked the assassin, his tone devoid of any emotion. This was just business to him.

When the soldier hurled a wad of spit against Mattia’s face, I shuddered. Suddenly, all the fire and anger I’d had inside of me faded away, replaced with raw fear. When Mattia slammed the knife into the man’s leg, I closed my eyes to keep from seeing the savagery.

Then I covered my ears as the enemy soldier began to wail.

The sound stopped abruptly a few seconds later. I took a deep breath, daring to lift my head, pulled back to the night from so many years before.

“It’s okay. You’re safe with me, princess,” he said as he wiped his knife on his pants, returning the blade to the sheath. It was far too similar to what I’d seen all those years before. I was frozen, incapable of thinking.

“Not around you,” I managed, no longer recognizing my voice. When I looked away, he laughed while I was shaken to my core.

“Hang around me long enough, princess, and you might learn a few things. This world is far too dangerous for a beautiful, yet innocent girl like you.”

I’d once used the term hero to describe Mattia. Then I’d learned better. Now I had no idea what moniker to use.

Especially since he obviously thought he was God.

CHAPTER 18



*M*attia

“Go. Go. Go!” I snarled as I pushed Sophia forward, turning around the face the direction we’d come, popping off another round then immediately yanking another magazine from my pocket. At this rate, we wouldn’t have enough ammunition to get us to the fucking train station.

Vincenzo was carrying Luis, who’d been shot twice, once in the upper shoulder as well as the chest.

“Go now, Vincenzo. Get them to the truck.” The massive man had Luis pitched over his shoulder, but I wasn’t certain whatever heroic methods Sophia had insisted on would do the man any good. He was fading in and out of consciousness.

“I ain’t leaving you here, boss,” my Capo answered.

“Do it!” I snarled, the crack of limbs coming from behind us forcing me to drop to my knees. The early morning haze of light allowed me to catch sight of three motherfuckers following us. Without hesitation, I sprayed the area with bullets, pulling up the gun and taking a deep breath as I listened.

When Sophia crouched beside me, somehow managing to find a weapon, I half laughed. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“The same thing you are. I’m a soldier too.”

“Like hell you are. Go. Now!”

I'd seen the look of terror in her eyes when I'd all but gutted the soldier, the ugly yellow light unable to hide the flashback that had obviously torn through her mind.

"That's not going to happen, Mattia."

The truth was I needed manpower.

"Goddamn it. Then stay quiet," I hissed, trying to catch my breath. We were lucky to be alive, but in truth, with the number of soldiers who'd suddenly appeared, we should dead by now, which led me to believe the enemy soldiers had been given direct orders to ensure both Sophia and I were left alive. If that was the case, it added more credence to the notion one of our own had betrayed us. The thought pushed my anger to an entirely surreal level.

Hearing nothing else, I jerked to my feet, grabbing her arm and dragging her backwards. Within seconds, she pulled away, ready to lay into me. Thank God a slight flash caught my attention or both of us would be dead. I lunged toward her, dropping her to the ground then firing off another round. The body dropped but not before the man's itchy trigger finger popped several shots from his assault rifle into the air.

"Oh, God." Her whimper sounded as if she was finally clueing into the fact this was no picnic.

Seconds later, I rolled over on my back, taking gasping breaths. Maybe I was getting too old for this shit. "You're going to stop fighting me, Sophia. We have one last chance of getting out of here alive. Do you understand me?"

"I can take care of myself. Isn't that obvious?"

"What's obvious is that your reckless behavior stands a chance of getting us killed. Not on my watch. I will tie you down if necessary."

Her laugh was coated with bitterness. "Try it, big boy."

The girl had a boulder on her shoulder. Admiration aside, she'd already become a liability. I'd need to figure out a way to control her or our safety would be constantly placed in jeopardy. It was apparent that whoever had abducted had plans on using her to their advantage. It was my role to find out what

and who the fuckers were. I'd heard different accents, several languages including English. For about a million reasons, I sensed she had a strong feeling about why she'd been taken.

My thoughts drifted back to the computers.

“Don't push my buttons, Sophia. Not now. You're fucking coming with us quietly and without any additional trouble. If you try and act out or handle this yourself, I will punish you.” I wiped sweat and dirt from my eyes, the oppressive heat taking a toll.

“Is that a threat?”

I struggled to my feet, yanking her by the arm. When she was crowded next to me, my body's immediate reaction was exactly as it had been before. I had an instant hard-on. “Hell, no, princess. I thought you'd learned years ago that I never make threats. I only issue promises.”

“You mean like the one you issued when I was eighteen? The one you forgot all about?”

As soon as she'd spouted off the words, I could tell she regretted them. Was she unhappy, angry, or pissed at herself?

“Trust me, little girl. I will follow through. No matter how long it takes or how many fires I need to walk through. When I told you that you were mine, I meant it. No more fucking around. Come on.”

Thank God she didn't continue fighting me as I dragged her through the forest to the waiting Humvee. At least something had gone right in that the vehicle we'd taken great pains in hiding was still where we'd put it.

“I checked the undercarriage. No bombs,” Vincenzo said then wiped his face. “Luis is inside. I don't like this shit, boss. I think we're about to be ambushed.”

Yeah, well, I didn't like it either. In my mind, the entire setup had been a conversation starter and nothing more. When an enemy laid his cards on the table, that meant the situation would get bloody quickly. He or she meant to torment us, pushing us to our limits in hopes we'd become careless.

There was one certainty. The lovely woman who was soon to be my bride was being used as a pawn.

I'd locked down every business quickly prior to leaving but would need to put additional controls on them to ensure we wouldn't be in for heavy losses. In my mind it was prudent to stop certain transactions at least for a waiting period. Lucia would also need to put a halt on the diamond business for the foreseeable future.

Why did I have the distinct feeling our actions up to this point had been calculated carefully? That kept my anger at peak level.

“Get in, princess.”

“You're an arrogant SOB.”

At least the feisty girl made me snicker. “So fucking be it.”

She glared at me but followed my orders, still carrying the weapon she'd secured. Why was it that my goddamn balls ached from the sight of her carrying a gun? There was nothing sexier than a badass woman, especially when I hadn't expected it.

However, what in God's name had the girl thought she was doing? Sophia could have gotten herself killed. Whoever had trained her certainly wasn't a part of the DeLuca family and I had no doubt D'Artagnan had no fucking clue either. What I did wonder was if her sister, Lucia, had been in on her sister's training. That wouldn't bode well for her marriage to my brother.

After climbing in, I didn't waste any time powering through the trees at excess speed, heading toward our destination. Vincenzo sat next me ready to take on anyone who dared get in our way. We were exhausted, being taken by surprise taking a toll.

And we were out for revenge.

Minutes later, I glanced into the rearview mirror, searching for any indication we'd been followed. Then my eyes drifted to Sophia as she peeled away Luis's shirt, taking off the enemy soldier's jacket and pressing it against the man's wound. She

was a natural, her stunning beauty not diminished in the least by the rough terrain or the brutal treatment she'd been through.

I had to admit that I was impressed as hell at the lengths she'd gone to in order to try to escape. Few women under the kind of duress she'd been under could ever rise to the occasion.

Then again, she wasn't just any woman.

She was Italian nobility, worth millions because of her last name alone. For the majority of my life, she'd been considered an enemy.

With a single exception.

And I'd fucked it up.

However, remorse wasn't a word in my vocabulary.

The fucking single taste of her then had almost done me in. I'd taken a taste of what hadn't belonged to me, but in truth I'd do it again. I'd been an arrogant asshole six years before, the kind of man who couldn't care less about what people thought.

No one fucked with a member of the DeLuca family. While my thinking was just as arrogant as the sinfully delicious woman had accused me of even then, it was the truth. The thinking was entirely elitist but given my family had owned a significant percentage of Rome and the surrounding area even then, it hadn't mattered.

She'd been a treat that I'd expected to take, refusing to think about the ramifications. Would that have changed anything? Doubtful, just like it wouldn't now. She'd pushed enough of my buttons that I would fuck her on my terms, but not until we were completely safe.

I dragged my tongue across my lips, still able to taste her delicious mouth. She was the kind of girl who could easily get under my skin, much like she had years before. What I found fascinating was the spark of electricity. It had almost led to an uncontrollable fire, which had been a shocking revelation. She'd also changed significantly from the last time I'd seen her.

No longer a stick thin young girl who'd given me attitude, she'd turned into a voluptuous woman with the kind of curves able to derail any red-blooded male. Even now, my cock ached thinking about heightened desires instead of if we were going to get the hell out of France alive.

"We need to get him to a hospital," Sophia snapped as she continued pressing her hands against Luis' wound.

"Not a chance. No time," I told her. I'd insisted on driving since Vincenzo didn't know the French countryside as well as I did. I'd tracked out a different way to return to the train station. Every airport and road was likely being watched. I'd made a calculated decision to take us to a safehouse outside of Geneva using a high-speed rail car. From there, it would only take three hours to get to our destination, which would give us a significant head start. What we learned from sources already positioned in the outlying areas of France would determine how long we remained in Switzerland.

Given I was certain an insider had something to do with the setup, that would provide ample opportunity for D'Artagnan to determine if my suspicions were correct and for Enzo to return from the States.

"A doctor will be on board the train, Sophia," Vincenzo told her. "Luis is strong. He's been through this shit before."

"What a life," she muttered.

"It's the same life you were given, princess. Oh, wait. You lived in the lap of luxury while the rest of us were fighting a war."

"Fuck you, Mattia. You have no clue what kind of life I've had. Besides, you're worth billions with toys and women at your disposal. I don't see that you're hurting for anything."

"Whew," Vincenzo huffed under his breath. "Getting chilly in here."

I threw him a look, twisting my hand around the steering wheel as I broke through the forest and onto one of the back roads. My right-hand man didn't know about the contract, the secret something I'd maintained at all costs. But she didn't

know that. The woman needed to be tossed across my lap and spanked like the bad girl she was. “Sit down and keep your mouth shut.” Great. Now I was tossing out orders like I was her father. Granted, she was several years younger than me with no real parental influence in her life, but goddamn it, I hadn’t signed up for this shit.

Taming her would be one of the first items of business.

Marrying her second.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Mattia. And what do you mean the train?” she countered.

This time I grinned. The less she knew the better.

“Where in the hell are you taking me? And I don’t think your soldier is going to last that long. He’s lost a lot of blood.” Her demand held a touch of entitlement.

“I’m okay,” Luis said weakly. “Boss. They wouldn’t stop coming.”

“Be quiet,” Sophia told him, barking out orders as if he would obey her. “You’re a fool if you think so, Mattia. Answer my question. Did Dar send you? I doubt you do anything of your own free will.”

I’d had enough. More than. Her disrespect in front of my men wouldn’t be tolerated. I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my anger in check.

“I’m taking you somewhere safe,” I answered, ignoring her plea. My men had known from the beginning what was at stake and the risk involved. While I was furious to have lost even a single man, it was an inevitable fact of being in the business. “How many men were left?” I demanded from the fallen man. We’d lost Carlo, his bullet-riddled body found only feet from the concrete prison Sophia had been in.

“At least five. Maybe more,” Luis struggled to say. “I think I got two of them before they shot me.”

“They’re from every freaking country, boss,” Vincenzo added, confirming what I already knew.

I scrubbed my jaw, the tension remaining. Whoever had instigated the abduction had utilized significant resources in their effort to lure us to our deaths. Had they anticipated D'Artagnan would send an entire army? Maybe so. If he had, that would have left us vulnerable in Italy.

"Please tell me," she hissed, although I could hear the sound of her resolve crumbling. "I deserve to know where you're taking me."

"Switzerland, Sophia. It's too hot in Paris right now. Every other exit out of the country will be blocked. We'll lay low for a couple days before returning to Italy, but returning home is the real destination." Remaining in Switzerland would also allow me to meet with a particular contact who might be able to provide additional information. It was a dicey move, but one only I had control over.

"Who were they, Mattia? Do you have any idea?" she asked after a few minutes had passed. Her voice was much quieter, the anxiety she felt creating a tremor.

"The truth is, princess, that I think you already know, or at least the reason why. Don't you?" I shifted another gaze into the rearview mirror, the morning light allowing me to see the reservation in her eyes.

"Are you out of your mind? They jumped me. Money?"

"You mean after you warned your roommate. Margot shared the voicemail with me."

Her eyes opened wide, but she said nothing. Even her jaw clenched from frustration and hatred.

"Well, that's what I intend on finding out. When we're settled on the train, you and I are going to have a long discussion. Call it a debriefing. I'll venture a guess you know more than you want to tell me, but you will, Sophia. You will tell me everything." I didn't wait for her to answer, yanking out my phone and dialing Dar.

She cursed under her breath in Italian, but I caught every word. I'd been called a hell of a lot worse than an arrogant son

of a bitch. The rest of the expletives were amusing. They were also exciting, my balls tightening.

Vincenzo glanced over at me, lifting his brows in amusement. Why did the girl have this kind of effect on me?

“Please tell me the package is safe,” D’Artagnan stated as soon as he answered the phone.

“Yeah, but we took a hit. Carlo is gone. There were more soldiers than anticipated. As in a good thirty of them. From different countries too. I think we could have a leak in the organization the size of a battleship.”

Dar exhaled. “I’ll find out and handle it if that’s the case. Get to your destination then call me. I need to know which nationalities you’re talking about.”

“Pick one. I don’t know if the assholes were trying to throw us off, but I doubt it.”

“Shit. They’re playing a game.”

I half laughed. “You can say that again.”

“I need to talk to my sister,” Sophia insisted. When she grabbed my shoulder, her involuntary gasp was as if she’d been burned. I felt the charge of electricity as well, the heat coursing through my body explosive.

“Not yet, princess. Soon,” I answered then heard D’Artagnan laugh after overhearing.

“And here you were worrying that you two wouldn’t reconnect. Just be careful, Mattia. I don’t like what I’m still hearing on the street.”

“Which is what?”

“Whoever has come to the table thinks they have a chance at destroying everything.”

“How the fuck did you get that notion?”

He laughed, the sound one that brought fear to others but to me had always brought a smile. The man had been adopted after his entire family was murdered. He’d been treated like nothing more than an animal, yet he’d thrived, even managing

to teach me a thing or two about remaining stoic through the worst our enemies could throw at us and how to do my worst to our enemies. I wouldn't call us the best of friends, but I did consider him a brother.

"Then I guess we'll enjoy the upcoming hunting season." I could almost savor the taste of blood.

"Yes. We will. Give Sophia my best but make sure nothing happens to her. Lucia will kill you herself."

"Yeah, I already know." I ended the call just as I noticed the first sign for the train station. From here, it could get dicey. What I didn't want to do was draw unnecessary attention. "There are some rags in the bag. Grab them."

Vincenzo responded, finding them after a few seconds, remaining on edge as I kept just above the speed limit. I'd calculated the odds at fifty-fifty at this point. If the asshole responsible was smart, he'd covered every base.

"Take a couple. Clean yourselves off the best you can," I commanded. "We need to look normal." If there was such a thing.

She scowled at me, yanking some from Vincenzo's hand.

A few minutes later, the station came into view. I knew exactly where I was going, heading toward the last parking lot closest to the north end of the station.

"We don't have much time. We need to get to the train." I cut the engine, immediately scanning every window.

"Let me scan the area, boss," Vincenzo said, climbing out without waiting for me to confirm. We'd worked together for long enough I considered the man a friend. He was also the only person who had the innate ability to read my mind.

He walked the perimeter, returning less than a minute later then opening my door before reaching for the one where Sophia was sitting.

After easing onto the pavement, I unfastened the snap on my shoulder holster. While I didn't want to draw the attention of Parisian security, I had to be ready for an additional ambush. I

took some time scrubbing my face, removing the war paint. After glancing into the rearview mirror, ensuring I was least presentable, I tossed the rags aside. It wasn't perfect, but it would need to do. I'd fed off adventures like these for years, throwing all caution to the wind. With both D'Artagnan and Enzo having families, Enzo's first child due in barely over a month, I was now the one who was happy to take the most risks.

Vincenzo helped Luis out of the Humvee and to my soldier's credit or maybe given his fear of my approach, Luis was determined to walk on his own.

"I'm okay," he said, his face filled with pain.

"This doctor better know what the fuck he's doing," Sophia barked. "He's lost too much blood."

"Keep your eyes down, Sophia. Don't draw any attention." I pulled her close to my chest, keeping my hand wrapped around her arm as I moved her toward the building. As soon as we walked inside, I glanced at the overhead boards, searching for our departure. We'd be lucky to get on the train in time. "Come on. Walk quickly."

Nodding, she remained quiet yet I sensed the tigress inside of her was ready to launch into me at the first opportunity.

There was a significant crowd still attempting to get on the euro rail. By the time we reached the doors, the second to final whistle had blown. The train would be leaving the station in minutes.

As I pushed forward, hairs stood up on the back of my neck. I turned around, scanning the area behind me. I was certain we were being watched. Then my eyes connected with a figure, a lone man standing at least a hundred yards away. From where I stood, I didn't recognize him nor was he wearing anything that would leave me to believe he was militia, but given his clothing was all black, I refused to ignore my instinct.

My skin crawled, an odd series of sensations coursing down the backs of my legs. Squinting, I could swear the asshole was

smiling. He wore dark glasses, but there was no doubt in my mind he was studying me from afar.

“What’s wrong, boss?” Vincenzo asked as he moved beside me.

“Get them on the train. I need to check something.”

“We don’t have time, boss. Let me go.”

“Do what I say! Keep her safe, Vinny.”

“Where are you going?” Sophia asked, concern in her voice as she reached for me.

“Don’t worry, princess. I’m not going anywhere without you.” Backing away, I moved through the crowd, pushing several of the passengers out of my way as I searched. I finally noticed him heading toward the bathrooms. I shoved my way through, knocking two people down then jogging toward him.

He glanced over his shoulder, his grin wider before heading into the restroom.

I wasted no time, racing toward it, slamming my hand on the door. When I didn’t see the stranger right away, I bolted from one side to the other.

There was no sign of him. I moved to the final corridor, noticing the asshole was standing at the last sink vessel washing his hands. Snarling, I took long strides toward him, slamming him against the wall.

“*Putain qui es-tu?*” I demanded, shoving the barrel of my weapon under his chin.

The bastard kept a grin on his face, throwing up his still wet hands. His answer was one that would bother me for some time to come.

“*Un fantôme qui continuera de vous hanter.*” A ghost who will continue haunting you.

What the fuck was going on?

He was nobody, a hired player used to taunt me. To let me know that whoever was playing this game had already pegged every single move. I shoved him hard then backed away,

returning my weapon to my jacket then racing from the restroom. The last thing I needed as to be separated from the others.

The train was already moving as I launched myself through the revolving doors. I took off running, noticing Vincenzo was waiting on the platform. I had one chance and seconds to spare before the conductor would throw the train into high speed.

Vincenzo reached out, his expression unreadable.

I thrust my body forward, lunging for his hand. When he managed to grab my wrist, he took a deep breath then hoisted me into the air. Thank God the man was like a raging bull, not an inch of fat on him.

When I landed on the platform, I heard several cheers as if the people were witnessing a hero in action.

Little did they know I was the devil in disguise.

“Jesus Christ, boss. You’re fuckin’ nuts. I mean no disrespect.”

Chuckling, I glanced into his eyes before moving toward the door into the cabin. “Did the doctor arrive?”

“Yeah, he’s here. What did you see?”

I smoothed down my jacket. “A ghost that doesn’t exist. Where is Sophia?”

“In the cabin. What are you doing to do with our... guest?”

His grin made me shake my head as I thought about his question. “Tame her. One way or the other.”

CHAPTER 19



*S*ophia

This was my so-called life.

I should have gotten used to it by now.

The danger.

The uncertainty.

The longing for someone I couldn't have. Even now, my skin tingled at the thought of Mattia's touch, the heated kiss that had awakened so many strong feelings. I fisted my hands, trying to keep from screaming.

The unpredictable lifestyle had been my mother's undoing, her fragile mental state almost losing its battle long before I'd reached adulthood. That had left my sister as a surrogate, even though she was only a few years older. My mother had rallied after my father's death but had never fully recovered.

That wasn't the kind of life I wanted, fearful that my children would be abused by my husband or hating me because of what I believed in. Nope.

I wanted love and a beautiful home. Maybe I was foolish enough to want the white picket fence, something I'd learned from Lucia given her American influences. Even Joy had mentioned that to me in passing during the two times I'd seen her. She adored Enzo with her whole being just like Lucia did

with D'Artagnan. That's what I wanted and had convinced myself I'd never have.

Why I was going over almost every aspect of my life at this moment had little to do with the fact I'd almost died and more to do with the understanding that I could no longer pretend. After the abduction, I'd be forced to return to Italy permanently. Now I could finally admit how much I hated my life, even if I was one of the wealthiest women in the world. I also had to be one of the loneliest.

I'd grown up being bounced on a Capo's knee, secured behind prisonlike walls of whatever boarding school I'd been forced to attend and never understanding why other families celebrated holidays with such vigor.

Granted, the home I'd grown up in had been decorated for every festive occasion, the finest decorators and caterers used. But there'd been no laughter, the somber events reminding me of a funeral.

The memories of the past remained vivid, so much so that they'd invaded almost every dream. And the wild running current of electricity that neither one of us had been able to shove aside was back in full force.

Then the attack, the handsome man saving my life. Why was I going over what had occurred again? Did I think I could change the events or alter the fact my father had been such a greedy bastard when he'd been alive?

I'd finally accepted the reason I'd given Mattia my virginity hadn't been about disobeying my father but about the stars I'd had in my eyes.

I'd been in love with Mattia before walking into his club. I'd reaffirmed it the night he'd taken me inside my old bedroom at my father's house. Then everything had gone to hell after that. I'd wised up, demanding to return to Paris, my father allowing me. Then a year had turned into almost two, my entire world turning upside down with the murder of my father. Lucia had reminded me more than once to stay away from Mattia, even after realizing that D'Artagnan hadn't been killed. It hadn't

erased her belief Mattia had been partially responsible for all the atrocities, including the death of Dar's family.

And I'd allowed myself to believe her words. Had I been wrong? Was that possible? Shivering, I wasn't certain I could trust my judgment at this point.

Even worse, the passionate desire had never left. Seeing him now had rekindled the fire, so much so I continued to have difficulty breathing around him. Somehow, I had to break the tether. But how? I was no longer the doe-eyed girl he'd deflowered. I was sophisticated and rich.

And just as much of a criminal as the rest of my family. The irony wasn't lost on me.

Mattia was right in that the abduction wasn't just about my family, but my skills as well. Why? Had the person responsible sought an inroad to the DeLuca-Lazarro ring of power? That was definitely possible.

I'd kept up with my family's holdings. I had a huge trust fund and was provided with earnings reports every quarter. I had my own financial advisor. I also had been privy to certain information regarding the various industries the combined family was involved in.

Money. What if the issue with the man who'd abducted me was about money, draining all the accounts? Was that something I could do? Well, of course. Given my thumbprint was on record, it wouldn't be a stretch even though I didn't know the passcodes. Who would want to destroy every avenue of business and why?

Revenge.

The Russians?

That would have been my first guess, but the man who'd taken me hadn't been Russian. I was certain. Oh, what was I saying? I couldn't be certain of anything at this point. My thoughts drifted back to my nineteenth birthday as I paced the tiny train compartment. I'd heard Vincenzo lock the door once I'd been shoved inside. He'd said nothing, just glaring at me as if I was

the enemy. Maybe I'd been away from the family for far too long.

There were far too many ugly, irrational thoughts racing in my mind.

I'd wanted Mattia to fawn over me at the party, to ask my father for my hand in marriage. That hadn't happened but I'd known a deal had been struck that night, the wretched members of the Five Families likely bidding amongst themselves which son I'd marry. At least with my father's murder, the marriage hadn't come to fruition.

Wow. I had something to be thankful for.

But Lucia's fate had almost been sealed, only my father's death altering that. And the sudden appearance of the man she'd been in love with for years.

That's exactly what's happening here. History was repeating itself.

I wanted to crush the girl behind the inner voice. That was bullshit. At least I refused to allow history to go into repetition.

Even if Lucia was madly in love, her second child on the way.

I rubbed my eyes, the tension behind them significant, wringing my hands as my thoughts alternated from salacious ideas of what I wanted the man to do to me to the reason I was in this predicament. The ache behind my eyes was understandable.

But the ache in my heart because I'd allowed my guard to fall with him remained even today.

I wasn't that girl any longer, certainly not naïve and vulnerable. Living in the beautiful city of Paris had not only dragged me out of my shell but had also made me a wealthy woman in my own right.

What in the hell was I doing on a highspeed train? Even though my father and brother and now D'Artagnan had tried to keep me shielded from the less than legitimate side of our family business, I knew the score. That included the fact when

an enemy struck, it was best to have large numbers of soldiers surrounding us.

With Luis injured, that left Vincenzo as our backup. The odds weren't in our favor. Fear remained, the thrumming pulse in the side of my neck just another reminder of how vulnerable I was at this point.

I continued pacing the small train compartment, uncertain how to feel or what to think. Where the hell had Mattia gone? It seemed he'd seen something or someone, but who? And how was that possible? We hadn't been followed. I was certain the careful maneuvers he'd taken had prevented that from happening.

A cold shiver danced down my spine. I was filthy and exhausted, my mind an angry mess as events continued to form brutal images in the back of my mind. I had no phone, no freedom, and had been refused time to talk to the one person I trusted implicitly, my sister. That had to mean Lucia hadn't been told I was in danger. Why would Dar keep it from her? Fear? Anxiety? Okay, so my sister was pregnant, but was that the reason? I couldn't be certain of anything any longer.

I leaned against the window as the train started to increase in speed. Then an ugly thought rushed into my system. What if Mattia hadn't managed to get on the train? What if Vincenzo wasn't who he said he was? I'd known someone was watching me from a distance in Paris. I'd felt it for almost a week prior to being abducted. At first, I'd believed it to be Mattia stalking me again.

That's why I'd been foolish enough not to pick up the phone and make contact to a single person in my family just to let them know. And why had I been so stupid? Because I knew exactly what would be expected of me.

Returning home.

A sudden moment of panic threatened to tear apart what was left of my sanity. I'd been a fool to think I could live any kind of normal life.

A weapon. I needed a weapon of some kind. Almost frantic, I glanced at the interior of the cabin. The stark interior was meant for a temporary respite, every piece of steel including the lamp bolted down. Then I remembered Mattia saying clothing had been brought to the train. I shifted my gaze to what had to be the lavatory, the small door barely wide enough to allow a normal sized human through. I pushed open the door, breathing a slight anguished sigh seeing the duffle bag. I yanked it off the floor, pitching it onto the tiny table.

My fingers were almost completely stiff as I struggled to yank the zipper, finally able to do so a few seconds longer. I yanked at the contents, finding almost nothing but clothes. Then I felt a chunk of steel, realizing instantly what I'd found.

A pistol. I pulled it into the air, happier than I'd been in a long time. Within seconds, I found a magazine of ammunition, completely overjoyed with my find. As soon as I slapped it into position, I heard the rattle of the doorknob and shifted in complete silence into the tiny bathroom, pulling the door almost all the way closed.

Unfortunately, doing so hid the door to the cabin completely. I wouldn't be able to see who walked in. I held my breath, sensing the moment someone had walked in. Then I struck without hesitation, tossing open the piece of steel, ready to fire if necessary.

A hand was snapped around my wrist within a split second, the gun wrenched from my fingers and tossed aside but the momentum of the train pulled us both to the floor. I hit with a hard thud, narrowly missing having my head slammed against the edge of the table.

I flailed by instinct until I realized it was Mattia positioned over me, his scent easily recognizable.

“What are you doing, princess? Trying to escape already? And here I thought we were getting along so much better.”

He wedged his knee between my legs, pushing up on both palms as he stared down at me. When he chuckled, a sickening growl vibrated in his throat. I slammed my hands against him, gritting my teeth, hating myself for being glad to see him. I

could hate him until the sun permanently faded in the sky, but he was one of the few people on earth able to protect me.

“I wasn’t certain it was you.”

“Did you really think I’d leave you to fend for yourself?”

“I don’t know you any longer, Mattia.”

He studied me intently. “You know me better than anyone, *bellissima principessa*.”

“I thought I did. Then you...” I half laughed. Why did the past even matter any longer?

“Then I what?” he asked as he cocked his head, allowing his heated gaze to fall. Even covered in mud and gore, he remained gorgeous.

“It doesn’t matter.” I looked away.

He gripped my chin, pulling my face until I was forced to look at him. “It does to me.”

The rich scent of the man was far too invigorating, my desire for him eclipsing my usual rational thoughts. “Just get off me.” I slammed my hands against his chest again, the same tingling sensations jetting through me.

“Only if you promise to be a good girl.”

They weren’t just the same words he’d used inside the prison but also the ones he’d said all those years ago when I’d been like a deer in the headlights, allowing him to take advantage of me. My inner voice was laughing at me. Maybe I’d been the one to take advantage.

Mine. Mine. Mine. *Mine*.

The word reverberated in the back of my mind, leaving my stomach churning.

There had to be something wrong with me given how the simplistic statement continued to set off a series of bottle rockets in every cell and muscle.

“Did you think I’d forgotten my promise?”

I laughed, the sound as fake as the hatred I'd tried to have for him. "I couldn't care less about your promise."

"I think you do. And I intend on making good on it. Now we need to get a few things very clear between us."

"Sure. Why not? Only if you promise to tell me everything that you know about what's going on."

"I think you know more than I've been made aware of, sweet Sophia." He shook his head and pulled away, kicking the door shut to the cabin before standing. "First things first, princess."

When he offered his hand to help me up as he'd done before, I wanted so badly to reject him, but at this point my childish antics had to stop. I wasn't solving anything by pretending I could get out of this situation by myself. I bit my lower lip then reached out toward him. He lifted a single eyebrow then dragged me to my feet. Then he ceremoniously raked his arm across the clothing I'd tossed on the table, pitching everything to the floor, then shoved me over the edge.

"What in the hell are you doing?"

"Ensuring you understand that you are required to follow my rules. And if you don't, you'll pay the price."

I was shocked when he ripped at my shorts, the thin material tearing as he yanked them over my hips, able to snake them off my feet seconds later.

"Are you out of your mind?" I struggled, throwing back my arm, my fist catching him in the kidney.

"I thought I was perfectly clear in my expectations but apparently either you didn't listen or you're hardheaded." He yanked off my panties next, then he tossed both aside.

I pushed up from the table, able to catch a glimpse of our reflection in the window. This was crazy, something that I refused to allow to happen. "Back down or so help me God, I'll hurt you."

He had the audacity to laugh before splitting my legs apart, pressing one hand down on the small of my back while I

watched in horror in the window as he used the other one to unfasten his belt. This was crazy.

“You’ll have an opportunity later, princess. For now, I’m giving you a spanking. Maybe that will calm you down.”

He wasn’t kidding. He truly believed he could spank me just like he’d done all those years ago, and I’d allow it. And that he could get away with it.

I was more incensed than I’d been before, pushing hard against the table but he was using the fact I was exhausted against me. When he snapped the belt free, the thick leather hitting the thinly carpeted floor, I flinched and he noticed it. Goddamn if the man wasn’t gloating.

“Don’t worry, my sweet Sophia. I’ll go easy on you this time.”

“I’m not your anything, Mattia.”

“I beg to differ; you’re the beautiful yet spoiled princess who now belongs to me.”

Spoiled. Did the asshole just call me spoiled?

He was enjoying this far too much. Meanwhile, I wanted nothing more than to scratch his eyes out. I took several deep breaths, realizing I was likely not going to be able to get out of this wretched situation. Did he not care I was starving or that I needed a shower desperately or that I still felt as if I had blood spots covering me and was wearing filthy clothes?

Evidently not.

In fact, he seemed amused, the wry smile on his face reflecting like a ray of sun in the perfectly crystal-clear glass. I was mortified that I’d lost all my will to fight, my heart thudding in my chest from the thought of being treated like a child. He folded the strap then pulled back, patting both sides of my bottom with the belt.

“I know you’ve had a rough couple of days so I’ll only issue twenty-five this go-around. However, if you continue to misbehave, the next round of punishment will be much worse.”

“There won’t be a next time, asshole,” I said through clenched teeth.

The fact he was enjoying himself would be duly noted. When I put a bullet in his brain, I’d do the same.

At least once we returned to Italy, I’d never be forced to see him again. I’d make certain of that. When he lifted his arm, the man far too dramatic, I almost laughed. The whooshing sound as the belt roared through the air caught me off guard. Somewhere inside, I knew I was holding my breath.

When he brought the thick leather down, I was surprised I didn’t feel any pain, at least not right away. It took until he delivered two more for the strange sense of being uncomfortable to drift into explosive pain.

“You will learn that following my orders is in your best interest,” Mattia continued. “I’m here to protect you, Sophia, not hurt you.”

“Then what is this?” I demanded.

“Getting your attention. I need your full cooperation if you want to get home safely.”

“Home as in Paris.”

“Not any longer. I can’t protect you there.”

He wasn’t just blowing smoke. I could hear the worry in his voice, concern that surprised me. He was a big, bad man yet he wasn’t entirely certain what was going on. I’d always known him to be a control freak, anal in everything he did. I’d never admit it but I’d always admired that in him.

The next four were brutal, so much so I dropped my head, beads of perspiration trickling down both sides of my face. “Oh, God.”

When he dared act like he was concerned, caressing my already bruised and heated skin with the rough pads of his fingers, I was floored by the number of electric vibrations tickling my senses.

“This isn’t fair.”

“Whoever taught you that anything about life was fair was an idiot.” He rolled his fingers up and down my spine, trailing them down the back of one thigh. I tensed when I heard him taking a deep breath, his strong scent of testosterone mixing with my perfume of raging desire. I bit back a moan, trying to keep my head on straight as my pussy clenched and released. No one should be as insanely gorgeous as Mattia.

In the light of the compartment, I’d been allowed to catch a better look at him if only for a few seconds. He was the epitome of gorgeous, putting on at least thirty additional pounds of all muscle since the last time I’d seen him. With his shaggy dark hair and eyes the color of rich dark chocolate tinged with flecks of gold, he could easily pass for a model on any runway. The years had made him even more rugged, dangerously gorgeous. The ugly mud he’d slapped on his face earlier hadn’t been able to hide his structured, aristocratic features including a strong brow and chiseled jaw. But he was still a dangerous man.

But I’d always been struck by his strong hands, long fingers that captured the essence of his power. The last time I’d seen him, he’d been wearing a stunning black onyx ring, the thick gold band drawing my attention as he’d twirled it in the moonlight.

He took a ragged but deep breath, fisting his hand and pulling it away. Then he continued the spanking, powering down the belt one strike after another.

I was floored that the agony took my breath away or that within seconds, tears had formed in my eyes. I wasn’t that kind of girl. Very little made me cry, my backbone strengthened from as early as I could remember when I was forced to endure hearing my brother beaten sometimes to within an inch of his life.

My father had never disciplined me with a belt, only treating me as if, given I was a girl, I didn’t matter in the least to him.

As Mattia brought the belt down five or six additional times, my moans became more intense. What I found so strange was that I was wet, excitement building, my pussy throbbing.

Just like it had been the first night Mattia had spanked me that seemed a lifetime ago.

“Oh...” I whimpered, licking my dry lips as I remained unblinking. The pain was nearly blinding but I was trembling from a raging round of excitement. I pushed up from the table again, arching my back, a move he allowed. His breathing remained as ragged as mine, his chest rising and falling. I had a feeling he was struggling with the same feelings I was.

The kind of forbidden desire that wasn't in our best interest. I couldn't want him, no matter how devastatingly good looking he was or the fact he'd now saved my life twice in six years. I hated him for that as much as I loathed myself for enjoying the round of punishment.

That wasn't normal on any level. Using an implement of any kind was something horrible people did for control. I would tear him apart for doing this.

Then why are you so wet?

Oh, God. I wasn't entirely certain. Even my nipples were aching, which I hadn't felt since... *Since you had a fantasy about him weeks ago.*

My God. I was pathetic.

I cinched my eyes shut again, fighting the tears with everything I had.

When he rolled his fingers down my spine, I dropped my head, gasping for air. I sensed the increase in electricity as he crowded my space, planting his hands on either side of me.

“Tell me, princess. Are you as aroused as you were before?”

My God. He had remembered. I'd hoped what we'd shared had meant so little to him that he'd forget all about the intimate moment. “What we shared that night meant nothing to me.”

“It didn't? So you were just using me.” he asked in a husky whisper. The light touch of his fingers brushing back and forth across my skin was invigorating, so much so an involuntary moan escaped.

“You didn’t seem to mind.”

“As expected. You do remember. You’re very wet, so much so your sweet pussy is glistening.”

Every word out of his mouth sounded dirty, just like it all those years ago. “I hate you.” Oh, my God. Why did those words choose to come out of my mouth? I sounded like some jealous girl, or someone scorned by her boyfriend in high school. That was insane and not me in the least.

“Good. You should hate me. Yes, you’re very wet.” He dared roll a single finger all the way down my pussy, my muscles tightening at the thought of him plunging several inside.

“No. You spanked me. Now let me go.” I could tell he had no intentions of allowing me to budge, at least not yet. The connection we shared was surprisingly strong, but I refused to tell him that.

“Only when I say so.” There was something so dirty about the way he rolled the end of the belt from one side of my leg to the other, sliding the strap along the inside of my thigh. Then he brushed it across my aching pussy and I couldn’t bite back a moan fast enough. “And you do long to share another moment like the one at my club. I can tell. You’re tight just like I remember you being. Utterly perfect.”

I could barely breathe, my mind shoved into an intense fog. I couldn’t believe this was happening.

“No. I can’t be.”

“But you are. But I think I’ll take a few minutes to remind you. And my princess, this is only the beginning. Nothing has changed. Now that I have you, I’m never letting you go.”

CHAPTER 20



*S*ophia

They were words I'd waited to hear for so long, but now I cringed from hearing them. But even though I did, the tingling inside erupted like a wild sweep of lava. As Mattia's heated breath tickled the back of my neck, I shuddered audibly. I'd been on so many dates, trying to rid myself of his presence, his influence, and his powerful hold over me. Nothing had worked.

No other man had touched me intimately, other than a stolen kiss here and there. To think I'd waited for this brutal man to claim me was ridiculous but accurate.

"Go away, Mattia. I will never want you again."

"I beg to differ," he mused as he crushed his full body weight against me. I was breathless, vivid flashes of light sparkling all around my field of vision. He eased his fingers down my arm to my side, taking his time to roll them ever so slowly over my hip then to my thigh. I couldn't stop quivering and he sensed it, his breathing hitching.

Goosebumps formed where they shouldn't, my mouth suddenly dry as a bone. I dragged my tongue across my parched lips, struggling to make sense of what was happening between us. It was as if the six years melted away, the frozen period of my life tossed out the window. I was here with the man I... adored. Safe or completely embroiled in danger, I

didn't care. This is what I'd longed for during the quiet, lonely nights.

This is what I'd been craving for far too long.

"I can't wait to remind you of everything we shared, *il mio fiore perfetto*." My perfect flower.

"Don't. Please don't unless..." I couldn't even finish my sentence. Why were tears forming in my eyes? Why had the resolve I'd build so carefully, crafting blocks of steel all around me just come crashing down?

"Unless I promise to never leave?"

"That's not it."

"Then what is?"

"I can't, Mattia." There was no conviction in my voice. None. I knew it. He knew it.

He pressed me down onto the table once again, gently rolling me over onto my back then spreading my legs wide open. As he crowded between them, I was painfully aware that he had a perfect view of my glistening pussy lips, the intense scent of my yearning likely staining the insides of his nostrils.

"Non ti lascerò mai più. Sei la luce che altera la mia oscurità, l'aria che ho bisogno di respirare. E sarai mio fino alla fine dei tempi." His whispered words weren't anything that I would have ever expected.

I will never leave you again. You are the light that alters my darkness, the air that I need to breathe. And you will be mine until the end of time.

I was momentarily in shock, finding the entire situation absurd. Yet his hoarse whisper ignited the flame that had never truly burned out, the longing so infused with need that I couldn't separate the two. I was in some crazy kind of limbo; the rumble of the train, the fast beating of my heart, and the intoxication I felt just being in his aura too much to take.

He took a deep breath, gently brushing his fingers down my arm. "My beautiful baby."

“I’m not yours.”

“Yes, you are. You always have been.”

Always. The word had such a wondrous meaning. For a few seconds, I almost fell into a trance.

Then I jerked up, almost able to slip off the table. He was too fast, pushing me back once again then lifting my legs and exposing all of me. A heated crush of electricity burned my cheeks as he dragged his tongue across his lips in appreciation. Where it had been dark before, the lack of lighting allowing me to hide behind a façade so he couldn’t see me therefore it wasn’t happening, this was entirely different.

There was no denying what was happening or that I was excited from his touch, the explosive heat tearing through me. “Close your eyes, princess. Allow me to make you feel very good while I provide another reminder that you need what only I can provide.”

His words were almost soothing, and I found myself obeying him without question, clenching my eyes shut and turning my head to the side. He caressed the inside of my thigh, the touch so gentle I was drawn into a haze of sweet peace, something I hadn’t anticipated.

As he brushed the backs of his fingers down to my knee, I shuddered. Then I sensed he noticed a mark on my thigh where one of the bastards had caught me trying to escape, striking me with his weapon. The intense growl he issued sent another shiver all the way to my toes.

“If those bastards weren’t already dead, I’d rip them apart limb by limb for what they did to you.”

Without a doubt, I believed him, the dark tone in his voice more ominous than before. When he kissed my calf then the inside of my knee, I tensed, fisting both hands. As soon as he pressed his heated lips against the inside of my thigh, I shuddered visibly, my toes curling inside my shoes. Then as he blew across my aching pussy, I couldn’t hold back a series of moans.

He had a way of making me feel incredible with his subtle touches and the insanely explosive heat of his body. The rational part of me knew somewhere that I needed to stop him before this went too far, but I did nothing other than arch my back.

“You are a beautiful woman, Sophia. Even more than I remembered. God, how I’ve missed you.”

Why did the husky sound of his voice awaken the darkness within me, arousing the woman I’d put into a dormant state? The tone was rich in velvet yet gravelly at the same time. The combination was irresistible, and I wanted to beg him to fuck me. That would never happen. Not again. I refused to lose myself to a fantasy. Nothing good would come of it.

When I felt him dipping his head further, I covered my face with both hands, refusing to acknowledge that he was about ready to devour my aching pussy.

“God, I can’t wait to feast on your pretty pink pussy.” When he growled, I was thrown how excited the sound made me. I’d never had another man react in such an animalistic way, as if he’d prefer to go hungry rather than taste anything else.

I kept my eyes cinched tight, refusing to look at him, the embarrassment too significant. Yet as he blew across my pussy again, I couldn’t help but snag a single look, basking in the way his eyes were staring at me, watching my every move.

Mattia rolled the tip of his finger around my clit and I bucked up from the table, pressing my sweaty palms against the Formica’s surface. When he swirled the tip of his tongue around my already tender tissue, I tossed my head back and forth, doing everything I could to keep from moaning.

I sensed he was enjoying every moment, totally in control of his actions and his hunger while my stomach was in knots, my mind floating free of any rational thought. When he licked me again, I arched my body into the wetness of his tongue, already intoxicated by the scent of my desire.

“Oh, God.”

“You taste so sweet, perfect flower. More so than before. Have you been saving yourself for me?”

The flush of heat cresting across my jaw was from the embarrassed acknowledgement that I had. I heard a glitch in his voice and dared not look at him.

“You’re crazy.” I closed my eyes and he issued another growl.

But he forced me to, using a single finger, gently easing my face forward. “You did wait for me.”

“Why would I do that? You didn’t,” I said in a blatant jab. I’d reverted to being that girl again, the one who’d been hurt and left behind. I hated myself for it.

After taking a deep breath, he shook his head. “No one else has mattered in my life, Sophia. I don’t know what you were told or what you think you saw, but my bed has remained empty.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

There was a strange look of sadness in his eyes, as if my distrust of him was worse than any act of violence or betrayal.

“Perhaps one day you can, *la mia bellissima bambina*”

“I’m not your beautiful baby, Mattia. I can’t be.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Why did I have the distinct feeling that he was holding something back from me? I didn’t have a chance to worry about it, his actions becoming needier, the growl erupting from his throat leaving me aching all over.

He slipped a single finger inside my tight channel, flicking it back and forth as if coaxing me into trusting him. Then he rolled his tongue all the way up the length of my pussy, finally sucking on my clit. Within seconds, the pleasure became so intense my eyes rolled in the back of my head.

I threw my arm down, digging my fingers into his muscular shoulder, clinging to him as if he was a lifeline. Maybe that’s exactly what I should consider him, his brutal actions just the

beginning of exacting revenge. Somehow knowing what he was capable of made his rough actions that much sweeter.

Panting, I dragged my tongue across my lips, clenching and releasing my fist in time to the way my pussy muscles were responding. He drove two more fingers inside, flexing his fingers open as he licked up and down in no particular hurry. He was taking his time tasting me, bringing me so close to an orgasm then pulling back that my mind was driven into a place of madness.

As he continued, now using a combination of his tongue and fingers in a perfect orchestration, I rode the wave with a smile on my face and wicked thoughts in my mind. I could envision his cock, long and thick, veins pulsing on both sides like the cords in his muscular neck did every time he clenched his jaw.

I wanted nothing more than to feel the thickness as he thrust it deep inside, fucking me like a crazed animal. I bit back a laugh as I was pushed into a fiery moment of raw electricity soaring through me.

“That’s it, princess. I need you to come for me. Come on my tongue.”

A part of me wanted to hold back, to keep this going for as long as possible, but my body couldn’t tolerate the building pressure.

When he pulled my swollen clit between his teeth, I lost it, the choice stripped away.

A wave crested over me that was so intense, so powerful and unstoppable that I was driven straight into a moment of pure ecstasy. My voice was gone, my mind blown by how sensitive I’d become, the eruption unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. I jerked up as I’d done before, the arch in my back so high that my head was hitting the table.

He covered my pussy with his mouth, burying his head into my slickness. And he refused to stop until I had another orgasm, this one equally as destructive and incredible.

“Oh. Oh. Oh...”

I heard the slight strangled scream erupting from my throat and all I could do was smile, trying my best to bite it back.

Seconds later, I fell back onto the table, the solid thud a reminder that what we were sharing wasn't decent or helpful. What we'd just done was a sin in every language as far as I was concerned.

And I hated him even more for making my body respond like he was a puppet master. But I also craved him just as much as I had before. The dichotomy was making my head spin.

He rose to his feet and I stared at him through hazy eyes.

“That was amazing, sweet princess. I assure you there's more of that where it came from.” He grinned as if he owned the world, taking another swipe of my aching pussy with his hot, wet tongue. “But only if you're a very good girl.”

With that, he reminded me that he was nothing but a brutal, repulsive man.

And one I longed to have in my life.

As he held his belt in his hand, I shuddered even more, trying to control the images and thoughts racing through my mind. I'd waited so long to indulge in seeing his muscular frame that as he yanked his shirt over his head, I rose onto my elbows, watching him intently. I was mesmerized by the additional ripples in his abdomen, certain his chest was broader than before. When I licked my lips in appreciation, he grinned, his eyes sparkling in the gorgeous sunlight shimmering through the window.

After he unzipped his cargo pants, I eased off the table and he snapped his hand around my wrist. “You're not going anywhere.”

“Where would I go dressed like this? You need to learn to trust me.” As I backed into the small bathroom, he finished undressing, yanking off his shoes first, tossing his pants aside.

“Mmm...”

I shook my head slowly, allowing my gaze to fall. Then I grabbed a towel, my nipples aching as I turned on the water. It

was time to remove the remainder of the mud and grime. When he crowded my space, his huge frame barely fitting inside the shoebox-like area, I wasn't prepared for the explosion of hunger erupting between us.

There was no chance at wiping dirt from his gorgeous face, the man far too famished. He spun me around, lifting me onto the edge of the teensy tiny counter space, wasting no time thrusting the entire length of his cock inside. I dropped the towel, no longer caring about dirt. Besides, soon we'd be covered by cum.

The thought brought a wicked smile to my face.

"Oh. My. God." I gripped his shoulders, digging my fingers into his skin, trying to keep my balance as my muscles clamped and released several times. Where he'd been gentle before, worried because I was a virgin, there was no holding back now.

His exhale was deep and scattered, his entire body tensing. Then he pulled out so the tip was just past my swollen folds, taking his time to study my eyes. When he plunged into me again, I let out a stifled scream, finally biting my lower lip to keep anyone from bothering us.

"So fucking tight, my princess. I've waited far too long to fuck you." When he repeated the action, I wrapped my legs around his hips, intertwining my feet and hanging on for the wild ride.

He was in such incredible shape, not an ounce of fat on him. I'd envisioned his body hundreds of times before, but the images hadn't been nearly as delicious as they would be from now on. The rush of desire for him was insane.

"Fuck me, Mattia. Don't stop."

"I have no intentions of it. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not ever. You are all mine."

As he developed a rhythm, I drifted straight into a moment of utter rapture, never wanting to let this go.

I couldn't wrap my hands around his thick arm muscles and as he leaned me back against the mirror, I laughed as I almost slipped off the counter.

“Don’t worry, baby. I won’t allow you to fall.” His voice dripped of lust, his eyes no longer focusing. As he rolled onto the balls of his feet, I slipped one arm over his shoulder, tangling my fingers in his hair.

Then he drove into me with crazed abandon, an animal taking his prey. We didn’t dare take our eyes off each other, the need becoming even more oppressive. I was thrown by how close we were, as if the last six years had all faded away. The ecstasy was pure, more intensified than I’d experienced before.

Or maybe the years of longing, the fiery fantasies and use of a vibrator had built to a crazy precipice, now refusing to be denied.

“God. Perfect,” he growled. “So perfect.”

I was far from it, but the praise was amazing, keeping me tingling all over.

Within seconds, the experience was overpowering, the heat building between us explosive. I could swear steam was rising, our heated breaths condensing air in the tight space. I couldn’t breathe normally, my mind a foggy blur and I loved every second of it.

As another powerful electric charge of current exploded within every cell and muscle, an orgasm pushed its way into my system, refusing to be denied.

“That’s it, baby. Come for me. Come on my cock.”

His husky words only added fuel to the fire. Panting, I couldn’t stop shaking as the climax swept through me like a tidal wave, stars floating in front of my eyes.

“Oh. Oh. Yes. Yes.”

The smile on his face was a powerful aphrodisiac, the scent of our combined lust floating between us. I prayed that his rich fragrance would linger for hours to come. I couldn’t stop shaking and he slammed into me, the sound of skin slapping against skin just as incredible as our ragged moans.

Only when the shaking began to subside did he slow down, my muscles still clenching around the thick invasion.

He pressed his forehead to mine, taking several scattered breaths. When he pulled away, I bit my inner cheek, basking in the beauty of his carved body as he yanked the towel from the floor, reaching around me, pulling me forward so he could slide the cotton under the stream of water.

I kept my legs wrapped around him, drinking in his essence as if it would create a barrier of protection from whatever danger we'd face.

Then as he pulled the towel to my face, he narrowed his eyes. The man was such an enigma, not a guy who was easy to love yet at times his tenderness caught me off guard. Today was one of those times, my mind barely able to process that he'd rescued me and that we were here together.

But were we really together?

When I yanked the cloth from his hand, he laughed softly. "You're very different than before."

"How so? I was always bratty, or so I remember you telling me."

"Stronger. More self-reliant. As if nothing and no one could ever wreck you."

While I adored every word he said in praise, a wave of heat drifted across my jaw. "You might be surprised."

"Nothing about you will surprise me." He wiped my face, taking his time to rub the dirt and grime away. I could see concern in his eyes, but a smile remained on his face, his eyes lighting up the entire time he was performing the intimate deed.

Then he tossed the towel, easing me off the counter and struggling to move us both through the narrow doorway. When he almost dropped me, we both laughed. Then he moved toward the window of the train, lowering me onto my feet.

"I thought I lost you. Again," he said quietly. "That made me want to burn down the world."

"Why?"

"Why did the thought of you being hurt make me violent?"

“Why do care about me so much?”

He smirked, glancing away briefly. “Because the first moment I laid eyes on you, I haven’t been the same. I’m not a good man, certainly not decent enough for you, princess, but with us together, we can rule the world.”

“What if all I want is a family?” I was testing him more than anything, uncertain I would ever consider bringing a child into this world.

His lust-filled eyes make me swoon all over again. “We’ll have one, *la mia gattina perfetta*.”

A quietness settled us, only this time it wasn’t unnerving. It was deepening our connection, which I didn’t think possible.

“What now, my glorious beast?”

He laughed at the term I’d used, turning me around slowly. “Now I take the last remaining part of you. After this, you’ll belong to me body and soul.”

CHAPTER 21



*M*attia

My God, the woman was a handful. I hadn't anticipated her behavior by a long shot. I'd thought she'd been pampered, but she'd been trained, not just in self-defense but with weapons and it hadn't come from D'Artagnan. He would have told me.

That meant Lucia had likely encouraged her.

My princess was very capable, certainly not immune to firing off a shot or two from any weapon. She could have no idea how much that turned me on. There was nothing sexier than a strong woman, one who could hold her own with any man.

The mere thought of losing Sophia had almost done me in.

I was enraged, so much so that there were only two things I could think about at this point.

Killing.

And fucking.

The need to protect her was a given, my mind still processing the events that had transpired, including the asshole who'd either followed us to the train station or had known where we were going. One way or another, I would find out.

But if she'd died, I would have burned down more than just the dark forests near Paris. I would have torched the fucking world.

Me, the man who'd sworn his entire life that he needed no one; the guy who'd perfected the art of remaining a happy bachelor. Only I hadn't been happy the majority of my life. The single experience with the luscious dark-haired girl had almost driven me mad.

Now I reclaimed her in a way I hadn't imagined. As she pressed her hands against the glass, the world spinning by at rapid speed, I only wished our moment of intimacy could last forever. I knew better, but the beautiful respite was necessary for both of us.

I rolled my fingertips down her back, marveling in the softness of her skin. I remained angry at what the assholes had done to her, determining what she'd been through and why she'd been taken high on the list of objectives, but no one would take this away from me.

No one.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Claiming your tight ass."

She shuddered audibly but widened her legs on her own. When I raised her bottom, she looked over her shoulder, taking several shallow breaths. I rolled my finger down the crack of her ass between her legs, flicking it back and forth across her clit then pinching. When I thrust it inside, she arched her back, bucking against me.

I slickened my finger then rolled the tip to her dark hole, easing one side of her buttocks open with my other hand. Then I pressed just inside. She threw her head back, the smile on her face surprising.

She was giving me another gift, allowing me to take her virgin asshole. I was thrown by how much my body was shaking, the tension and need for her mounting. I could ravage her for hours and would do so at some point, enjoying exploring every inch. Now we were merely reconnecting, fulfilling a need that refused to be denied.

When I pushed it in by a couple of inches she tensed, taking a single scattered breath. She was even more beautiful than

before, her skin glistening from the euphoria she'd just experienced. She was absolutely breathtaking when she came, her eyes dancing to a wildfire that I'd seen all those years ago as well.

It had kept me awake at night, haunting my mind and ravaging my soul. While I wanted to be careful with her, making this as special as possible, my patience was running out. I was at the point that I wouldn't be able to hold back for much longer.

"Why do you want me so much?" she asked quietly, but her voice was full of emotion.

"Because you mean something to me, Sophia. Perhaps you've always meant something special to me. I was a fool to let you go. That won't happen again. Now, you've become my everything." I drove my finger into her tight hole, smiling at the sounds erupting from her voluptuous lips.

I pumped several times, adding a second finger then flexing them open. She met every thrust, her breathing as ragged as mine. Then she pressed her hands on the glass, pushing back against the tight invasion.

The look on her face enticed the hell out of me, my mind blown at having her here in my arms. I would track down the person responsible for hurting her. Then the asshole would die a slow and very painful death and I'd enjoy every minute of it.

I ran the fingers of one hand down the length of my cock, stroking the base. After adding a third finger, pumping deeper into her tight ass, more aroused than ever by the sensual sounds pushing past her lush lips, I thrust my cock into her pussy once again, throwing my head back with a roar.

After plunging in several times, I pressed my cockhead to her dark entrance then wrapped my hand around her long hair, tugging until I could see her face. "Breathe, princess. Just breathe for me."

She took several shallow breaths, her lips remaining pursed as I pushed the tip inside. How many times had I thought about doing this exact filthy act to her, defiling her in every way? More times than I could count. As I slipped another two inches

inside, her moans escalated, one hand slapping the glass. But her muscles stretched, accommodating my wide girth.

“That’s it, baby. Take all of me.”

“So huge,” she muttered as I forced her back to arch even more.

“Mmm... So tight.” I thrust other inch inside, hitting the tight ring of muscle and holding my position while we both took several deep breaths. Images of the night we’d spent together years before jetted into the forefront of my mind. They’d given me hours of pleasure over the years.

When I drove the remainder inside, she issued several sharp cries, her entire body shaking. She slapped her hand on the glass once again then raked her nails down the surface. Every muscle was tense, the reflection of her lovely face keeping me fully aroused.

The sensations coursing through me were incredible, so much so I sucked in my breath, doing everything I could to remain gentle. When I was fully seated inside, she laughed softly, as if the hint of pain had immediately washed into a pure bliss.

“Oh, my...” she breathed, a smile crossing her face.

“I plan on fucking you every chance I get,” I told her then pulled out, driving into her again.

And again.

When she began to meet every savage thrust, I allowed myself to let go. She was no fragile girl, able to take everything I dished out.

I continued fucking her, my sadistic needs breaching the surface. When I smacked her bottom once again, she yelped then laughed, her nervousness around me returning. Yet with every breath she took, every drag of her tongue across her lips, I was pulled into her sweet darkness.

As I rolled onto the balls of my feet, I yanked one arm over her head then the other, snapping my fingers around both wrists. She was a tiny little thing, at least ten inches shorter

than me. That made me want to protect her that much more from the evils of the world.

But in truth, I was the vilest creature of all. I'd done my best to stay away from her. I'd given her a chance. She had no idea what she'd awakened all those years ago, the dormant beast no longer satisfied with his slumber.

As I pounded into her, every sound I made animalistic, I sensed she was losing herself in the moment. I did what I could to control my needs, wanting this to last as long as possible.

But within seconds, there was no chance at holding back.

It was as if she sensed I was close, her smile turning wicked. Then she squeezed her muscles, and it was all I could take.

As I erupted deep inside, filling her with my seed, I felt danger lurking in the sunlight. As if it was all around us. Seconds later, I crushed my weight against hers, both of us staring out at the countryside as it whizzed by. This was no scenic adventure but at least I believed that as long as we were on the nonstop train, we'd be safe.

I only hoped I wasn't acting like a fool.

She took several deep breaths, the reflection of her face highlighting her return to anxiety.

"Who were those people, the men who abducted me? Russians? French? Italians?"

"All of the above, it would seem."

"How is that possible?"

"That's a very good question. I need you to be honest with me. What did the man say before he took you?"

"Nothing. He did call me by name and said my family would get what was coming to them, but that was it. Then I never saw him again."

There was no way of telling at this point if she was lying other than my gut was screaming that she didn't feel she could trust me. While I couldn't blame her, at some point she'd need to

come completely clean with me. However, this wasn't the time or the place to try to grill her.

"You were there for a specific reason, Sophia. Until we determine what that was, both our families could be in danger."

She pushed me back enough to turn around. "What about Lucia and little Michelangelo?"

"They are safe. You know Dar wouldn't allow anything to happen to them."

"And Joy?"

In my eyes, both women were targets. That was if the attacks were all about destroying the empire and not something more personal. With the seemingly mixed nationalities of the soldiers, the reasoning behind their attacks could be based on a number of things. All three of the men in power of the DeLuca-Lazarro Empire had made additional enemies along the way. I had a half dozen of my own.

The people behind this were clever, organized, and had patience. That made them the most dangerous set of enemies to date. We'd need to undermine their entire operation, or we wouldn't be successful in uncovering their identities, let alone defeating them.

I brushed my knuckles down the side of her face. "You need to learn to trust me, Sophia."

"You're not an easy man to trust, Mattia. You must know that. You've acted like I belong to you for years, yet you kept your distance, keeping tabs on me like you were hunting me. That's not the best way to get a girl to fall hopelessly in love with you." She laughed, the sound something I'd missed almost as much as seeing her lovely face.

I refused to tell her about the contract on this godforsaken train. That wasn't going to happen.

"We will have time to learn from each other. First, we ensure we're on safe ground." I gave her another stern look, waiting until she nodded in response.

The knock on the door brought a moment of anger. She glanced toward the door, trying to keep from laughing given our state of undress. Then she skirted around me, snatching up her clothes and moving into the small bathroom.

Sighing, I glanced at my reflection before yanking my pants from the floor, struggling into them just as another knock became more of a pounding.

When I opened the door, Vincenzo opened his eyes wide. “Boss.”

“What is it?” I glanced over him into the corridor then ushered him inside.

“Luis will recover. The doctor was very helpful, but I don’t trust him.”

Nodding, I raked my hand through my hair. I’d been forced to use an old connection, something I never did without going through several checks. People could turn sides under the best of circumstances. “I’ll handle it before we leave. Any other communication?”

“I checked with our people in Switzerland. The house is secure.”

“Good. We have another two hours before arrival. I don’t want any hiccups.” Soon we’d be out of range for any normal communication services, although I had a high frequency radio that could be used in case of an emergency. At this point, I didn’t mind radio silence. There was always a chance we could be tracked. If we were, there would be little chance of survival.

He glanced around the small compartment and grinned. “Your history with Ms. Lazarro is fascinating.”

He was making a statement, not asking a question. The man knew me too well. The fact I considered him a friend was the only reason I didn’t react badly. I wasn’t the kind of man who allowed being questioned by anyone under any circumstances.

“Yes, very complicated.”

“She’s the one you’ve been pining away for?”

I cocked my head, lifting an eyebrow. “Let’s just say we were destined to be together.”

He thought about what I was saying as well as the terminology I’d used. “Perhaps she’ll bring you happiness.” At least he had the forethought of lowering his voice.

“We will see, my friend. That’s a tall order.”

“It’s time you had a family.” He grinned then backed away.

I’d mentioned her in passing, something that hadn’t surprised him in the least. He was well aware of the demands of being in my position, surprising me once by stating he’d never want to be me under any circumstances. Hell, I didn’t want to be me. “You will protect her with your life.” Now I was making a statement.

“Yes, sir. With my life.”

“Walk the train. I want certainty we weren’t compromised.”

“The person at the station?”

“Others will be sent to rattle me, more likely to Dar and the others. Whoever this is wants us spinning while trying to determine what the hell is going on. We’re facing a possible war, my friend.”

Exhaling, he nodded. “Understood. Should I put the pilot on notice?”

It was best that we return to Italy as soon as possible, only I had to make certain whatever moves I made weren’t typical. “Not yet. I’ll know when the time is right.”

“Yes, boss. I’ll let you know if there are any issues.”

“You do that.”

As I closed the door, I took a deep breath. There was no doubt there’d be additional attacks, but for some reason, I had a feeling the person or persons responsible wanted us to return to Italy.

Where he had a captive audience.

The chess game had been played well so far. However, it was time to turn the tables and even the score.

As she opened the door, I could tell by the look on her face that she was anxious but there was something else. She was hiding a secret, one that I had a feeling would turn the tables.

If only she could learn to trust me.

CHAPTER 22



*S*ophia

Pop! Pop!

The sound had been muffled so that no one else on the train heard. But I had. I could swear it was echoing in my eardrums even now.

How many gunshots had I heard in my life? Dozens. Hundreds. But for some reason, the fact I watched as Mattia entered the second cabin where Luis had been taken, not hesitating for one second before driving two bullets in the doctor's brain had reminded me that the world in which I lived was dangerous.

I sat huddled in the seat of the SUV on my way to safety, trying to determine why the incident hours before had bothered me so much. While there was so much about Mattia that I didn't understand, I sensed he would protect me with his life if necessary.

Hell, I'd killed two men with a crude weapon only hours before, although it seemed like a lifetime. I'd driven the jagged blade through the asshole's eye socket, for God's sake, yet the cleaner kill Mattia had been responsible for bothered me? I had a swell of emotions, most of which didn't make sense. I was excited yet terrified, longing for his touch, yet wishing he'd never walked back into my life.

But was he in my life? Or would he disappear again? Maybe that's what my angst was really all about, the fact I'd believed he'd come back for me quickly years before. Then when he hadn't, I'd done everything in my power to shut down every feeling except for hatred. It had worked so well that six years had been lost. Six. Fucking. Years. Gone.

I wasn't certain if I was angrier with him or with myself.

"Are you alright?" Mattia asked in such a quiet voice I wasn't certain I'd heard him.

"Peachy." When he said nothing, I grimaced. "Why did you kill him? The doctor?" I glanced down at the Glock the rugged man had on his lap and hissed.

"Because he couldn't be trusted."

"You didn't know that for certain. You assumed." I tipped my head, noticing Vincenzo's amused gaze in the rearview mirror. We were in a rugged SUV that had been waiting for us at the train station, which wasn't unusual but another reminder how powerful Mattia and his influence was.

"Yeah, I did, *bellissima principessa*," Mattia said quietly as he lifted his head, his eyes searching mine. "In case you haven't noticed, we're facing another war like we did years ago."

"You mean when our fathers died? I'm sorry. When they were murdered?" Not that the loss of my father had ever bothered me much.

He narrowed his eyes, obviously trying to figure out what I was getting at.

"Now isn't the time or place to have this discussion." He shifted his gaze momentarily to his men sitting in the front two seats. Of course. He wouldn't want me to disrespect him. He was carrying on with the family traditions.

Because he doesn't know any different.

My inner voice didn't tell any lies.

The awkwardness had returned between us, the level of tension that I'd hoped we could ignore. I'd need to tell him all

my truths, confessing my sins and the thought of doing so weighed heavily on my mind.

Secrets and lies.

Was it possible that typical families didn't have them? Normal families. Was there even such a thing? I didn't have the answer and in truth, I doubted a single member of either the DeLuca or Lazarro family could provide one either. What I did know was that the sins of our respective fathers had tainted our worlds and would continue to do so for at least another generation.

That was also the reason I'd given myself for never wanting a child, determined to shatter the great ticking clock all women had. I wanted to laugh but I was shaking too hard from a hard rush of adrenaline.

"I couldn't take the chance the doctor would bring additional danger our way, risking your life. I hope you understand." His words were hollow.

"I'm not certain I understand anything, including why we remain connected, Mattia."

He reached over, taking my hand into his and I bristled, trying to close my fingers. When I attempted to pull away, he issued a distinct growl.

"That's an easy answer, my perfect kitten. We were always meant to be. I care about you more than you know."

"I thought that to be the truth years ago." He was right. Now wasn't the time or place given Vincenzo and Luis were only inches away. Whatever we had to say would be in private. I fisted my hand, shoving myself against the rear passenger door, sucking in and holding my breath.

"But not now?"

"I don't know what to think any longer."

When I looked away, Mattia let go of my hand, tingling sensations remaining. The tension between us increased.

"We'll be able to rest for a couple days," he repeated, as if he wasn't certain himself. "We'll talk."

“Are you certain about that? They’re hunting for us. Aren’t they?”

“Nothing in life is certain, Sophia, but every precaution has been taken. We will return to Italy unharmed. You have my word.”

“Another promise you won’t keep?” That I was tossing out barbs one after the other highlighted how much he’d hurt me by leaving me. By finding another life. Wasn’t I a stupid girl after all? There was no such thing as a Prince Charming. They were all toads in disguise.

I could feel Mattia’s heated look as well as his uncertainty over what I was getting at.

Vincenzo shifted in his seat, coughing slightly. “We’re almost to the house, boss. I’ll check out the interior. I’ll make a sweep of everything to make certain there aren’t any explosives.”

“Good,” Mattia said in passing, not concentrating on what his men were saying.

There was too much baggage between us, unanswered questions and concerns.

Secrets and lies.

That had to end.

“And I’ll handle the surrounding grounds,” Luis said from the front passenger seat.

Another five minutes passed until Vincenzo made a turn, heading up a long driveway. When he reached the top, I had to admit that the view was even more incredible.

With the engine stopped, both Vincenzo and Luis immediately exited the vehicle, the back doors opened.

“There are some things that need to be said, Sophia. I never lied to you, but I also haven’t told you everything you need to know about our pasts and the decisions that forced us to take different paths. Just know that you meant and mean the world to me. I couldn’t care less about other women. You were truly the only person in my life that meant anything to me. I hope

you can believe that because it's coming from what is left of my heart.”

I was stunned by his words, shocked how much they meant to me. And I had no idea what to say in return.

Fisting my hands, I waited as Mattia climbed out, thinking about everything I wanted to say to him. I hated him. I loved him. I wanted him. I needed him. He was my everything. And I was utterly terrified that once we returned to Italy, he'd disappear again. I couldn't take it. The ache in my heart increased to the point I was hollow inside, tears threatening to strip away all of my strength. How many times had I thought about a sit-down meeting with him and what I would say if that occurred? More times than I could count. How many fantasies had I concocted with a beautiful, perfect ending attached to the end? Too many.

Enough that I no longer believed in fairytales.

Mattia was right in that we were both adults, my naivete shattered a long time before. He wouldn't be able to charm me into thinking that I mattered much to him. That was perfectly fine with me. I needed to face what we'd shared like any other situation, with practicality in mind.

Even if my heart wanted something else almost desperately.

He remained stiff and unmoving a few seconds before heading toward his men, talking to both in a hushed voice. After they'd walked away, he walked around the back of the SUV and I held my breath. When he bent over, I closed my eyes briefly. The scent of him alone was driving me crazy, so much so I wanted to keep my distance but knew it wasn't possible.

“Come on,” Mattia urged. Although his tone was firm, there was an encouraging gentleness with it, as if he was trying to allow me time to adjust to my surroundings.

Vincenzo had driven for what seemed like hours, although I could tell by the sun lowering in the sky that maybe two had gone by. I was aware we were in Switzerland but honestly, had no idea where. I had a feeling the Capo had been told to take the scenic route to our destination.

Granted, I'd been able to enjoy a gorgeous view, the countryside utterly incredible. The deep greens of the lush valleys were a picturesque tapestry of vivid colors, the regal snowcapped mountains a stunning backdrop. For any other woman in this position, perhaps she'd feel protected, enough so she could enjoy the environment. But I had a sense that everything was crushing down on my shoulders and would continue to do so until Mattia not only discovered but exterminated the enemy.

That was what my family did, crush the rodents who dared attack us. Maybe I should also be grateful that's what usually occurred.

He'd remained almost entirely quiet, although he'd glanced at me as often as I'd glanced at him. I'd also noticed that Vincenzo had seemed amused at our cagey, ridiculous behavior.

Leaning forward, I peered at the gorgeous chalet, shocked that it was exactly like pictures I'd seen of the Swiss Alps. I'd always wanted to come here but had never found a reason. However, the reason chosen for me wasn't on my bucket list.

He pulled me to the door of the SUV, easing me onto the cobblestone pavers. The three-story house was on a knoll overlooking a valley with a small town beside a stunning crystal-clear lake. From where I stood, I could swear I was able to make out fishes swimming in the rippling water.

Or maybe I was stuck in a crazy fairytale that I'd soon learn had no happy ending.

Or just maybe I was as jaded as I'd been accused of being.

Vincenzo had a weapon in his hand, wasting no time heading toward the front door. Luis had regained much of his strength and his color, which surprised me. The doctor had lost his life to save the man's. There was something sick about that.

"Nice place," Luis said. "Stay right here, boss. We need to ensure everything is secure."

"He should be resting," I told Mattia after the two of them had walked away.

“And he’ll get his chance. Right now, I need to make certain that you’re the one protected.”

“I’m not fragile. No matter what you think.”

“No, you’re not. However, you’ve already learned how dangerous the situation is. This isn’t over yet by a long shot.”

“Why do I feel like that everything you touch is dangerous?”

He smiled and it seemed strange that his expression was genuine, the sunlight accentuating the twinkle in his eyes. When he curled his hand, lifting his arm as if he was going to stroke the side of my face, I reacted involuntarily, flinching and pulling my head away.

The sparkle in his eyes immediately died, his smile fading. He turned away on purpose, his jaw suddenly clenched so much I was certain his face hurt. “Maybe because you’re right. I hope one day you’ll be able to trust me.”

“I don’t know if I can, Mattia. So much has changed, so many lies told over the years.”

“I’m not your enemy.” He studied me for a few seconds, but I sensed he knew exactly what I was talking about.

“You’re not? That’s what I’ve always been told. My father. My sister. My brother.” I laughed and the sound was nothing but bitter. “But when I was in your arms, I thought the sun rose and set with you. You were my hero, my first and the only man I wanted at the time.”

“And now?”

“And now, as I said, I don’t know you or what to believe any longer.” I could tell he understood the admittance was difficult but for once, the absolute truth.

“We were products of our respective fathers, two men who’d once been friends.”

“One betrayed the other, or so I’ve heard. Do you know why?”

He shook his head. “Does it matter any longer?”

“For some reason, I need to hear the truth about everything. I think my mother knows why, a secret she’s kept all these

years. Don't we all have them?" I'd always thought my mother held more answers, which had helped push her into her current mental state while increasing the anger my father had shown over the years.

"I guess we do, beautiful princess."

"We can't have secrets between us, Mattia. I can't take it."

"Understood. If you need to know what happened between our fathers, then only you and your brother and sister have the right to ask. I'm not trying to cause you any more pain than you've already experienced over the years, Sophia. That was never my intention."

"I thought it was. At least for a few years."

He fisted his hand, bringing it to his chest. "You thought I used you."

"Yes. Because you were my everything and I think you knew that. Then you weren't. You just tossed me out of your life. I need to know. Why did you make a promise that you refused to keep? I thought we had something special." I was surprised at myself that I'd admitted it, but if ever there was a time to end the lies and walk away from the past, it was now. "Maybe I was just a stupid child, but you made me believe in fairytales and knights on giant steeds."

I could tell he was debating what to say to me but there was tremendous pain in his eyes. "I meant every word I said to you then. You need to know that what Lucia told you about D'Artagnan and the night of the fire when she was only twelve wasn't true. I didn't have anything to do with what happened to him and his family. However, I can't blame your sister because she didn't know what was going on. Years later, there was no undoing what had happened or the brutality of how my father treated D'Artagnan, but at least she found him again. If I'd known the truth, I would have told her, but my father was damn good at keeping secrets himself. I can only imagine what she believed and what she had to endure."

"She suffered. Like I suffered. She loved him like I loved you." Why was I bothering?

His eyes opened wide, anger sparking an intense light in both. But it was rage for himself and his actions. I could easily see that. “You were always meant to be mine, Sophia. I believed that from the moment I saw you at that restaurant when you almost fucking died.”

“The night you risked your life to save mine.” The gut-wrenching moment was draining, so much so I wasn’t certain I could remain standing much longer. “Why does my sister hate you so much?”

“I know she believes I was responsible for what happened to D’Artagnan. You know the truth, although you still suspect I had something to do with it. Don’t you?”

I was shocked that he was being so forward, shielding my eyes from the bright sun so I could try to determine whether or not he was telling the truth.

“Both Lucia and I are well aware that the person who ordered the hit was my father. She’s accepted that as well as the reason Enzo killed Papa for all his evil deeds. However, there must be more to the story for Lucia to continue warning me about you.”

“When was the last warning?”

In truth, I had to think about the last time we’d bothered having a conversation about him. Not since I’d returned to Paris after our father’s funeral, refusing to have anything to do with the entire family regime, let alone Mattia. My God. What if part of the angst and continued anger was my fault? “Not for several years.”

“Then you’ll need to ask your sister. Dar mentioned before I came to rescue you that she still blamed me. I thought time would heal wounds, but apparently not. You need to be aware that she doesn’t know you’re in danger so I couldn’t ask her before I left.”

“Dar doesn’t want her upset.” Of course not. Her second pregnancy had already been difficult, her blood pressure the issue. “Why didn’t you talk it out with her years before?”

“Because you had a life, Sophia. Because you made it perfectly clear that you didn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

My heart was in my throat, the need to have his arms wrapped around me stronger than ever. “Do you know how many times I thought about you? Every time I saw you in Paris, I was angry with you, yet the girl inside wanted you to rescue me. How crazy is that?”

He half laughed. “Not crazy at all, Sophia. Hell, you had a boyfriend.”

“Who cheated on me within six months because I refused passion. He wasn’t you.” I was sick to my stomach for admitting the ugly truth.

Sighing, he glanced away, rubbing his eyes. “A part of me didn’t want to push the issue with Lucia even a couple years ago because I didn’t know how much anger she harbored for me. Then I recently found out that she told you I tried to kill Dar. Did you know she threatened me to stay away from you? She was prepared to do whatever it took to have Dar exile me.”

“After she knew my father was responsible?” It didn’t make any sense to me.

“Yes.”

“That’s why you never made good on your promise.”

“Yes, Sophia. But it wasn’t because of fear of exile or losing power. It was because I truly believed you deserved a better life. I still do. At this point, my job is to get you home safely.”

Too much time had passed. I could see it in his eyes. He’d moved on. Maybe it was time I did the same. The fucking was just that, electricity that needed to be extinguished.

Then why did my heart ache as much as it had from the beginning?

My chest immediately tightened, my pulse racing. “I only wanted to be with you. She begged me not to see you.” I thought about what she’d said all those years ago. Why had

she continued to lead me to believe Mattia had anything to do with the death of Dar's family? "You were there at the fire. Weren't you? My sister wasn't lying."

He turned his head so slowly that I didn't see it move until he was looking in my eye. "Yes, I was there, Sophia. I was an angry kid who'd overheard something he didn't understand."

"Meaning what?"

"My father was a brutal man. I hated him, everything about him. He enjoyed tormenting both Tommaso and me while we were growing up. I knew who your family was. I was told the same bullshit that you, your brother and sister were when growing up. It was drilled into us that you were bad seeds. Our enemies. My father often talked about destroying Roberto, claiming his territories. On that night, I overheard my father talking to someone. I found out later it was D'Artagnan's father. He made a promise that he would take Dar as his son. I was livid. He'd accused our mother of being unfaithful, later having her murdered because of it. He did it right in front of our eyes, yet he wanted to bring another boy into the family. His sister too. Another ready-made family."

"Oh, my God." Was that possible? It was something neither Dar nor Lucia talked about. Granted, not that I'd given them much of a chance to talk about the past. I'd shoved every aspect of my life away, including my family.

"Yeah, just imagine. I don't know the entire situation or all the reasons why, and I certainly had no clue at the time but I left to confront D'Artagnan, to keep my family intact, telling him no one wanted him. Yeah, it was fucking stupid and irrational, but I couldn't think straight. That was the night of the fire, so Lucia was right in that I was there. I heard a slight explosion only moments after I arrived. The truth is I couldn't do anything to stop it. And yes, Sophia. I did try."

There was such conviction in his voice that I wanted to believe him. I didn't have a chance to say anything before Vincenzo returned from searching the interior.

"All clear, boss. I'll finish walking the grounds with Luis and we'll be in the guest house out back if you need us."

“Thank you,” Mattia said, taking a few seconds before nodding toward the door. “Let’s go inside. Then we’ll finish our discussion.”

“I can take almost anything, Mattia. I’m not the girl you knew all those years ago, but what I can’t take are lies. I love my sister, but I know that her love for Dar clouded her vision and kept the rage inside. I don’t want that for myself or my future, but I can tell you’re still hiding something. If that’s the truth, you need to tell me. I can’t live like this any longer. The longing. The need. The uncertainty. It’s not living, Mattia. And it’s not worth it.”

I walked past him toward the house, the ache building.

“Are you certain you want the truth, Sophia? Sometimes, the truth won’t set you free. Do you understand me?”

Exhaling, I stopped yet refused to turn around. “Yes. I understand, Mattia, especially in this cruel, jaded family. But I need to know all of it. You made a deal with my father at my nineteenth birthday party. Didn’t you? Please tell me.” I folded one arm across my stomach, uncertain I wanted to hear the ugly truth.

The quiet was horrible.

“Yes,” he hissed. “I did. Did you know your father was almost broke? Did you know he was looking for the highest bidder that night for both his daughters?”

The news wasn’t shocking. “That’s the night he made a deal with Giuseppe Romano regarding Lucia.” Thank God, the marriage hadn’t been allowed to come to fruition.

“Yes. He also made a deal with the highest bidder infusing cash into his broken company. With me. I have a contract for your hand in marriage. And before you ask why I never mentioned it again...”

“Because of Lucia,” I said, interrupting him.

“That was only part of the reason. As you said, I take what I want. It was because you were happy in the life you’d created in Paris. I didn’t want to interfere. I’ve done a hell of a lot of terrible things in my life, Sophia, including murder. I’ve never

lied to you about that, but I refused to take your life away. If that was the one good deed, then so be it.”

The angst in his voice was as tremendous as the ache in my heart.

“I wasn’t happy, Mattia. Don’t you understand that?” I should be angry with him, but it was just the opposite. In telling me the truth, something I think I already knew, he was admitting his faults. And that he had a heart. I suddenly loved him more than anything in the world.

Yet when he said nothing, I was gutted. I’d played the game too long. I’d risked everything because of my impetuosity, my need to have him chase me. I’d lost the one thing I’d wanted my entire life more than freedom.

Love.

Tears formed in my eyes, but I refused to sob like a child in front of him. This was the moment, the end. And now, I had to walk away.

When he snapped his hand around my wrist, jerking me backward, I gasped. Then he cupped the side of my face, shaking his head.

“You need to listen to me, Sophia. You are everything to me. You’re the reason I go on living, the air I breathe and the light at the end of the darkest tunnel. I live to see you safe, to watch you thrive and to ensure that no one ever hurts you. I long to taste your sweet lips, to drive my cock deep inside your pussy and to claim you as mine. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. You’re all I’ve ever needed and now that you’re back in my life, I will never allow you to escape again. Do you hear me, *bellissima principessa*? Do you? I love you and you belong to me.”

He shook me brutally, jarring my entire senses. But as joy and love swept through me, tears slipped past my lashes. And I knew without any doubt, with zero reservation that he was the only man I wanted in my life. “Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

CHAPTER 23



“*L*ove is blind, but when we close our eyes, we see with our hearts.”

—Sara Bareilles

Sophia

Love.

Was there truly such a thing as being blinded by it? Yes. I knew it without any doubt, without reservation that the few who were lucky to find true love, the kind that left you breathless and aching because of a single thought, were blinded utterly and completely.

And in admitting it, I'd never felt such a powerful release in my life. The man I'd refused to love, had been told not to care about, who'd remained in the shadows for far too many years was right here. And he loved me.

I threw my arms around his neck, gasping for air seconds before he captured my mouth. The air around us was still, all sounds ceasing. While danger still existed, this was yet another moment that we would steal from reality, taking our time to appreciate the realization of what we'd almost lost.

Mattia swept his tongue inside my mouth as he pulled me onto my toes. I was thrown into a sweet abyss, every nerve ending

on fire, every rapid beat of my heart exciting me even more. He loved me.

Love.

Love!

How was it possible for two broken people to be in such a heated, passionate moment of understanding? I wrapped one leg around his as I brushed my hand down his back. The feel of having him this close, the heat of his sculpted body pressed against mine was everything I'd ever wanted, yet the one thing I'd tried to deny.

No longer.

I belonged to him.

The kiss was more powerful than it had ever been, his tongue finding and dominating mine. His chest rumbled as he growled into the moment of intimacy, his massive hand sweeping down my back and cupping my bottom, forcing my legs around him. The man was more possessive than before, determined to take all of me. Even the way his fingers dug into my skin was more controlling.

I would never be free of him again, not that I wanted to be. My heart, my body, and my soul belonged to him. He fisted my hair, tangling his fingers in my long curls as he took long strides toward the door of the chalet, struggling to open the door then kicking it shut once we were inside.

It was apparent he knew where he was going, heading through the house without hesitation, never breaking the deliriously amazing connection. When he started to walk up the stairs, I pushed my hands against his shoulders, finally able to break the kiss, catching my breath.

“What are you doing?” I asked, laughing and purring.

“You're dirty.”

“I thought you liked it when I was filthy.”

There was something about his dark grin that sent a series of shivers down my spine. He was so determined, his hunger off the charts. I adored seeing him this way, taking full control of

me as he'd done before. Maybe I was always meant to submit to only one man. The thought gave me a wicked smile.

He headed for the third floor, the loft-like setting a beautiful addition, highlighting the cathedral ceiling. As he walked down the hall, I allowed myself to peer down at the gorgeous living room. A stone fireplace jetted up to the peak of the roof, the leather furniture accentuating dark rugs and vibrant art on the walls. Every window had a gorgeous view of the countryside. This was a place where magic happened, where two people could fall hopelessly in love.

And where no one could interfere with the passion.

I so wanted to believe that.

Mattia nipped my lower lip, dragging my attention back to him. Then he stormed into a bathroom at the end of the hall, barely managing to flick on a light.

"Oh, my God. This is gorgeous." I was shocked at the stunning black marble features, veins of gold and a pearlescent shimmer weaving a delicate pattern through the thick slabs. Everything was modern, yet gothic, larger than the living room in my apartment in Paris.

"Not nearly as much as the woman in my arms." He laughed, the husky sound sending a flicker of electricity through every cell and muscle. Before allowing me to stand on my feet, he jerked off my tennis shoes, pitching them to the side.

As soon as my feet touched the cool marble, he ripped off my shirt, growling as soon as he exposed my naked breasts. He was nothing but a savage, his hunger knowing no bounds. He cupped my breasts, flicking his thumbs back and forth across my already hardened nipples.

"Are you wet for me, Sophia?"

"Always."

"I'm going to fuck you every day. Do you know that?"

"Yes. God, yes." I was trembling all over, excitement surging through to the point I was burning from explosive heat. Gasping for air, I threw my head back as he lowered his head,

sucking on my nipple. The second he bit down, I allowed myself to cry out without fear of anyone hearing me. “Yes. Yes.”

He pushed me against the counter, taking his time shifting from one hardened bud to the other, licking then biting until my pussy was throbbing. I ran my hands over his shoulders, struggling to slide my fingers under his shirt. I needed to touch his skin, to have the tips of my fingers seared from the red-hot heat pulsing between us.

Chuckling darkly, he pulled away, giving me a mischievous look before tapping the tip of my nose with his index finger. “You will obey me. Yes?”

“Maybe.”

“Then I guess you need a reminder of who’s in charge. And you will learn that striking your master isn’t in your best interest.”

“My master?”

“You heard what I said. I am and will always be in charge of you. That’s something you need to accept.”

His tempting ways were about to drive me crazy.

He refused to allow me to squeak by with taking any advantage of him, yanking down my shorts and panties, easily maneuvering them off my feet. Then he turned me around to face the oversized mirror, crushing the weight of his body against mine. “Take a look at our reflection, baby. What do you see?”

“Love.”

It was as if he didn’t expect my answer. Suddenly, his features softened and he brushed hair from my face. “Yes, my princess. Love.”

“I doubt I’ll be able to obey you.”

I shuddered in his hold, never allowing my eyes to leave his. Just the bold expression on his face was mesmerizing, the intoxication I felt all about the musky scent of his desire. I was elated, tingling all over, curious as to what he had planned. He

rubbed the rough pads of his fingers down both arms, dropping his head and pressing kisses from one shoulder to the other. When he lifted his head, his grin was positively evil.

“My bad girl. I’m going to have a tough time taming you I can see.” He jerked out a drawer, wrapping his hand around a wooden brush within seconds.

“Why do I think you’ve been to this chalet before?”

“Because I own it.” Winking, he pulled the brush up to my eye level, twirling it several times. “You never know what’s hiding in closers and drawers, delicious implements and shackles to be used on your luscious body.”

“Does that mean we’ll return one day?”

“Yes, on our honeymoon.”

“Does that mean you’re asking me to marry you?”

I was shocked when he issued a hard crack against my backside, yelping from the shock more than the pain.

“Not yet. Good things come to girls who have patience.”

“Like the man of the family?” My snide remark resulted in four more smacks on one cheek then the other.

“You should be mindful of what you say.” His tone was playful, so much so all I could do was smile. I’d never seen him this relaxed, acting as if a sheet of armor had been lifted from both of us.

Maybe it had been.

Whatever happened in our lives, the only thing that would matter was the closeness we’d managed to grasp onto, the need that furrowed deep inside both of us. The look of seduction remained on his face as he used his knee to widen my legs. Then he didn’t hesitate, bringing the brush down from one side to the other.

There was something crazy and wondrous about hearing the thudding sound, my bottom aching immediately. What I found more interesting than anything was how powerful the spanking was as an aphrodisiac. I gripped the edge of the counter,

staring at our reflection as I'd done only hours before. Now it seemed like a lifetime in that so much had changed between us.

All the anger I'd felt was gone, replaced by an intense need, the desire tearing through me almost identical to what I'd felt all those years ago. A warm, dizzying feeling swept over me, settling between my legs.

He rubbed his fingers down my spine, his hooded eyes darker than normal. I could easily get lost in them for hours, unable to do anything but bask in their beauty. Maybe I was just a silly girl, incapable of thinking about anything but the building lust.

"We have a lot of years to make up for." His whispered words added another series of vibrations skimming across my skin. He continued the spanking, twisting and twirling the brush several times.

When he jerked my hips further away from the counter, I arched my back, taking gasping breaths as he brought the thick piece of wood down more brutally. With his chest heaving, I could tell he was barely controlling his needs.

After a few additional cracks, he threw back his head with a series of growls. Then he tossed the brush aside and wrapped his hands around mine, forcing our fingers to entwine.

"Time for a shower, *bellissima principessa*," he whispered, muttering sinful words in Italian as he used his chin to push aside hair from my neck.

I closed my eyes, basking in the dozens of sensations as the current between us became another cocoon. I wanted to wrap the experience up with a bow, keeping it close to my heart for the rest of my life.

"Non c'è niente come fare l'amore con te, principessa. Sei tutto ciò che il mio cuore ha sempre desiderato. E ti fotterò per ore."

There is nothing like making love with you, princess. You are everything my heart has ever desired. And I will fuck you for hours.

The purr erupting from my lips after he issued the alluring, frank words floated between us. He wasn't in the mood for wasting time, yanking off his shoes and peeling away his pants. When he was completely undressed, breathing became even more difficult. I turned around, raking my nails down his chest, using the tip of my finger to outline one of his tattoos. "Why is it that powerful, dangerous men crave at least one tattoo?"

"It's an expression of our domination," he said as he lowered his head, watching me intently. "The darker the work of art, the more they believe themselves to be gods of war."

"An interesting analogy. Then the man who captured me believes himself to be invincible."

He laughed, narrowing his eyes. "How so?"

"He had a bloody skull, the face of it even more ominous." I glanced up into his eyes, giving him a salacious grin. "But it's obvious you are by far the most powerful god of war around."

"Because of the number of tattoos I have?" He grabbed my hand, bringing my fingers to his mouth, pressing wet kisses from one knuckle to another.

"Yes. I adore them."

"Well, then. Perhaps I'll need to have my name imprinted in your lovely skin since no man will ever be allowed to touch you again. You do understand those are the rules, don't you, sweet kitten?" As he pulled me with him, heading to the large enclosure, I pursed my lips in a playful pout.

"We'll see."

"And you'll learn," he roared before pushing me inside then closing the all glass door behind him.

I backed against the furthest wall, admiring his physique as if seeing it for the first time. He was tall and rugged, every muscle chiseled, perfection in my eyes.

The memories of what we'd shared on the rooftop so long ago rushed to the surface. We were both so different, which made this that much sweeter.

He turned on the water, the three rain showerheads immediately pulsing. I couldn't help but laugh from the frigid temperature.

"You did that on purpose," I said, issuing a growl of my own.

"You needed to be cooled down."

"Be careful. Two can play at that game." I moved toward him, pressing my body against his, forcing us both under the icy water. Within seconds, I could swear there was steam from the explosive nature of our desire.

He rubbed his hands down my back, caressing my skin as he lowered his head. "You're not a game player, baby girl. That much I know about you."

"Then what am I?"

"A woman in need of an owner."

I punched him, the action meant as a tease. He shook his head as if I'd smacked his face all over again. Then he pushed me against the wall, gripping my hips and lifting me off the floor. "You are so... bad, Mattia."

"Baby. This is just the beginning." He didn't need to guide his cockhead to my pussy, his shaft pressing past my swollen folds with ease.

I arched my back, gripping his shoulders then throwing one leg around his hip. His grin caused a series of vibrations and as soon as he thrust the entire length of his cock inside, I closed my eyes, my breath strangled. As I clung to him, my pussy muscles expanded, my mind blown by how much electricity continued to course through us.

"Oh, my," I breathed and he captured my moan with his mouth, rolling onto the balls of his feet and pressing me against the wall.

When he yanked one arm over my head then the other, wrapping the long fingers of a single hand around my wrists, I bucked against him. Of course, it was no use. Not only was he far too strong, I also didn't want to escape his captive hold. The thought continued to rip away at my defenses, revealing

the vulnerable girl underneath, the one who'd been lured by a single word into his dark and dangerous lair.

But I longed to hear him say the word again.

Mine...

He pulled almost all the way out, driving his cock deep inside a second time. The series of tingles continued to rush through me like a tidal wave, my entire body starting to shake uncontrollably as the water began to add another layer of heat. I was thrown by the intensity and when he shifted his hips back and forth, grinding into me, I laughed nervously.

“You're so big.”

Another look of amusement crossed his face, his eyes lighting up. “And your pussy is so tight. It seems we're perfect for each other.”

“Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

He plunged in deep strokes, slamming me against the wall. I'd never felt so filled, my mind drifting into the most beautiful places on earth. Seconds later, he let go of my arms, immediately lifting me up by several inches.

“What are you doing?” I clambered to hold on, intertwining my feet as he continued fucking me.

He drove his fingers into my hair, pulling me tightly against him as he pressed his lips against the corner of my mouth. Then he rolled them gently to my earlobe, nipping the bottom before whispering hoarsely, “Whatever I want.” He assaulted my mouth once again, immediately thrusting his tongue inside, now fucking me like a crazed man, his actions becoming so forceful I gave up trying to breathe or even focus. The kiss was addictive and wild and when he sucked on my bottom lip, I was lightheaded. Then he bit down on my tender flesh and I could taste blood almost instantly.

Every stroke was deep and long, my muscles clenching and releasing to try to accept his wide girth. I could feel him throbbing, matching the rapid beating of his heart as he pressed his full weight against me.

My beast of a man growled as he disrupted the kiss, having mercy on my bruised lips. Against all rationality, the sound of our hard fucking echoed in the room. I was enamored by his guttural breaths, the hard pounding of my heart in my ears as my blood pumped furiously.

Everything about the man was merciless and my knees would have buckled if he hadn't been holding me. He leaned back, breaking the connection enough to slam both his palms against the marble. As soon as he pushed back, he sucked on my bottom lip then threw his head back, issuing a series of animalistic sounds.

The friction of our bodies and the weight of his as he arched his back kept me firmly planted against the wall, but I hung on for dear life. Another look of amusement crossed then remained on his face as I was tossed head over heels into a climax.

“Oh. Oh. Yes. Yes!” As it roared into me, both my mind and body slipped into the most incredible state of bliss. I had the overpowering need to taste him again, to have his cum tickle my throat but as the orgasm continued to ravage my system, I captured his mouth, taking as much control as I could manage.

I shoved my tongue past his lips until the two danced and swirled together. Seconds later, he issued several guttural sounds. He pulled out, teasing me for several seconds before driving his cock inside again, going slowly inch by inch. Then when he was fully seated inside, he broke the kiss, finally giving me the single thing I wanted the most.

“Mine.”

There was no holding back, no sense of being able to control ourselves any longer. Every muscle in our bodies remained tense as he fucked me long and hard. And moments later as the blissful moment surpassed anything I'd ever felt before, another orgasm claiming my system, he erupted deep inside, filling me with his seed.

And this time, nothing would keep us apart.

God help the man who tried.

CHAPTER 24



*M*attia

Snow.

We hadn't paid any attention to the weather, the storm rolling in quickly. While that did nothing to alter our plans, the last thing I wanted to do was to get snowed in for an extended period of time.

"I'm sorry for the unexpected trip, Mattia. I'd looked forward to seeing you."

I gazed at Sven, the Facetime call unexpected. I'd known the man for years, his knowledge of the Russians proving helpful during the last attack. He also had innate knowledge of comings and goings in the United States and had his ear to the ground with the Greeks and the Armenians, both in Europe and America.

His information had always proven helpful. Why was it that a nagging feeling told me to be careful in placing all my trust in him?

"Business is business, Sven. That much I understand."

"Did you arrive safely in Zurich?"

I thought about what I wanted to tell him as I drummed my fingers on the desk. "I felt it prudent to alter my destination. We're close. What have you heard? Is this another attempted Russian invasion?"

“No. The Volkov Bratva seem to have other more pressing issues to deal with that have nothing to do with the Five Families.”

“Meaning what?”

“The Greeks. From what I’ve heard, there could soon be a bloody war that could last for years.”

“Interesting. Then what are you hearing?”

Sven sighed. He looked more haggard than usual, as if he was under duress. Granted, the man had to be in his early seventies. He’d been one of the few men my father had trusted outside of the family, the two men considered friends. “Here’s the thing, Mattia. The noise on various streets doesn’t make any sense, which is why I was hesitant to contact you tonight.”

“I don’t understand.”

He drummed his own fingers on the desk in his office. In his other hand was a drink and I could tell his arm was shaking. Since the man didn’t have physical tremors, at least that I was aware of, that meant he was nervous about whatever he was keeping from me. “It’s as if there’s someone from your past, or your father’s past that has been waiting a long time to seek revenge. The name ‘the Ghost’ has been whispered as if in reverence. Never heard of an assassin going by that name. Have you?”

Thoughts regarding the visitor in the train station came to mind. “I haven’t heard the moniker, but revenge is always a good reason to attack.”

“True, but I can tell you my instinct says there is a significant difference.”

As far as the reason for the cat and mouse game, revenge was entirely possible. My father had enemies in at least a half a dozen countries, some of which held grudges even now. “Let me guess, this person could be one of a dozen nationalities.”

“That’s possible, my friend. What I can tell you is that whoever is after your family is highly motivated, well organized, and is enshrouded in mystery. There isn’t a single

person on the street in several countries who has any idea of the leader.”

“But they sense a game is being played.”

“Absolutely. If I were you, I’d return to Italy and use your influence on the other Five Families so they have your backs. I think a storm is coming sooner than you realize.”

My instinct had already told me that. “I appreciate you trying to find out.”

“So you know. My family has received several threats as of late; my granddaughter’s pet rabbit was taken from his cage then beheaded and left on my son’s front porch. I want to help you, Mattia, but I won’t place my family in continued danger. I hope you understand.”

Now the real reason he’d begged off on the meeting. I couldn’t blame him. “I can fully appreciate that, Sven. I won’t contact you again.”

“You’re a strong man, Mattia. In truth, you remind me of your father.”

“I’m curious about something, Sven. You were closer to my father than almost anyone. Did you ever know what happened between him and Roberto Lazarro?”

He seemed surprised I’d ask the question. “It’s best to let sleeping dogs lie, my son. The two men are dead. Let them rest in peace wherever the hell they are.”

“Rotting in hell.”

His chuckle was full of angst. “Did you save the woman you were intent on protecting?”

“Sophia? Yes.”

When he leaned into the computer screen, I could tell he was searching my eyes, which made me curious what he hoped he’d find. He’d done the same thing when he’d attended both my brother and father’s funeral, perhaps hoping that in my eyes or in D’Artagnan’s he could find words of wisdom. At the time, I’d had none, still coming to grips with everything that had occurred, the truest sabotage of our family. “I can tell

you found the woman who captured your heart, my son. I'm very pleased for you and it is something I hoped would happen." It seemed he'd chosen his words carefully, which was something he'd always done.

"How do you know for certain?"

"Because there's light to your eyes, something I haven't seen since you were a child. I remember hating to come and visit because I sensed the joy and awe you had in everything you saw around you was being sucked away."

"Thanks to my father."

"Tell me about her."

I wasn't certain there were any correct words to use about the way I felt regarding Sophia. "She's beautiful and brilliant, breathtaking in every way possible. And you are right in that she's the light to my darkness, which is why I fear I'll taint her. Destroy her."

"You were given a second chance. Yes?"

His question hit me hard. That's exactly what had occurred. Through danger and my job, the bloodshed that had led me to needing to protect a member of my family, I'd been gifted a second chance with the woman I loved. "Yes."

"And she doesn't belong to anyone else?"

"She belongs to me. Although it took me years to understand what that meant, the sacrifices that I'd be forced to make."

Nodding, Sven looked away for a few seconds. "I knew a man once who fell in love with a woman who also brought him into the light. They were very much in love, but she was considered the wrong person for him and his father forbid him to marry. He was given a damning choice. He could have the woman but lose everything else. Power. Money. A kingdom. He made a choice, but it was one that made him very lonely. In doing so, he broke the heart of the woman prepared to give him everything. And so both moved on, the two scarred for life."

I bristled, the story far too close to home. "What happened?"

“As always is the case, true love can never be destroyed no matter how hard someone attempts to do so. Their love helped them find each other again but as you might imagine, the destruction it caused ended a friendship and placed two families on the brink of tragedy, something that could still destroy the next generation.” He’d never blinked once as he told me the story.

One of my father and of the only person he’d ever truly loved.

“I ask you again. Do you love her?” There was such reverence in his question.

“With all my heart.”

He nodded. “Then do not allow your greed or desire for power to interfere. You won’t be given another chance.”

“Yes, sir. Of that I’m well aware.”

“Take care of yourself, Mattia. Perhaps when we speak next, there will be cause for celebration.”

As soon as the call ended, I sensed a presence behind me. I stood, slowly turning around. In the shadowed light of the continuing snowstorm streaming in through the windows of the office, I was able to see past the anger and heartache, the hatred of my father and the condemnation of my mother into the eyes of the only woman I could ever love.

And in return, I was gifted something more precious than her virginity or a second chance. I was given the greatest gift of all.

The power of her love.

As Sophia walked closer, she glanced at the computer screen then back to my eyes, the look of knowing comforting. She understood now that her mother had been the love of my father’s life. We had been connected, more so than we’d understood. But the past was the past and it was time to let it go.

We would make our own memories.

Sophia took her time walking closer. In her hands were two drinks, but it was the mischievous smile on her face that drew

me in.

I sat on the edge of my desk, giving her a hard and delicious onceover. She'd found an old tee shirt of mine, which on her could be used as a dress. Standing in her bare feet, almost no makeup on, she appeared so much younger than her almost twenty-six years. In comparison, I felt like an old man in my thirties, aches and pains in my muscles just a part of the norm.

When she was close, she stopped, a wry smile crossing her face. Then she handed me one of the glasses, barely avoiding my hand reaching out and grabbing her. Her laugh brought one into my chest, the sound amplified. She had a way of cutting through the darkness like a knife through butter.

Great.

Now I was analyzing how effective she was at tossing aside my armor. Next, she'd know all my dirty little secrets. When she sat down in front of the laptop, I glanced over my shoulder.

She took a sip of her drink, holding her mouth near the rim as she swallowed. Then she placed her glass down very carefully on the surface before placing her fingers on the keyboard.

When she started typing, I shifted around to the side, more than curious as to what she was doing. "I'm curious, my princess. What are you up to?"

While she lifted her gaze briefly, her fingers continued to fly. Christ. She wasn't even paying that close of attention to what she was doing. After a few seconds, she had me more than just curious. I took a sip of my drink then moved behind her, narrowing my eyes as she moved from screen to screen.

"I don't understand." But I did. She was ceremoniously pulling up every single financial account locked in the names of the two families and the combined enterprise. Then she added several additional windows, pulling up corporate records that I'd locked down personally before leaving. Finally, she pulled up everything Lucia had in her records.

My lovely bride to be had managed to hack every single account owned by the DeLuca-Lazarro corporation and then

some.

When she sat back, I glanced at my watch.

Less than ten minutes had passed. She leaned against the chair, taking a deep breath. I half expected her to ask for a cigarette given her success. Instead, she shifted the chair back and forth, allowing me a few seconds to absorb the information.

“I have a confession to make,” she said quietly.

“I think I have another round of discipline to provide,” I teased. “You’re a hacker.”

“The best in the world.”

“Says who?”

“All the people who’ve hired me.”

“Fuck. Fuck. How easy was that in comparison?”

“Too much so. You were right in that you were hacked.”

“You’re certain of it.”

“Without a doubt. Let me show you.” Her confirmation was exactly what I needed.

Over the course of the next few minutes, she was able to provide several clear indications that someone had been inside not only our financial records but also corporate documentation providing links to several customers, brokers, and other valuable people used in both our legitimate and more lucrative illegitimate businesses. Everything had been at the hacker’s fingertips, his or her signature left where only someone like Sophia could see.

“That’s why you were abducted.”

“That’s what I expect,” she answered. “But I don’t think there’s any room for doubt that this has to do with our families. Do you?”

“No.”

“Then let me help you. If what your friend said is true, I got closer to the man than anyone.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

Sophia chewed on her lower lip. “Playing a game while leaving him an easy in. Then I’ll place a tracker on the computers he pings off. I can establish a program that will run in the background. It’s like a clock that will tick down, ultimately finding the location of his main series of computers.”

“Are you certain you can do this without being detected?”

She gave me a saucy look before running her fingers down my thigh. “You need to trust me, *mio pericoloso padrone*.”

“Dangerous master, eh?” I brushed my fingers through her hair. “I do trust you. More than almost anyone. Just be careful. I’ll call D’Artagnan and let him know.”

“You’ll need to have him talk to Lucia. He’s going after the brokerage first and if what I suspect is true, he’s prepared to clean out the accounts.”

Exhaling, I rose to a standing position. “Can you have them transferred?”

“Yes, but if I do that then he’ll know we’re onto him. What I can do is place a stronger security system around every system so that will take him additional time to break through. But it’s only a matter of time.”

“So the clock is ticking. Do it. Then you’re going to tell me one more time everything you remember about being taken.”

“What about the storm?” she asked.

“If all goes well, we’ll leave tomorrow. Will that give you enough time?”

“I’ll only be thirty minutes.” She lifted her eyebrows and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Perhaps I’ll start calling you my lioness.”

“That’s what D’Artagnan calls Lucia.”

“Hmmm... Then I will definitely need to select another predatory animal.”

“I thought you were the predator.”

“Trust me. I am.”

I walked away, grabbing my drink from the desk before yanking out my phone to call D’Artagnan. After walking out of the room, I stopped and turned around, shaking my head. Beautiful princess. That was the term I’d used when I’d had no understanding of the woman inside or the strength she held.

In my mind, she was stronger than every single member of our family.

Fortunately, Dar answered on the second ring. “Dar. I have news.”

“Good. Because I think the shit is about to hit the fan.”

* * *

As I nursed the third drink of the evening, I realized that neither my instinct nor the level of anxiety had shifted since arriving. There was no indication we’d been found, our scouts suggesting if the airports were being watched, there wasn’t a heavy presence. Besides, we were leaving via one of the smaller facilities, privately owned by someone who owed the family a favor.

While I wouldn’t put it past the man to sell us out, I’d taken steps to ensure that didn’t happen. Unfortunately, I couldn’t place my trust in anyone. We were far too important cargo.

“What are you thinking?” Sophia asked, her voice providing another wave of desire.

I slowly lowered my head, realizing that she’d had her head in my lap for almost an hour. We were in front of a roaring fire, my feet propped up on the coffee table, simply enjoying an evening as would any couple taking a few days of respite.

What a shame this was just a temporary setting.

“That we should return here one day.”

“It’s magnificent, especially in the snow.” She gave me a salacious grin and turned on her side, adjusting the pillow under her head.

“I hate snow.”

“You do? Does that mean you’re never made a snow angel?”

“A what?”

“That’s where you lie on the ground and lift your arms over your head as you’re opening and closing your legs?” When I gave her a puzzled look, she laughed, immediately sitting up. “We need to do one right now.”

“Does that mean go out in the snow?”

“Yes. Now, come on.” She moved onto her feet, glancing around as if searching for something. “Let me grab our jackets.”

“You’re serious.”

“Yes. You obviously need a lesson in what life is all about. I’m here to give that to you. Call it another gift.”

I eased my legs off the table, laughing at her exuberance. “I thought the number of gifts you’ve provided had reached a limit.”

She threw her hands on her hips, cocking one as she stared at me. The woman was playful even now, which created the kind of desire that could become overwhelming. “No, they don’t have a limitation unless you’re not a good boy. Come on. This might be a once in a lifetime opportunity. Get your boots on. Grab your coat. No, I’ll grab our coats.”

“The coat you have isn’t warm enough.”

“Stop being silly. It will be for a few minutes. Come on.” She laughed and as I reached out, trying to grab her, she managed to skirt around me. Being around her was refreshing, more so that I could ever have believed.

And laughter was easier than it had ever been. I couldn’t wait to have the lovely woman as my wife. Everything about her was infectious, including her laugh and her joy of life. I placed my drink on the table and couldn’t resist smiling. Maybe we could enjoy life in an entirely different way than our parents.

Maybe, just maybe we could start a family of our own. I grabbed my boots, struggling to get into them as she secured the jackets. Whatever the hell she was trying to create, I realized that I'd never done anything like it as a kid. I didn't have normal toys or backyard play equipment. Other than soccer when I was a kid, there was little entertainment that didn't mean staying inside in my room.

Shit. That wasn't what I wanted for my kid. Nope. He or she would play outdoors.

I wanted to laugh. What had the woman done to me?

"Do you have a flashlight? We need to see the angels after we make them."

I laughed as she tossed me my jacket. "I'll get one from the kitchen drawer." I moved quickly, realizing she was humming from excitement. The sound sent a wave of electricity through my muscles. Tonight I would ravage her all over again. I grabbed my weapon from the coffee table, shoving it into the jacket pocket after I slipped it on.

"Do you really think there's a bad guy out there waiting for us to make snow angels?"

Her tone was chastising but playful. "I can't be too careful, beautiful princess."

"Of course. Forever the protector." She rolled her eyes.

"Absolutely." I took a few seconds to tie my shoes as she walked away. The girl was going to drive me to an early grave. I laughed at the thought.

Sophia was waiting by one of the back doors, moving from one foot to the other. "Come on. We're wasting time. It's perfect out there." She pointed to the backyard, the interior lights providing a spectacular glow on the snow's surface. It appeared like crystalized glass, tiny ice particles creating a shimmer.

When she tried to open the door, I yanked her hand away. "Not so fast. I need to check the perimeter."

“Come on. We’re going ten feet away. Ten feet. It’ll take thirty seconds. That’s it.”

Growling, I rubbed my face then opened the door, peering outside. “Alright. Thirty seconds but that’s it.”

Squealing, she scampered outside, immediately selecting a spot in front of the window and plopping down in the snow. When she patted the area beside her, I looked at her skeptically.

“Come on. Are you chicken?” she cooed.

“Me?” I asked, pointing to my chest. “I’ll have you know I’ve skied these mountains, princess.”

“Uh-huh. I’d like to see that. Then this won’t be any big deal for you. Lie down.” She eased back, showing me what I was supposed to do, laughing the entire time.

Grimacing, I finally sat down, groaning twice before lying down.

“Move your arms and legs. Don’t be a statue.”

Biting back a laugh, I did as she... commanded, feeling more like an idiot than anything. As the snow continued to fall, the rustling sounds she was making kept my rapt attention. The vivacious vixen was even sticking out her tongue, collecting the snow as it fell. There were so many things about sharing the moment with her that seemed entirely too special, my gut telling me that at any moment the bubble could burst. However, I had no intention of ruining the single aspect of the night that I had a feeling she’d remember more than anything else.

“Come on. Put some effort into it, DeLuca,” she barked like a sergeant would in the Italian military. “Flap your arms like you have wings. You know, angel wings.”

“Oh, is that what we’re doing out here in the frigid cold?”

Her laughter forced me to laugh and within seconds, I had a feeling that if either one of my men noticed what we were doing, they’d never respect me again. Did I honestly care? Not even remotely.

While I doubted that I'd admit it to the woman I adored, this was the most fun I'd had in a long time.

A few seconds later, she rose to her feet, staring down at me, criticizing my efforts. "Hmm... I can see I have an amateur on my hands. Get up. Let me see if it's acceptable."

Another groan left my aching body before I attempted to get up, but not before glancing over at the angel she'd created. The lighting from the window shimmered across the newly created form and I could swear the wings were in gold.

She threw out her arm, giving me another feisty look. When I grabbed her arm, she threw her other arm up, pointing her index finger at me. "Do not pull me down or there will be hell to pay."

"Oh, you're tempting the devil. You should know better than that."

"You know how I love to live dangerously." She did what she could to yank me onto my feet, laughing as I playfully tumbled into her then grasped her around the waist, pulling her against my frozen body.

"That's what I'm worried about." I stroked her face as she continued to laugh, taking a deep breath as I enjoyed gazing into her eyes. "You are truly a beautiful gift."

"I love you, Mattia. I think I always have."

I shook my head, trying to think of something to say that she would realize came from my heart. Then something caught the corner of my eye and I snapped my head to the side, yanking her behind me.

"What's wrong?" she half whispered, shock in her voice.

"Get back to the house."

"What is it?"

"Don't argue with me. Get back to the goddamn house."

She backed away, obviously shaken while I grabbed my weapon with one hand, the flashlight with the other. When I sensed she'd hesitated, I threw her a look.

“Go!” Then I swung the flashlight toward the point of origin where I thought I’d seen a flash. That’s when I noticed footsteps and there was no doubt neither set belonged to Vincenzo or Luis. When I noticed another strange flash, my brain went through slow motion as I shone the light on the area.

Then I realized not quickly enough what I was seeing.

I turned, lunging toward Sophia, flying through the air just seconds before...

Boom!

CHAPTER 25



*J*taly

Five days later...

Mattia

Loss.

It was something I'd grown far too accustomed to over the years. That's why my anger had remained just under the surface for as long as I could remember. Since returning from Zurich, I'd remained enraged to the point it was difficult to focus. Even now, my heart continued to pound in my chest because the Ghost had almost gotten us killed.

"She's fine, brother," Enzo said. While I wanted to correct him that he would never be my brother, my love of Sophia prevented me from doing so.

"This time. What about next time?" I snarled. At least my beloved didn't have any broken bones or internal injuries, but if she'd followed my orders and gone inside the house, she'd be dead. I'd slept maybe two hours since the horrific bombing because of that alone. I wasn't a man who'd ever prayed. But I'd done so as well as thanked the man upstairs for saving her life.

Then I'd pledged my soul to the devil if we could find the person responsible. At least she wasn't alone, Joy spending time with her while Enzo, Dar, and I discussed options.

“There won’t be a next time. We won’t allow that to happen.” D’Artagnan seemed far too certain of that. “We have measures in place to keep all eight of us protected.”

Eight.

Our compound was housing the entire family, including Sophia’s mother, who now permanently resided here.

And Michelangelo was here as well, the little boy the light of everyone’s eyes. The weight of what we were facing was heavy.

And I wasn’t so certain the Ghost couldn’t get to us. He or she seemed to be one step ahead. I’d gone over every detail dozens of times. That’s all I’d had time to do prior to our return to Italy.

The woman I loved had almost forfeited her life because I’d been stupid enough to trust Sven. He’d known exactly where the chalet was, the only person who had. “The Ghost isn’t finished yet.”

Dar sighed. “No, it’s obvious he’s not.”

“It’s unusual that the perpetrator isn’t claiming accolades or attempting to hijack the others in the *famiglia*.” Enzo leaned against the wall, folding his arms.

“It’s personal, but why?” I wasn’t necessarily posing the question with thoughts of getting an answer. It was obvious how concerned D’Artagnan was. “Lucia can’t be placed under any stress. If she is, she’ll go into premature labor. The baby is at that point it won’t be good for her. Lucia is supposed to be under twenty-four-hour rest, but she’s refusing to do so.”

“I have a feeling the end game will be played out soon. Arrogance usually means those who are responsible are looking for a prize. With our businesses in lockdown, he’ll seek other methods.”

Dar looked at me, nodding. “That’s what I’m afraid of. We need to find this son of a bitch quickly. I will not have my family harmed.”

“Did you round up Sven?” I turned toward him, cocking my head.

He glanced at Enzo and I took several long strides in his direction, rearing back.

“Hold the fuck on!” Enzo snapped as he moved in between us. “We’re not doing this. Tell him what you found out, Dar.”

I shifted my hate-filled gaze toward my adopted brother, daring him to lie to me.

“The bomb was crude and had obviously been planted there after your arrival. Vincenzo swept the place. Remember?”

“Yeah, well, he fucking missed something.” I wasn’t in the mood to be talked down to.

Dar shook his head at Enzo then moved closer to me, shoving his hands into his pockets to show he had no intentions of fighting me. He’d reacted this way when Lucia had been threatened. “We have topnotch equipment. If there’d been a damn bomb the device would have found it. You know that.”

“Then how the hell did they manage to get that close?” I knew the answer. I wasn’t a goddamn fool. Even though we’d been rushed to the hospital, the snow had packed the ground, the temperature not warning up prior to me walking three miles around the property. The fuckers had used a snowmobile to the point they were concerned the engine could be heard, hiking on foot after that. They’d waited until the cover of darkness.

The ugliest truth of all was that if Sophia hadn’t gotten us outside to create goddamn snow angels, we’d both be dead. The Ghost had upped his game.

Now I planned on finishing it, and I’d be the victor.

We’d arrived only the night before, Sophia still recovering. At least she only had broken ribs and that had been from my crushing weight falling on top of her. But thank God I had. My face still looked like I’d walked through a mine field, shards of glass picked from my skin. I couldn’t care less about what I’d gone through. I hadn’t been able to protect Sophia.

I would never forgive myself for it.

“We’re going to have a drink, all three of us. Then we’re going to figure out who the fuck this Ghost is,” Enzo said, snarling when he glanced from one to the other of us.

Both Dar and I stared at each other. I sensed he was just as concerned as I was, likely given Lucia had almost fallen apart when she’d heard. Now she was on her way over and I could only imagine the kind of anger she’d display.

Not that I fucking blamed her.

I’d never allow my guard to fall the way I had in Zurich. Never.

Enzo grumbled under his breath then grabbed the glass from my hand as he walked by, taking long strides toward the bar. “Tell us again what the fucker said in the train station.”

“Just that a ghost would continue haunting me.”

“Me or the family?” Dar asked.

“How the fuck would I know? I had to catch a train,” I snapped but Dar was right. I’d been thinking of this more personally but in truth, I had a feeling the person responsible wasn’t targeting just one of us.

“Sven mentioned the Ghost as well. Yes?” Dar asked.

I’d demanded my old friend be tracked down, but I knew both men were right. Sven wasn’t behind the attack. The crude method used made it seem like the opportunity to hunt and kill hadn’t been anticipated. Maybe the phone call had been detected. That was possible.

“Yes.” My nerves remained on edge. I had no desire to leave Sophia alone for long. While I felt safe in the old family compound, the security tightened and dozens of our soldiers surrounding the grounds, I didn’t want her out of my sight any longer than necessary.

Fuck. I had it bad for the woman. There was no doubt about that.

“Then we need to go through our list of enemies and determine who’s alive and capable of doing this.” Enzo’s

suggestion was good, but in my mind would take far too much time.

“I called the Five Families. As you might imagine, they are not eager to have a face-to-face meeting, but I’ve scheduled a Zoom call for tomorrow. We will have their support.” Dar took the drink being offered, lifting the glass in my direction. Maybe he was offering an olive branch.

“We’ll pool all our resources and figure out who’s after us. We can use Sophia’s help to ensure the additional security systems set in place are working,” Dar encouraged.

I threw back half the drink, knowing that Sophia was already pestering me to allow her to be behind a computer. “I know. Just give it another day. Okay? She was pretty shaken up.”

We heard noise, a door slamming in the background, and I braced myself for my sister-in-law’s entrance.

She was almost seven months pregnant, but that didn’t stop her from taking long strides into the living room toward me.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Lucia snapped as she faced me, fury in her eyes. Before anyone had a chance to stop her, she stormed toward me, cracking her hand across my face.

“Lucia. For God’s sake,” D’Artagnan said and shook his head. “We don’t need to do this now. We’re all upset.”

“Yeah? Well, my sister almost died because of this pig. He’s responsible!”

“It’s okay. Lucia had every right to be upset.” I meant what I said, even if I was angry with her for helping keep Sophia and me from being together.

“No, she doesn’t. You’re not going to treat the man I love that way,” Hearing Sophia’s softer voice as she entered the room drew our attention. Joy bounded in after her, obviously concerned that Sophia had left our suite.

Exhaling, I locked eyes with Sophia and there was such fire in hers that I was equally proud and furious that she was at odds with the person she’d remained closest to.

Yet she was a force to be reckoned with, refusing to give into the slight limp she had while healing from a sprained ankle. She headed for her sister, holding her head high. “Lucia. I’m sorry that you’ve believed Mattia to be responsible for all the horrors you suffered when you were led to believe that D’Artagnan was dead, but you know that he had nothing to do with the fire. I tried to tell you years ago that I was in love with this man and you begged me to stay away from him. And I did. I suffered just like you did for six years when all I could think about was him. The man who’d awakened such joy in my heart that I could barely breathe when I was in his presence. No one, including Daddy, admitted that if Mattia hadn’t saved my life on my eighteenth birthday, I wouldn’t be here today. But that was the truth. He risked his life several times to save mine. Do you understand me? You will not disparage him again. Period.”

Sophia huffed after issuing the words, blowing hair from her face then realizing the room had gone deathly quiet. She spun in a circle, locking eyes with everyone, ending with offering me a sly smile that made my cock twitch.

“That goes the same for all of you,” she continued. “He is the love of my life and is going to be my husband. We are one big happy family. We’re going to share in holidays and birthday parties. We’re going to celebrate births of children and Santa Fucking Claus. And the Easter bunny. I hear he’s big in America. And the goddamn tooth fairy. Do you understand me?”

Her voice reverberated and it was all I could do not to smile. The woman would take on a room full of vipers.

That was one of so many reasons I adored her.

“Do you?”

“I think your baby sister is all grown up, Lucia, and is perfectly capable of taking care of herself. So, we have a wedding to plan?” D’Artagnan did his best to break the ice but I could tell Lucia wasn’t convinced just yet.

She turned her head in my direction then back to Sophia. Then she wrapped her arms around her sister, pulling her in tightly.

“Oh, baby sis. I just wanted you happy. I never meant to make you suffer. I’m so sorry. Will you ever forgive me?”

“It’s not about forgiveness. This family has been through a lot over the last few years, but we are a family. We need to act like one. I love you, Lucia. You’re my sister, but that man is the one I’m going to marry. And God willing, I’ll have a family with. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. In truth, I think that’s all any of us have wanted over the years. Family.”

D’Artagnan nodded. “She’s right. We work together.”

As the two girls hugged, Dar grinned like a kid. This was the closest we’d ever been. Would we ever be Hallmark card material? Fuck, no, but this would do just fine for now.

Until after we hunted down and slaughtered the person responsible for everything we’d been through.

As Sophia backed away, she glanced back in my direction. “And I know exactly how we were discovered in Zurich. It was my fault. I led the assassin right to where we were staying.”

Lucia folded her arms, staring at her sister with narrowed eyes. “How would you know that?”

I moved toward one of the chairs, sitting down and waiting for my princess to answer. Seeing the bruises on her face continued to keep me at a heightened level of anger, but now wasn’t the time to go off the deep end.

“I’m a hacker, Lucia. You knew that. You just didn’t want to hear what I had to say. I’ve worked for some of the most unscrupulous organizations in the world and I’ve also worked with a few law enforcement agencies, namely the CIA out of the United States. I know what I’m doing. I underestimated the person responsible, but every hacker has a weakness. His is arrogance. I can track him down and was in the process of doing so. The work I’ve already accomplished is waiting for my continued access. If you’ll trust me enough to continue what I started, I will find him.”

“The Ghost,” I said in passing.

Sophia turned her head. “With a tattoo. I’m going to somehow remember the damn thing then run it through Interpol and the CIA databanks.”

“You have access to those as well?” Enzo marveled.

“You might be surprised what I have access to. They don’t pay me the big bucks for nothing,” she half purred, the gleam in her eye turning me on.

I turned my full attention to D’Artagnan, who also wore an expression of amusement. At this point, we had little choice. While it would appear both our funds and our businesses were protected, almost every transaction on hold, that had placed the perpetrator on notice that we were aware of the majority of his actions. That would likely make him take other more extreme measures, which in themselves would help us track him, but that didn’t mean our world wouldn’t be severely affected in the process.

And we had too many lives to consider.

“Are the various warehouses surrounded?” Enzo asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “Including in New York.” I turned my attention toward Lucia. She’d been hesitant to place the orders ceasing business activities, something I’d done without an hour of returning. I expected her to be angry, but she seemed resigned that we needed to lock down everything until we had a handle on what was happening.

And exterminated the opposition.

“Let my sister into the systems,” Lucia directed.

“Agreed,” Enzo said, lifting his glass.

“Is it dangerous?” Joy asked.

“Everything in life worth anything is,” I said quietly.

Sophia grinned. “Whoever is doing this knows where we are. It’s no secret we’re in a protected compound. He or she will make efforts to draw us out into the open.”

“True.” I shook my head. “Unless we create a more desirable environment.” I was thinking out loud but I sensed Dar was

paying attention.

“The problem is that our forces are currently stretched. We can’t be everywhere.” Dar was thoughtful, walking toward the window. “That concerns me.”

“I don’t like the wait and see,” Enzo added.

“Then show me to a computer and I’ll go from there,” Sophia said, turning her head in my direction. There was such emotion in her eyes that I could tell she was more alive than before. I thought about the snow angels and knew one day we’d do that again. Smirking, I took a sip of my drink.

“You can have full access to my office,” Dar said, grimacing when his phone rang. Then both mine and Enzo’s did as well.

“Shit,” Enzo said as he yanked his into his hand. “It’s my Capo. I have a bad feeling.”

As I answered the phone, I knew instantly from the sound of Vincenzo’s voice we had an issue.

“We got problems, boss. Two warehouses were firebombed.”

“Where?”

“Here, close to the city.”

“Fuck. Make certain we have bodies protecting this estate. Under no circumstances are you to allow anyone to cross the property lines. Do you hear me?” I jerked to a standing position, glancing around the room. It would seem the beginning of the end was already here. However, I knew this was nothing more than a wild goose chase to rattle us. This had to be handled carefully or we’d lose everything.

“You got it, boss. There’s something else,” Vincenzo said. “Sven and his family were murdered.”

“What?”

“D’Artagnan asked me to go looking for them. I contacted some of our allies in Zurich and it was obvious an assassin entered their home. At least his son and grandchild are safe. They were taken to a safehouse.”

“Fuck.” I glanced at Dar who was just finishing up a call. This was it. “If any of the men see a single thing, I need to know.”

“Understood.”

As soon as I ended the call, I headed toward Sophia, pulling her aside. “It’s starting. Sven and part of his family were killed.”

“What?” The look of horror on her face added to my anger.

“Anyone who provided assistance is in the killer’s crosshairs. You’re staying here. You will not leave the compound. Is that clear?”

She nodded then placed her hand on my chest. “I won’t. Don’t do anything stupid, Mattia.”

I cupped her face, exhaling as she nuzzled against it. “Like get myself killed?”

“Exactly like that. We’ve been through too much already.”

As I slid my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her closer, she rose onto her tiptoes, tilting her head. “You are so beautiful and the smartest girl I know.”

“I am, aren’t I?” she cooed, her eyes twinkling. “As soon as I find out the origin of the attack, I’ll let you know.”

“He’ll know you’re onto him, won’t he?”

“This is a game for him, one he’s spent months if not years perfecting. He’ll take his time enjoying the moment. So will I.”

“Now, I’ll warn you. Do not try and entice him with anything. Do you hear me?” I pressed my fingers into her neck, pulling her even closer. As I lowered my head, she wrapped her fingers around my shirt, arching her back. I would do everything in my power to protect her, making it my mission to ensure no one ever hurt her again. I had a terrible feeling about what was going on, the fact the Ghost had only set his sights on our family the most disconcerting.

“You know me too well.”

“Yes, I do. I will punish you if necessary.”

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“Don’t worry about what I’d doing, baby. You will be protected.”

“What if we set a trap?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

She tugged at my shirt then fiddled with the buttons. “Maybe you should hear me out.”

“Why do I have a very bad feeling about this?”

“Because I’m a very bad girl.”

I captured her mouth, holding our lips together for a few seconds as I rolled my other hand around her waist, keeping her close. The need to hold her was more intense than ever before, the ridiculous fear crawling through me unusual. I’d never feared facing an enemy before. I’d never even thought about the danger I’d be in or the injuries that I could receive.

But I’d been alone. Very much alone. Now I had someone to care about. A weakness. The asshole meant to take what the three of us loved the most away from us.

That meant we needed to play the game smarter. The rules were entirely different. Now it was time to adjust them again to our benefit.

As I thrust my tongue inside, I could tell she was trembling. For all her strength, all her brilliance, she was an innocent girl looking for her knight in shining armor.

I wasn’t certain I could scrape off the tarnish in time, but I would try if it was the last thing I did on this earth.

She was mine to adore, to protect.

Mine to die for.

After ending the kiss, I locked eyes with first Enzo then D’Artagnan, the understanding of what needed to happen settling in. It was time to go on the offensive instead of waiting for the hammer to fall. Did that place our families in harm’s way? Likely, but if we waited, the outcome would be much worse.

And that would allow history to repeat itself. The Ghost. According to the Oxford Language dictionary, the definition was an apparition of a dead person believed to manifest to the living. There were two men who undoubtedly fell into that category.

Franco DeLuca and Roberto Lazzaro.

Whoever was using their deaths against us had innate knowledge of how our family worked. It was time to narrow that down and the best way to do that was to provide something they wanted.

Our complete devastation using our greatest weakness.

The people we loved. If I was wrong, we would never recover. But if I was right, the game would end forever.

“I have an idea,” I told everyone in the room.

And so it was set to begin. May God not fail me this one, single time.

CHAPTER 26



S ophia

Games.

Secrets. Lies. Games.

Now the three words were forever woven together, the plan that had been put into motion leaving the two women I'd been sequestered with as riddled with anxiety as I was. However, I sensed the person responsible was getting antsy himself since he'd been unable to collapse any accounts or hijack any business shipments. Even all his fake emails to our clients had been blocked.

The ruse had been developed after I'd carefully crafted a web. Diamonds weren't only a girl's best friend, Mattia's idea of using them as the sparkly bait irresistible. I sent a quick email, which had been crafted as an enticement to Mattia and the others at the DeLuca compound only seconds before. I was pretending to be the Don of the Romano family, happy as could be to allow not only his docks to be used in accepting shipment but also the newly built bridge that connected the island of Sicily to the mainland of Italy. It was a win-win for everyone to the tune of several hundred million dollars.

Unfortunately, it was completely falsified, other than the Romanos were in on the game, providing the physical appearance of accepting shipment and having it transferred to several trucks that were currently on their way to a warehouse fifty miles west of Rome.

I'd spent hours setting everything up while Mattia, Enzo, and Dar handled the issues with the warehouses and businesses, the chaotic scenes finally under control. The fires had been little more than a smokescreen, the perpetrator playing additional games just like sending the fake to the train station. Now I was certain we'd turned the tide. If the asshole wanted to hurt us, he'd need to reveal his identity.

The only thing that concerned me was that the tattoo I'd remembered seeing meant nothing. I'd put it through every system I had access to, finding no information. I tapped my finger on the drawing I'd done, trying to remember any additional details.

Then I checked one of the traps I'd set, laughing softly. "Take that, asshole."

"Look at that. A laughing skull. How *so* not original," Joy chortled as she looked over my shoulder. Every time the Ghost believed he'd accomplished a goal, he'd left a brand spanking new calling card.

A laughing skull. At least we weren't subjected to hearing a dark, crackling laugh on audio at the same time. If the person thought they were being clever, they were sorely wrong.

"At least the asshole is going down my trail," I told her as I sat back in the seat. Still, the uneasy feeling remained as if I was missing something. I'd tried not to get too cocky, but the fact the person had followed almost every trail I'd laid like golden bricks left me with a bad taste in my mouth.

"That's good," Lucia said. "How close are you to determining his location?"

"Maybe an hour. Maybe a day. It's hard to know but I've narrowed it down to somewhere on this side of the world. The hacker is very good. Almost too good."

"Shit. I can't stand by and do nothing."

"That's all we can do, sis," I told her. "So, how is Michelangelo?" I asked absently.

"Happy as can be staying in a resort with his grammy. The funny thing is that Mama is better than I've seen her in a long

time. However, I don't want to be without my baby for long," Lucia said. Her little boy was everything to her. I remembered the day of the gender release party as if it had been yesterday instead of almost three years before. So much had changed, including the fact Joy was also pregnant.

I was the odd girl out, uncertain if my Prince Charming would follow through with asking me to marry him.

"Did you know Mama was in love with Mattia's father?"

Lucia coughed, spitting up the juice she was drinking. "Wha... What?"

I nodded, unable to keep from chuckling as Joy handed her some napkins. "Yep. Sven knew but Mattia and I suspected something."

Lucia stared at me then shook her head. "That makes sense then."

"What does?"

"When you were so little and our father had started to become so damn brutal, she told me once that she'd married the wrong man. But if she had, she wouldn't have had her amazing children. I never asked any questions. That's crazy."

"That makes us even more of a family," Joy told us. She was always the one who tried to bring sunshine to the world. Lucia had told me that.

"True. Mama has no clue we know. I'm not certain I want to burst her bubble."

I glanced at my sister and sighed, still hating there were secrets. What would our families have been like if there hadn't been?

"What's wrong?" Joy asked me coyly.

"Just thinking," I said absently, shoving the damn picture aside. No one thought the tattoo meant anything. Besides, it was missing a portion and for some crazy reason, I couldn't remember what it was. The upside-down skull had only been a part of it. That hadn't made it appear ominous to me. I'd drawn several versions, but nothing had stuck.

A full twenty-four hours had passed with no additional issues. Everyone was antsy, me included. We left the compound, and I paced the floor of the office in the house where I'd grown up. The memories were painful, more so than I cared to admit.

"You're thinking about all the lost time," Lucia said from where she remained across the room. She'd apologized several times in the last few hours. I wasn't angry with her. How could I be? She'd had my best interest at heart, worried that I'd fall head over heels for the wrong guy.

Maybe I had, but it wasn't planning on letting him go.

Unless the cavalier man got himself killed. The thought continued to churn in my stomach, enough so my chest hurt.

"When did you know you were in love with Dar?" I asked, although I knew the answer.

Lucia laughed. "You know the story, my baby sister. I'll just say from almost the first time he sang to me so many years ago. He had the voice of an angel."

"Does he still do that?" Joy asked.

"Every night. He serenades the baby," Lucia cooed. "It's the only thing that calms her down."

Both Joy and I snapped our heads in her direction then toward each other. "Whoa. Hold on here. Her?"

Lucia bit her lower lip, threw a glance to the door, then grinned like a kid at Christmas. "Don't you dare tell Dar. We were determined not to find out, but my doctor blurted it out yesterday."

Joy squealed, racing toward the couch, thumping down and giving her bestie a hug. "Congratulations. Now you have the perfect family!"

Perfect. The word wasn't in my vocabulary. I chewed on my lower lip, the longing pulling at everything inside of me. I had a secret too, but a horrible one I had yet to tell the man I loved. It would crush him. "That's so amazing, big sis. I'm so happy for you."

“Then why do you sound like you’d prefer going to the dentist to have your teeth pulled?” Lucia asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m just worried.” I refused to allow anything else to cloud the situation. I had to keep my wits about me. I was one hundred percent positive that the tattoo was a key to finding the asshole. I just needed to clear my mind. The fucker hadn’t wanted me to see it. In fact, he’d been furious that I’d exposed it that day at my apartment in Paris.

“We both are,” Joy said then grumbled under her breath. “So, Enzo doesn’t want to find out the sex either, which I think is crazy. I need to paint the nursery.”

“Same here!” Lucia laughed.

“When are you going to tell him?” I did everything I could to be happy for them. They both deserved it.

Lucia had a wicked grin on her face. “Maybe when we have a wedding celebration? Huh? Are you really getting married to your fabulous hunk?”

I had to give her credit. She’d tried to accept that I loved him. “He hasn’t asked me yet, but he did sign a contract with Papa. It’s all but a done deal.”

Her eyes opened wide. “Our father was such an asshole. Thank God a man you care about came to your rescue. And I assure you that Mattia is going to ask. The way he looks at you is as if he’s going to devour you whole.”

“You mean exactly the way D’Artagnan looks at you?” I couldn’t help but laugh. She was right. Mattia had come to my rescue countless times. Would he do so again? I could only pray he wouldn’t need to.

“Well, if only we could have a champagne toast because I have a little secret for my man as well.” Joy stood, rubbing her tummy.

“Then you need to spill it. We could use all the good news in the world.” I meant what I said at this point. I’d tried to remain optimistic, but it felt like the world was crashing down on us.

“She’s right,” Lucia pushed. “Spill it.”

Joy acted like she was going to keep it to herself until I lunged toward her, laughing. At least it was good to be able to do so with family. The word was so foreign to me but amazing.

“Okay. Okay!” Joy backed away then tears formed in her eyes. “We’re having twins. A boy and a girl.”

The silence in the room was almost terrifying.

“What?” both Lucia and I said at the same time as we rushed toward her. There were hugs all the way around and for a few precious seconds, everything almost felt normal.

Then it was as if a blanket fell over us, an ugly reminder that we were waiting for a monster to appear from the shadows.

“I know. It’s hard to believe,” Joy said. “Maybe we will plan a huge party after this shit is over.”

“I’d like that.” The knot in my stomach remained.

Another quiet moment settled in, the tension tearing at all three of us. It had been almost three hours since we’d heard from the brothers.

“I don’t like the games the Ghost is playing,” Lucia said as she moved toward the window overlooking the pool. “Or our men for that matter. They’re going to get themselves killed.”

I immediately rose from the chair behind the desk in Enzo’s office, heading toward her. “You need to rest, sis. You know what the doctor said.”

“I’m fine. I’m just not a patient woman. Besides, I have a conference call in twenty minutes.”

“You’re not supposed to be working.”

She shook her head. “I’ve worked too hard to make the business special. I can’t let it go without a fight.”

Joy gave me a look and headed toward her best friend, guiding her to the couch. “You are going to sit your butt down right there. I’ll bring you your phone when it’s time. Then you’re going to rest. If not, you don’t get access to your phone. Do you understand?”

Lucia laughed. “Both of you are pains in my ass.”

“That’s why you love us,” Joy said. “I hate waiting as well. Hopefully, you’ll learn where this asshole is so the guys can hunt him down.”

I returned to the computer, plopping down in the same place I’d been for hours. I could barely get my mind off Mattia. Images of his face continued to remain in the forefront of my mind. He’d made love to me before he’d brought us here, the memory of which brought tears to my eyes, fearing we’d never touch each other again. I pressed my fingers across my lips, the taste of him still lingering after several hours. I wanted so many things out of life but the thought of having children meant the world to me when it hadn’t before.

Maybe the old adage was true. When you thought you couldn’t have something, you wanted it the most.

“Love isn’t easy, you know.”

Lucia’s quiet voice brought me out of the fog. “I know. But when you’ve someone for as long as I have, you don’t want to waste any time like we’re doing right now.”

“Good things come to those who wait?” Joy asked in her lilting voice.

The three of us tried to laugh again but it was difficult to pretend everything was going to be just fine. There were guards walking the exterior, but no one knew we were here, brought to the other house in the dead of night. I’d managed to alter the computer’s location, so it appeared I was doing the work from the other compound. However, I had a fear that the person on the other side of the internet lines was as good at his job as I was. If so, he’d eventually figure out where we were.

We had maybe eighteen hours left before that happened.

“Okay. I honestly don’t think after everything we’ve been through that a little champagne is going to hurt the babies,” Joy said with defiance in her voice. “I know we have a lovely bottle of bubbly in the refrigerator. I’m going to get this celebratory party started. You ladies with me?”

I looked at Lucia who smiled in a way that let me know she was feeling my pain. “I think that sounds amazing.”

“Good. I’ll get snacks too. Pregnant women get hungry often.” Joy threw her long red hair over her shoulder as she bounded out of the room.

I slumped in the chair, grabbing a pen and pulling the pad with the tattoo closer. *Remember. You need to remember.*

Seconds later, Lucia headed toward me. “What’s wrong other than the obvious?”

“Nothing.”

“You can’t lie to your big sister. You have the man of your dreams finally within reach. He’s your hero and your lover and everything you’ve wanted. We’ll get through this.”

“I know.” I tried to clear my mind, absently scratching out another skull. The damn thing didn’t have crossbones but there had been another symbol.

“So what else?”

“So I might not be able to have children.”

“What? How the hell do you know that?”

I glanced up at her then continued drawing. “Mattia insisted after the explosion that I was looked at thoroughly. Evidently, I have some scar tissue; from what, the doctor wasn’t certain. But if I do get pregnant, it will be a miracle.”

“Aww, sis. I believe in them. Think of it this way. I was never a religious girl given what we went through, but I prayed to God more than once he’d bring D’Artagnan back to me and look what happened?”

A flash went through my mind. I peered up at her. “What did you say?”

“I mentioned God, as in maybe you should remember our Catholic upbringing.”

“Oh, my God is right.” I could finally see the tattoo in my mind. I drew it quickly and as soon as I did, Lucia jerked the piece from my hand. “What?”

“I’ve seen this before. I’m certain of it. No. Wait. D’Artagnan described it. No. I did see it. The night of the fire a few years

ago. Remember? When his brother...”

“You mean in the barn?”

“Yeah. The one that was rebuilt a third time. Did you tell Mattia about it?”

“Only the skull. Why?” I could tell she was horrified.

“I need my phone. I need my phone now. This can’t be. If I’m right, we are dealing with a ghost. How is that possible? How?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Where is my phone?”

“I think Joy has it. What is going on, Lucia?”

Lucia continued to shake her head as she moved toward the doorway.

“Talk to me. Hold on. Here it is.” I grabbed it, walking closer. She was white as a ghost, her breathing far too labored. “Come on. You need to sit down.”

“No. It’s not possible he’s alive. It can’t be.” As she continued to become more hysterical, I became more and more concerned.

I wrapped my arm around her, trying to guide her toward the couch. Then I heard a pinging sound indicating the bastard had been found. “Just breathe, Lucia. Come on. Sit down.” Thank God she listened to me, but her hands were shaking as she tried to dial a number. I backed away, returning to the computer.

When I glanced at the screen, I was in shock and in disbelief. There wasn’t a chance in hell the asshole was on this property.

Yet a horrible feeling pooled in the pit of my stomach. We’d been played. Who would have known we would be here instead?

“Dar. Listen to me. I know this sounds crazy...”

I hit a couple of buttons refreshing the screen, but the information came back the same. Oh, dear God. Grabbing my

phone, I backed away, terror racing through me. I quickly tried to dial Mattia's number, only to misdial the first time. Then I took a deep breath, trying it again as I reached for one of the weapons that I'd insisted be left. Then I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

As I turned slightly, I let out an intense scream seconds before the window exploded.

“No!”

CHAPTER 27



*F*ive minutes before...
Mattia

“There’s nothing going on here, boss,” Luis said, checking in as he’d done several times over the last few hours.

We’d set up camp in one of the warehouses bridging the distance between the old DeLuca and Lazzaro estates, which were almost forty miles apart. The warehouse was perfect not only because of the location but also because the bait of having diamonds shipped in through Sicily, Don Romano’s territory was too enticing to pass up.

Or so we hoped.

It was a gamble, one highlighted by bogus emails between Dar and the other member of the *famiglia*. If the Ghost was in close proximity, which we suspected, then he wouldn’t resist attempting to muscle in since it was our only order of business at this point. At minimum, we believed the fucker would try to derail the ‘trucking’ shipment that was supposed to arrive within the hour.

It had been a formidable plan to establish, using far too many resources but at least we were in position. At least Sophia’s last text had indicated the bogus emails had been tracked. Whether or not the Ghost would show his ugly face remained to be seen, but something seemed to be working given the

heightened level of interest. It was only a matter of time before she was able to track the asshole's exact location.

"No movement?" I confirmed as I paced the area outside the warehouse. I wasn't thrilled with how much time had gone by, my patience running thin.

"Nothing. I'd had the men drive the roads around the house. Everything is quiet."

"Just remember what we went through in Paris. Don't underestimate the fucker."

Luis laughed. "I have a score to settle, boss. Don't worry."

I ended the call, holding the phone to my head as D'Artagnan walked out of the warehouse. "Nothing new."

"I don't like this any more than you do, brother."

"Yeah, I know. You have an entire family on the line."

"So do you, which is something I never thought I'd see." He chuckled, his gaze one of amusement.

"Why? Because I'm not lovable?" I was surprised I could tease given everything that was going on.

"Yeah," he mused. "That's part of it, Mattia. You took what happened with your father the hardest."

"I don't know about that. You were treated like a fucking animal."

"We both were. Correction. The three of us were." Dar huffed.

"Do you ever wonder what would have happened if Tommaso had lived?"

I hadn't thought about him for far too long. "Do you remember when he was sent away?"

"Oh, I was livid. I made certain Franco was aware of just how infuriated I was."

The moment in time was one of the worst. "I allowed myself to believe that he'd been given a gift, no longer tethered by the extreme violence and anger that our father continuously

displayed. I was jealous. Can you believe that? I wanted to be the one who'd been let loose."

"It sounds like you're blaming yourself for what happened."

I thought about his comment. "I did and still do. He reached out to me after that day he left. I ignored him. I don't know why other than he'd started gravitating to you. You were suddenly his hero, the guy he looked up to the most."

Dar narrowed his eyes. "You do hear yourself, don't you? Sadly, our brother's mistreatment helped him slip into a darkness that he couldn't escape from. I think I know why."

"And why is that?"

"Because he didn't have anyone in his life. Think about it. You had Sophia, even if you couldn't be with her. I had Lucia and while Franco tried to brainwash me into thinking she wanted nothing to do with me, her light always remained with me."

"I guess you're right. He dated a lot but never found the one. It's too bad. He was the most intelligent of all of us. That kid could do anything he set his mind to. Did you know he started reading at two?"

He chuckled. "No. I had no idea."

"Yep. He devoured games on the computer and all the gaming units, literally beating the systems every time. He even developed his own computer software program when he was eight or nine. That was before Pops used his love of them against him. He'd forced the poor kid to destroy all his games. That was just before you came into our lives."

"You still resent that."

"Not as much at first as Tommaso did, but he rallied around you and who was I to stop your connection?"

Dar remained quiet. "As I said, it's a shame he was a victim."

"Some victim, Dar. He attempted to kill you and Lucia."

"I haven't forgotten. I only wished things could have been different."

Now I was the one who nodded. “We’re a fucked-up bunch. You know?”

“Yeah, but we’re changing things.” He patted me on the back. “Incidentally, you are going to be my kid’s godfather. Aren’t you?”

“And here I thought we’d never be close. Yeah, I’d be honored.”

“Good, because I have a feeling it’s another boy and if so, his middle name will be Mattia.”

I was floored with the gesture, more so than I could say to him at this point in time. “Well, if I’m lucky enough to have a kid, then you’ll be his godfather.”

“Don’t say that too fast. Remember that Enzo will always be Sophia’s brother.”

We both laughed, which was something I’d thought would never happen. I’d heard more than once that difficulties and danger could bring families together. It was something I would never have bought in a million years until now. “When this shit is over, I’m going to buy Sophia a ring. I want to do it right.”

He grinned, rolling his eyes as if he knew exactly what I was talking about. “Let me give you a piece of advice.”

I hadn’t realized Enzo was standing in the doorway until he took a step onto the platform. “Get down on one knee,” he said. “If you don’t, you’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Exactly!” Dar said, laughing. “And make certain and have flowers with you.”

“Roses,” Enzo corrected.

“I’ll make note. Anything else?”

“Dinner. Make her dinner. Don’t just take her to some fancy place,” D’Artagnan added.

“True, brother,” Enzo quipped. “It doesn’t matter what it is. You need to make the effort. That’s all a woman cares about. But a real effort.” He glanced toward Dar and grinned.

“Shit. Now I’m not so certain I can do it. I can’t cook, you know. She might die of food poisoning.” I grinned, glancing from one to the other. Getting through the ridiculous situation was getting more and more on my nerves.

“Hell. You can do anything,” Enzo teased.

I grabbed my phone, needing to hear Sophia’s voice when Luis called.

Then the sound of a message coming in to Dar’s phone surprised him.

“Luis. What?” I answered my phone, immediately on edge.

“We’ve been compromised,” he said, his voice hitching.

“What are you talking about?”

Boom!

The sound in the distance instantly sent up a red flag. “What the fuck is going on?”

Enzo jerked at my arm. “What is it?”

“An explosion. We need to get there. Now.”

“Yeah, we do. I know who the Ghost is. Remember a tattoo, Mattia? The one he got in defiance of our father?” Dar said.

“An upside-down skull by a cross, blood dripping down the crucifix.” I glanced at him and suddenly I knew. And ice ran through my veins. We’d been idiots, but how was it possible?

Ghosts really did exist.

* * *

There was some sense of beauty in the art of revenge, especially when it took a significant period of time to bring it to fruition. Granted, I’d learned the hard way that it also created a rift in life, as if the only thing that mattered was exacting retaliation. But given that’s what I’d grown up believing, I could certainly understand the desire and the joy it brought.

I'd wanted nothing more than to tear my father apart limb by limb. I'd planned it, imagined it, dreamt it, and hungered to the point that I'd lost several years of living my life planning to end one. Now that he was rotting in his grave, I realized it had given me almost zero satisfaction. I'd gotten a piece of advice from a professor of mine that had taken me until only a few years before to truly understand let alone embrace.

Living well was the best revenge.

But when someone was psychotic like my brother had to be, there were no rules, no other desires that came close to causing destruction and bloodshed. At least I could understand the need that burned deep inside.

I had a beast lurking in the darkness of my being much like Enzo and D'Artagnan did. Dar had been correct in that the women we cared about kept us from going over the edge completely. Maybe if my father had embraced the love of another woman, things would be different.

Maybes.

There were too many of those in my life with almost no answers.

While I still found it impossible to believe that Tommaso was still alive, the pieces all fit. Now I stood in the middle of the office at the DeLuca estate, trying to control my breathing.

"What the fuck?" Enzo snarled as he crouched down, picking up the explosive device. "It's little more than a goddamn smoke bomb."

I raked my fingers across the desk, pulling them closer to my face. "Blood."

"Goddamn it!" Dar yelled, tossing a lamp across the room. "We need to find them now. How could they ambush us? How?"

"That's what I want to know. Where the fuck are they?" I yelled, taking long strides toward the door. The second Vincenzo stumbled into the office I had him by the throat, pitching him against the wall in two seconds. "What the hell happened? Why weren't they protected?"

His face was covered in soot, three other ‘bombs’ going off on the estate, which had allowed enemy soldiers to invade the property. There was evidence of a struggle; both Sophia’s laptop and phone were smashed.

“The smoke bomb was done from a distance,” Vincenzo huffed, trying to catch his breath. “They surrounded the place just past the cameras. Then they came at once.”

“That’s because the goddamn system hadn’t been changed,” I snarled.

“There had been no reason to,” Dar insisted. “Tommaso was dead.”

I released my hold on Vincenzo, fisting my hand. “The goddamn barn burned. Wasn’t his body there?”

“You know the answer to that,” Enzo said. “Nothing was left. Nothing.”

That was the truth, but it didn’t make the situation any easier. “Where are they?”

“They left. There were at least eight vehicles.” Vincenzo was insistent.

I took a deep breath, glancing at Dar. “He blames us for what happened to him.”

“That goes without saying,” Dar said. “He could be anywhere.”

“No. He’s repeating history, my brother.”

Dar narrowed his eyes. Then he glanced at Enzo. “Fuck. Then we don’t have any time to waste.”

“Vinny. Have the men leave the estate in a hurry, as in make a lot of noise about it,” I told him.

“And go where?”

“Surround the estate but stay out of view. That’s what he’d anticipate just like he did years before.”

Vinny huffed. “You’re trying to tell me the Ghost is there.”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. Now, do what I say. We won’t have much time. He will kill them if he doesn’t get what he wants.”

“And what is that?” Enzo asked.

“Our deaths,” Dar answered. “He thinks we should die.”

Narrowing my eyes, I realized almost instantly what he was saying. “The goddamn barn?”

“That’s where it all began, the beginning of what he saw as the end.” Dar was convinced.

I thought about that night and the nights leading up to it. “My God. I told Tommaso about a conversation I overheard.”

“What are you talking about?” Enzo asked.

“About our father promising Dar’s dad that he would take care of his children. Sadly, only one survived.” I was shocked I hadn’t even thought about it. “He must have thought for certain even then he was being replaced.”

“That’s why I saw him at the ranch that night. I tried to get his attention, but he was running. I had no idea what the hell was going on. Then everything exploded, soldiers screaming there was a fire. Jesus. Fucking Christ. We went to school together. We were friends.”

As soon as Enzo said the words, I felt my muscles start to tense. “Tommaso caused the fire all those years ago.” The fire that had taken the lives of D’Artagnan’s entire family, almost ending his. The fire where Dar had held his dying sister in his arms, trying to will her back to life.

And the fire that stripped away Lucia’s innocence, stealing the boy she knew one day she would love, the one who sang to her inside a barn.

A stable boy.

The continuation of a vicious war between two powerful families, one that cost millions of dollars, hundreds of lives, friendships, and brothers.

All the secrets and lies had formed a crossroads, ready to destroy three new families who'd been nothing but pawns for two men who had no understanding of how much damage they would cause.

Now it was time to wage another war, only this time it was even more personal.

I glanced slowly at D'Artagnan and for the first time in years, I thought the powerful man was going to crumble. He looked away, his chest rising and falling.

"We can't let them die," he said quietly.

"Fuck. We're not going to. Let's go." I didn't wait to see if either man reacted, bolting toward the door. I knew the estate as well as the one I'd grown up in. I had memories here as well, although none of them were worth dying for. I would save the three women who didn't deserve to suffer because of the sins of their fathers.

Or those of their brothers.

I took off running, the adrenaline already kicked into my system, the war being waged in my mind more horrific than any bloodshed or any need for violence. All I could think about was saving her.

Seconds later, I knew my brothers were following, their heavy footsteps evident by the sound of cracking limbs. We would move closer silently, refusing to allow Tommaso to know we'd arrived. Our only hope in saving the women we loved was some element of surprise. Various emotions clawed at my system.

Guilt.

Rage.

Love.

Understanding.

I could never forgive my brother for what he'd done yet I understood the reasons behind his horrific actions. Our father had turned three boys into killers, indoctrinating them into his evil world. What else could anyone expect?

As soon as we reached the edge of the woods, the three of us stopped, peering through the thick undergrowth at the pristine building that no longer housed horses as it once had. Now it was home to leftover equipment waiting to be used or sold.

And it was a perfect place to hide a monster.

D'Artagnan moved in front, his arm shaking as he held his weapon in front of him. The adrenaline was killing all of us, the need to engage in our own level of revenge something we'd need to watch. Stupid decisions were usually made when blinded by emotion. At least that was one decent lesson our father had taught us.

Never succumb to weakness. The sentiment was worth mentioning but what he'd neglected to realize or embrace was that often the thing considered the weakest provided the greatest strength and power.

The women we loved did that, the children brought into the world by our blended family providing peace. Of that I was certain.

He glanced from Enzo's eyes to mine.

"I go in first," I said.

"Not a good idea," Enzo stated.

"It's the only one that's acceptable. You need to know the right time to make contact with the soldiers."

"He's right, Enzo. Be careful, Mattia. He's fucked up," D'Artagnan told me. "Don't underestimate him."

I threw my head in his direction, the waning twilight still allowing me to see the haunted look on his face. There was so much baggage all four of us shared, so many painful moments that there was no need to talk about them.

I made a silent promise to them as well as to the woman I would marry. We would never turn into our fathers. The vile evil that had trickled in our bloodlines would end here. Our children would know love and happiness, not sorrow and treachery.

God help me.

We separated and I moved around to the back of the barn toward the second set of doors. It was easy to see one was still ajar. Whether an invitation or simply an oversight didn't matter. I moved through the shadowed light, slipping inside without making a single sound. There was no room for error as there would be no second chances.

The stench inside was strange, something I had difficulty deciphering, but it was overpowering, so much so that I pressed my hand over my mouth as I carefully moved through the bales of hay still secured inside. Then I heard a noise and crouched down, listening to determine the location.

Then I heard a laugh, the sound sending a jolt of electricity through me.

Tommaso.

As soon as I moved away from my secure location, a light was snapped on from somewhere above, the brightness blinding. Shielding my eyes, I glanced over my head toward the oversized spotlight, following the shimmer to the ground where the three women had been positioned on plywood boxes, each bound and gagged, ropes tying them together in a crude circle. From where I remained, I could see my beautiful princess's face. While there was fear in her eyes, there was also a strong resolve.

Just like usual.

She noticed me, quickly shifting her eyes to another location in the barn. Perhaps a hiding place? When I heard another laugh, the sound echoing, I moved forward into the light. There was no reason to continue playing cat and mouse games at this point.

Seconds later, I realized I smelled gasoline along with another source of fuel. As suspected, the fucker was going to try to burn us alive.

With no sign of either Dar or Enzo, I took it upon myself to address my blood brother. After all, I had a feeling the bulk of his revenge was toward me, the only living member of his biological family.

“The Ghost,” I said quietly, trying to hold a hint of reverence in my tone when I felt nothing but fury. “You enjoyed playing a game for far too long.”

“It’s good to see you again, brother. You’ve done well.” His voice was rougher than before, almost too practiced. “Yes, I do love my games. Did you like the man I sent to see you at the station?” He laughed manically.

“I wish I could say the same about seeing you but you’re a fucking freak.” I took careful steps forward, my eyes finally adjusting to the bright light. Fuck. The asshole had positioned what appeared to be explosives lined up against the barn walls. This time, he wasn’t taking any chances that one of us could escape.

“I’d be careful what you call me since I’m holding all the cards.”

“Yeah, it appears you’ve underestimated me.”

He chuckled as if this was all in good fun. “I was right about the woman you fell in love with. She’s incredible. I would have made her my queen except she defied me.”

The man was completely deranged.

“Come out and show yourself, brother. That’s the manly thing to do,” I said more in passing, doing everything I could to keep the anger from my voice.

Sniffing, he took a few seconds then took the bait, taking two long strides toward me. There was no mask hiding his disfigured face, no method of disguising the true monster he’d become. The previous fire had ravaged him. That’d he’d lived was beyond comprehension, but it had fueled the anger to the point he was no longer in control of his actions or his mind.

If it hadn’t been lost long before.

“What’s wrong, brother? Cat got your tongue? Are you terrified of the beast I’ve become? See what you and your stupid little family have done to me. Isn’t it pretty?” He walked closer to the women, heading straight to Sophia. Then with quick actions, he yanked out a knife, slicing the blade through one of the ropes, dragging my baby to her feet.

She moaned through the gag, keeping her eyes locked on mine.

I detected movement from two corners of the barn. My brothers had slipped inside. I could tell Tommaso had very calculated plans on what he was going to do. If he started a fire, the entire barn would go up in seconds, not minutes. There would be little chance of escape.

He pulled her against him, licking the side of her face. “I have such great plans for her. She will bear my children, carrying on our legacy. I’ll mention your charred body every once in a while so she doesn’t forget you.”

“You’re a murderous bastard, Tommaso.” I wanted to try to keep him talking so I could move closer but I sensed he was close to an edge.

Sophia jerked in his hold, fighting him with everything she had.

I took a step forward but he pushed the knife under her neck. “Don’t come any closer, brother, or you’ll watch as I make her just as ugly as the man she will marry.”

“Why do this? Why now?” I asked, offering him an opportunity to speak. I wanted him off guard, drowning in misery.

The wild look in his eyes confirmed he’d lost absolute touch with reality. He thought about my question, laughing bitterly. “Because you have everything. I have nothing.”

“You have no idea what I have.”

He grabbed Sophia’s hair, laughing when she gasped. “Yes, I do but that’s all about to change, even with your little bitch’s attempt to take everything I worked to achieve away from me. I placed safeguards on the systems myself. Did you know that, Sophia? Tell him how happy we’re going to be together. One big happy family. My little hacker. You thought you were so clever.”

“Yeah, I’m clever, you fuck. And I can’t have spawn. What a shame,” she spit out, gasping for air, still fighting him with everything she had.

Whether or not she was telling the truth, the momentary shock was enough to throw him. That gave me a single chance to lunge forward, managing to snag her arm. As soon as I pitched her away, Tommaso bellowed, giving an order to unseen soldiers.

“Now!”

Then I heard a slam of the barn door, the cracking sound of something metal. He’d never intended on escaping the fire. I grabbed him around the throat as Enzo rushed forward.

“Get the women!” My command was likely too late, Tommaso able to flick a lighter, tossing it several feet away. As flames erupted instantly, I smashed my fist against his face, the hard punch tossing him over a bale of hay.

We fought, rolling several times. I punched him hard, tossing him back by several feet. He threw himself on me as the fire swept across the floor, immediately crawling up two walls. He’d planned the fire well, the building prepared to go up in flames within seconds.

Tommaso kicked me in the stomach, knocking me back by several feet. Winded, I fought to get to my feet, noticing the gun in his hand seconds before he fired off several shots. I pitched and rolled, the bullets ricocheting off one of the pieces of equipment.

Sophia screamed, her frantic cry pulling at everything inside of me.

D’Artagnan roared, pitching himself on top of Tommaso, wrangling to grab the gun while Enzo rushed toward the other girls.

“We need to get the fuck out of here.” Enzo’s cry was cut short as one of the makeshift bombs exploded, flames immediately licking toward the ceiling.

“Come on, baby. I got you,” I told Sophia as I pulled her away from the melee. As fire began to consume everything, the smoke becoming acrid, I struggled to free her arms. Another cracking sound drew my attention, Tommaso almost able to get away from Dar. As soon as Tommaso issued a hard kick to

Dar's chest, pummeling him backward, he flung himself on top of me.

The flash of the knife still in his hand caught my eye seconds before he drove it into my shoulder. The pain was blinding but there was no time to waste. We pitched and rolled as the entire building went up in flames. Wood began to crack, splintering down on top of us.

"We need to get out of here now!" Enzo roared, managing to pull Joy to her feet.

"He has other men with him. They're all around us." Joy's cry was followed by a booming sound, a portion of the roof falling too close.

As soon as Lucia was freed, she fell to her knees, moaning in obvious pain. "No. No! It's too soon."

"Oh, God. No!" Sophia broke free from my arms, crawling toward her sister. "She's in premature labor. Please get us out of here."

"Fuck. Fuck!" I fought my way toward one of the blocked doors, issuing a hard kick. "Where are the soldiers?"

"They'll be here." Enzo seemed certain. Suddenly, I could hear gunfire coming from outside, the sound unmistakable.

Pop! Pop!

As D'Artagnan fired off two rounds, I kicked the door again. The goddamn thing wasn't budging. I coughed as the thick smoke rolled through the building, shadowing the spotlight. Tommaso refused to die, the fucker coming for Enzo as he finally managed to shield Joy and the others.

Lunging forward, I fired off two shots of my own, the close range catching Tommaso in the shoulder, the force tossing him against another piece of machinery. I watched as his body slumped down, his face going slack.

Even if the fucker was dead, that didn't help us in any way.

"Find a way! We need to get out of here."

Crack!

Boom!

Timbers fell all around us, the rapid gunfire continuing outside. Then all was clear.

Gasping for air, I could swear I heard voices. Then there were other sounds, hard slamming. I struggled to see anything, finally able to make out Sophia and Joy huddling over Lucia's shaking body.

I turned in a full circle, noticing several tools attached to one of the walls. I leapt through the flames, hissing as I managed to grab the handle of an ax. Without hesitation, I ripped it from the wall, moving quickly, issuing one swing after another.

Then a loud noise was followed by a bright light, several deep voices penetrating the space.

“Get them out of here. It's going to blow!”

I had to admit, hearing my Capo's voice was probably the sweetest fucking thing I'd heard in a long time. Smoke burned my eyes but I fought my way toward Sophia as our soldiers surrounded the others, pulling Joy and Lucia away from the carnage.

“Help!”

I froze, the sound of Sophia's voice coming from the darkest part of the shadows. Everything dropped into a moment of slow motion as I turned, blinking furiously until my eyes adjusted.

A wash of flames burst in front of me, searing my skin but it didn't stop me from seeing Tommaso's bloody body, his arm wrapped around Sophia's waist, dragging her into the hottest part of the fire.

There were moments in my past where I'd placed myself in dangerous situations, uncertain of the outcome. I'd done so without hesitation because it had been a requirement. Expected.

But this time, everything was different. I was eager to jump into harm's way for one reason.

Because of the love of the most beautiful creature on earth.
Should I die, I was doing so without hesitation, without
remorse. And with joy in my heart.

No one had the right to play God.

I threw my head back and roared, taking not only a giant leap
through the flames but also one of faith, hoping for the miracle
I'd never believed I deserved.

“Sophia!”

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Boom!

CHAPTER 28



S ophia

Family.

I remember my mother one Christmas talking about the importance of family. It was the only memory of our grandmother at our house, her death shortly thereafter the first tragedy Lucia, Enzo, and I had suffered as children. But it wouldn't be the last. The thought weighed heavily on my mind on the cloudy, dreary morning as I stood staring out the window the hospital waiting room.

The memory had actually been a happy one, our father in a good mood, which had been rare but more frequent while I'd been young. Maybe I'd been three or four, the memory fuzzy but vivid enough I could smile from how enjoyable the Christmas had seemed.

Even our father had dressed up as *Babbo Natale*, Father Christmas, the only time I remembered him doing so. There'd been laughter in the house, fabulous foods and lots of presents. The *Befana*, the Italian Christmas Witch had even visited us on Christmas Eve, filling our stockings with toys and candies.

Then several enemies had broken into the house, not only burning down the Christmas tree but almost claiming my father's life in the process. It had been our mother's love that had kept me from being terrified, her nurturing spirit and her soft voice something I'd never forgotten. The holidays had never been the same afterwards.

Now my mother sat in a chair that she'd turned to face another hospital window, having not spoken a word since being brought to the hospital.

I'd all but abandoned my family after my father's death. I'd had a chance to reconnect but had refused for selfish reasons. Now all I wanted to do was to make up for lost time, but I wasn't certain members of our family were allowed yet another chance. We'd likely used up any of our good karma. However, I'd made a promise to my family and to God that if he allowed my family to survive this latest near tragedy, there would never be a day I didn't savor every single family member.

Hours had passed, enough that night had turned into morning, the dawn bringing storms and ugly clouds crisscrossing the sky. Lucia had fallen into a coma, which the doctors feared she'd never awaken from. My mind was a terrible blur of both good and bad images, the horror of what we'd just gone through seeming a million miles away in comparison.

I felt Mattia's presence seconds before he appeared in the shadowed reflection just as a bolt of lightning flashed in the distance.

When he wrapped his arms around me, the weight of him and the blazing heat was exactly what I needed. Even if the stubborn man had refused to be treated for smoke inhalation and the few burns he'd received. Thank God they weren't any worse than they were.

"I just looked in on Joy. She's just fine. The baby wasn't hurt at all."

A slight smile crossed my face as I remembered Joy's secret. I'd never seen my brother so frantic, Enzo screaming at the EMTs when they'd loaded his wife into the ambulance. The love he had for his family was amazing and heartwarming. One day we'd be able to enjoy that glass of champagne.

Or so I hoped.

"I'm glad," I managed, my voice almost unrecognizable. He pulled me closer, resting his chin on top of my head.

“Lucia and the baby are going to be just fine as well. I feel it.”

There was such authority in his tone, as if he had a direct line to God. “I’m glad you do. I’ve been praying. I know you don’t believe in God, but he’s given me some comfort over the last few days.”

“I do believe, *la mia bella principessa*. God was the reason I was able to save you.”

His words brought a smile to my face, something I wasn’t certain would happen again. I pushed away from him, turning around and gazing into his eyes. There were tears in them that he quickly tried to blink away.

“Is Tommaso really dead?” I’d heard the close-range shots, but my screams had almost drowned them out. I’d been certain I would die, the agony of never seeing my family again the only thing I could concentrate on.

“I shot him between the eyes twice, in what was left of his heart once. He’s dead.”

I shuddered from the coldness in his voice, but I certainly couldn’t blame him. What his biological brother had made him and other members of our extended family go through was horrific in every way. Maybe it wasn’t Christian-like, but the bastard had gotten what he deserved.

“If my sister and that sweet baby don’t survive, D’Artagnan will go on a killing spree.”

“Neither Enzo nor I will allow him to, but put more faith in your brother-in-law and in the doctors. I have a good feeling everything is going to work out.” He brushed his fingers through my strands of filthy hair, offering a sweet smile. The stench of smoke remained, every muscle in my body aching, but I’d refused to leave the hospital like every other member of the family and several soldiers. While Vincenzo and the other Capos had spent time rounding up what was left of Tommaso’s soldiers, Vincenzo had recently arrived at the hospital to be by Mattia’s side.

The fact the brusque man was so dedicated to the family was amazing. He was definitely on our Christmas card list.

I almost laughed. What a ridiculous thought.

“I’m trying.”

He cupped my face, lowering his head. “Baby. I will walk the ends of the earth to make you happy. If I could take away this pain, I would do so even if it meant spending all eternity in hell. Just know I’ll be here.”

“I know you will. I love you more than the sun, moon, and stars.”

His smile brought tears to my eyes, the boyish grin on his face creating a series of tingles all through my body. “And I love you more than I believed possible. I know now isn’t the time, but I want you to know that I will ask for your hand in marriage. When the time is right.”

“Maybe, just maybe I’ll accept.”

He captured my mouth, pulling me onto my toes. There was such a sweetness about his actions, as if we were locked in time away from all the destruction and heartache, able to bask in the glory of our love. The kiss was tender, so loving that I felt myself swooning even in the face of our continued crisis. Guilt followed, but the way he was holding me brought the comfort I needed.

When he finally pulled away, he rubbed his knuckles on my cheek. “We’re going to be a family, my beautiful kitten.”

“What if I can’t have children?” I was shocked the words slipped out, hating myself for being selfish all over again. My sister could be dying and I was worried about what he’d think.

He studied my eyes for a few seconds then shook his head. “I don’t need a child to consider us a family. But we have options if and when we decide. A furry creature would be nice.”

“A dog?” I almost burst into laughter. “You?”

“What’s wrong with adopting a dog? I love animals.”

I was so dumbfounded that all I could do was laugh.

He acted as if he was insulted then picked me up, turning me around in a full circle. “We’ll have several.”

“God, I love you.” I realized my mother had turned her head and was watching us intently. There was a knowing smile on her face, her eyes as bright as I remembered from the Christmas I’d been thinking about. I pressed my hand against his chest, no longer grimacing as the earth rumbled from thunder.

“Entrambe le mie bellissime figlie saranno benedette con almeno due figli. Molto presto avrai un figlio perfetto, mia dolce Sophia.”

Both my beautiful daughters will be blessed with at least two children. You will have a perfect son very soon, my sweet Sophia.

I could swear that my mother had the ability to see into the future. My heart raced, the ache subsiding. After glancing into his eyes, I moved toward her, crouching down by her knees. “You sound like you’re certain, Mama.”

She smiled and I was thrilled to see she was completely lucid, as if the veil of fear and the past had been lifted permanently. God, I hoped so. “I do, my daughter. You are already pregnant. I can tell.”

“That’s not possible. It’s too soon.”

Her smile widened. “I can tell you have a lot to learn.” When she laughed, I couldn’t help myself, able to do so as well.

A few seconds later, I could tell my entire face had fallen by the sadness returning to her eyes. “You have a good man, my daughter. Love him with all your heart.”

“I already do, Mama. He is my everything.”

“I loved that way once,” she half whispered. “He was my everything as well.”

“I know, Mama.” I took her hand, bringing her fingers to my lips and kissing them. “And I know Franco loved you as well.” Now her eyes opened in surprise. Then she nodded.

“My beautiful, intelligent daughter. I wouldn’t change anything in the world. I was lucky to have three incredible children, soon to have several grandchildren.”

She was so certain of the fact that I refused to burst her bubble. If only I could believe. I rose to my feet, sucking in my breath as I heard little feet hitting the ugly tile floor. After a quick look toward the man of my heart, I braced myself for what was coming.

“Auntie So-fee-a,” Michelangelo said as he raced toward me, wrapping his little arms around my legs. Tears rushed to my eyes, my heart heavier than it had been in such long time.

“Hey, baby man. I missed you.”

He giggled as only a child could do. He had no idea how lucky he was to have both a mother and a father who adored him without holding anything back. He was a beautiful, bright boy and I was willing to sell my soul to the devil if he could have his mother by his side for most of his life.

When Mattia scooped him up into his arms, Michelangelo couldn't stop laughing, his eyes so bright. “You are a perfect little man.”

My nephew rolled his eyes. “Mama just said so.”

I heard the words, but could I believe them coming from a three-year-old? The fact was that the doctors were fearful my sister had experienced a stroke and might never recover.

“She did, huh?” Mattia asked for me as he pressed his finger into the little boy's tummy.

Michelangelo giggled again, nodding profusely. “She said I was the bestest boy in the world.”

“She just told you that?” I had to ask, even if I was terrified of the answer.

“Yep.”

I closed my eyes briefly until I heard another noise. When I opened them, D'Artagnan was headed in our direction, his expression blank.

Mattia managed to throw his arm around me, or I would have fallen.

“Come on, baby,” he whispered, pulling us closer.

Dar stopped short, waiting until we were within a couple of feet. Then he burst into a grin. “You can’t stay long but would you like to see your niece, Sophia Joy Lazarro-DeLuca?”

Oh, God. Oh, dear God. My prayers were answered. I couldn’t stop shaking.

Gasping for air, I slapped my hands across my mouth, trying to keep from becoming hysterical. “And Lucia?”

“She’s going to be just fine. A light brain bleed, which caused the symptoms, but no permanent damage. She’s begging to see you, but her doctor is adamant she needs her rest. But come on. Maybe I can sneak you in for a few seconds.”

As I turned my head toward my mother, I gave her a nod of respect. I’d always known mothers knew best. Now I realized they were truly the heart of every family.

Maybe just maybe she was right about everything after all.

* * *

“Oh, for the love of God. Halloween. Really?” I asked as I glanced at the little outfit Lucia had purchased for Michelangelo. The little devil suit wasn’t anything I would have chosen for him, but my beautiful sister had believed it to be hysterical given the nature of our family.

“Hey, it’s become a very important holiday in Italy, sister of mine. Besides, you look adorable yourself, so keep your mouth shut.”

Adorable wasn’t the word. We were all dressed up, Lucia insisting the entire family head to the coastal town of Sperlonga to celebrate the festivities. From what I’d been told, the entire small town was lit up with lights and apparitions, everyone dressed up. I was shocked Lucia had allowed a babysitter to watch over little Sophie while we left the gorgeous vacation plaza for more of a traditional American holiday. Granted, there were at solid six soldiers watching the place even though there’d been no direct threats from anyone

in recent months, the peace and tranquility almost too good to be true.

None of us talked about what had occurred months before any longer. There was no need as the men Tommaso had hired had been little more than mercenaries paid tremendous sums of money to be his hired guns.

Interestingly, Tommaso had earned his wealth stealing from some of the same people whose assets I'd been hired to protect. There were still days I expected to see Tommaso walking into a room, his scarred face a reminder of everything we'd all endured, himself included, but his bones were resting in a grave beside his mother and father.

We were happy, more so than I'd believed we could be. I glanced back at the second SUV, the one carrying Joy, Enzo, and our mother. Joy and Enzo were happier than I'd seen them, both spending time decorating the oversized nursery, half in blue and half in pink.

And Joy was almost eight months pregnant, barely able to walk given the size of the twins. We were a motley crew but more of a traditional family than I'd thought could happen.

Vincenzo stopped the SUV, glancing in the rearview mirror at Mattia, who'd remained terribly quiet during the entire ride.

"Okay. What's up?" I asked as soon as Vinny pulled the vehicle to a stop in front of a festive restaurant right by the ocean. There were lights everywhere, the promise of how hard the city celebrated not embellished in the least.

As usual, Vincenzo opened the door, ushering his boss out. Before Mattia eased onto the pavement, he threw a look at Lucia and Dar, who wore smug expressions.

"Do you mind telling me what's going on?" I barked.

"Mommy. Daddy. Can't we tell Auntie yet? Doesn't she get a big ring?" Michelangelo blurted out.

Lucia snapped her hand over his mouth, lowering her head and whispering in his ear. Then she jumped out, dragging her baby boy with her.

Exhaling, Dar laughed then patted Mattia on the arm before climbing out. That left me alone in the back with the man I loved.

“Do you have something to tell me?” I purred.

“Who, me? Not a thing. Could be a boring night. Come on.” He jumped out, taking long strides around the front of the SUV before throwing his hand into the open door.

Just touching him was as incredible as usual, my heart racing. In the two months of basic bliss, we’d purchased a house together, gutting a portion by ourselves as we created a beautiful world we wanted to live in. It was in between the original DeLuca and Lazarro estates, which allowed us privacy and seclusion on our gorgeous five hundred acres while keeping our family close.

It was perfect and I’d never been happier, except the love of my life hadn’t mentioned a word about marriage.

Perhaps until now.

As he took me by the hand, leading me toward the iron railing surrounding the beautiful harbor, suddenly as if by magic I heard music, the guitarist strolling closer strumming a romantic tune. Then my family gathered around, forming a semi-circle while Joy handed off what appeared to be two dozen or more of my favorite flower, white roses.

“What are you doing?” I was shaking, more so than I thought possible. Mattia wasn’t a romantic man and this was completely unexpected, even if my adorable nephew had blurted out what was happening beforehand.

As soon as Lucia started to cry, tears formed in my eyes.

And the man of my dreams stood a few feet away, glancing at every single member of the family, finally nodding to the guitarist. While the music became quieter, the musician continued to strum the romantic tune. Everything was perfect. The backdrop. The weather. The people.

The man.

“Sophia Lazarro. As I told you years ago, you were destined to belong to me.”

“Aww,” Enzo murmured and Joy punched him in the gut.

“Quiet,” she barked.

Which of course caused everyone else to laugh.

“But I was wrong,” Mattia continued. “We were destined to be together. The light to my darkness. The good to my evil. The air I breathe and the reason I get up in the morning.” He inched closer, handing me the roses, his eyes shimmering from tears.

As soon as he pulled a box from his jacket, D’Artagnan cleared his throat and whispered, “Down on one knee. You can’t cook worth shit but you need to follow my advice.”

“I’ve got this,” Mattia said gruffly but bent down. “My beautiful princess. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

I sucked in my breath, my tongue tangled.

“Say yes, Auntie!”

As my family laughed, I felt Lucia taking the flowers from my hands, Joy pulling out my arm, extending my hand.

I took a few magical seconds to look into his eyes, tears slipping past my lashes. Through all the horror and agony that we’d been through, two things had been constant in my life.

My family.

And the man I loved.

“Yes, Mattia. I will become your wife.”

EPILOGUE



*M*attia

A wise man once said keep your loved ones close but your enemies closer. Whoever that asshole was obviously didn't have a beautiful family.

Barking.

Laughing.

Babies cooing.

A child giggling.

Christmas music.

Laughter.

They were all things that most people took for granted. Not this man, at least not any longer. I was happy, so much so I could barely keep from smiling. Was it fair? I refused to answer the question. Maybe not, but I would never allow myself to forget how damn lucky I was.

I chuckled as I walked away from the festivities, getting a beady eye from my lovely wife. We'd been married the night before on Christmas Eve, the entire small event magical. Now my nephew was running around showing what *Babbo Natale* had brought him, the mound of presents ungodly.

Even the twins hadn't been forgotten, their one month birthday something both Joy and Enzo had insisted on. With four kids

on the estate, and three new puppies, the house was full of love.

I took a deep breath, eyeing the recent snowfall with amusement. We were in southern Italy yet it had snowed for Christmas, which was one of the things my beloved bride had asked for.

Stranger things had happened.

As I studied the falling crystals in the limited light, I sensed my brothers had followed me, likely eager to get away from all the joy if only for a little while.

“A perfect holiday,” Enzo said. “Although I’m exhausted.”

“New babies will do that do you,” I told him.

“Twins. I’ve aged ten years.”

D’Artagnan laughed and pulled off his Santa hat, tossing it aside. “This is perfect, including the damn snow.”

“Yeah, it is.” We stood quietly, sharing in the special moment, still strangely awkward.

“Any issues with business?” Enzo asked.

“None. Everything is running smoothly,” Dar answered.

“Enemies to control?” I threw in for fun.

Dar shook his head. “Nope. The usual but everything is very quiet. Incidentally, the other *famiglia* Dons sent congrats.”

“On babies or the wedding or both?” Enzo asked, half laughing.

“Both,” Dar said, grinning.

“We are lucky men,” I said, lifting my glass.

“You do realize they have us wrapped around their fingers,” Dar said casually.

Enzo snorted and clicked his glass to mine. “Not in my world. But I have a leash and collar just in case.”

We laughed together, something else I never thought would happen. “A toast, gentlemen. To family. To business. To the

loves of our live. And to my beautiful nieces and nephews.”

“And to everything in the future,” Dar said, “including...”

When he stopped mid-sentence, glancing toward the door, I turned my head. My beautiful bride was standing in the doorway wagging her finger at him. “Don’t ruin the surprise, Dar, or I’ll kill you myself.”

“Uh-oh. Our cue to leave.” Enzo whistled and headed inside.

“I’ll round up everyone and get our coats,” Dar said brightly as he headed for the doorway.

“Coats? Where are we going, beautiful princess?”

“To make snow angels. They need to be taught how, you know.”

“And you are the woman to do it.” I hadn’t smiled so much my entire life.

She grabbed my hand. “Besides, I won’t be able to do this for long, that is if we have any additional snows.”

“Why?”

There was something about the look on her face that both amused and terrified me. Then she placed her hand on her stomach. “The best I can figure out is that Mama knew a couple days after I’d gotten pregnant. Don’t ask me how because it wouldn’t have shown up on a pregnancy test but she knew. I believe it. Hell, she bought me the test a month later, insisting I take it. Do you believe that?”

“Wait a minute. And you kept this very important news from me for two months?”

“I had to be sure. Right?”

When she laughed, I jerked her against me, fisting her hair and pulling her onto her toes. “You seem to forget I’m your master. After we make snow angels, I think I’ll need to remind you.”

“Mmm... We’ll see.” She slid her arm around my neck, tugging on my hair.

“And so it begins, brother,” Dar said from the doorway. “As I reminded you before, women are the ones in charge. Get used to it.”

My beautiful bride kissed my nose then backed away, giving me a salacious look. Before heading inside, I lifted my head toward the sky. There were things I wished I could change, years I wished I could redo, but I was a thankful man.

I had the love of my life, the sanctity of a family, and a new lease on life.

There would be enemies and attempts made to derail our happiness. There would be difficulties and tragedies, but there was a constant that I knew would thread through all our lives.

Love.

The greatest gift of all.

The End

AFTERWORD

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BOOKS OF THE TAINTED REGIME SERIES

Cruellest Vow

D'Artagnan Conti was born into poverty, raised to be a soldier in my father's savage regime. I grew up in luxury, longing to escape my family's cruel machinations, and the young man with sapphire eyes and the voice of an angel became not just my forbidden crush but my everything.

Then he was taken from me, killed in a brutal attack by our enemies. Or so I was led to believe...

For twenty years I did my best to forget him, until a devilishly handsome stranger awakened my desire in a way that I hadn't thought possible, baring my body and soul and setting them both ablaze with passion so intense it burns hotter than the lash of leather across my naked backside.

Every taste of his lips, every whisper in my ear, and every quivering climax pulled me deeper into this dark, twisted rapture, and only when I was already under his spell did I learn the truth.

The man I thought I'd lost is the one who has made me his.

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Twisted Embrace

Enzo Lazaro is my best friend's brother, yet the fact that it was taboo only left me even more desperate for him to undress me with those piercing eyes and then strip me bare and ravage me.

But until he found out a secret I hadn't even known myself, I never thought I'd be screaming his name in bed with my belted ass still burning because he decided I needed a lesson in obedience.

...or that he'd be claiming me as his bride.

It turns out I'm the daughter of a Russian mobster, and even though my adopted parents never told me, that means I have dangerous enemies. He says he's making me his wife to protect me.

But we both know he would have taken what he wanted eventually anyway.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE RUTHLESS EMPIRE SERIES

The Don

Maxwell Powers swept into my life after my father was gunned down, but the moment those piercing blue eyes caught mine I knew he would be doing more than just avenging his old friend.

I haven't seen him since I was a little girl, but that won't keep him from bending me over and belting my bare backside... or from making me scream his name as he claims my virgin body.

He's twice my age, and he's my godfather.

But I know I'll be soaking wet and ready for him tonight...

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The Consigliere

As consigliere of New York's most ruthless crime syndicate, Daniel Briggs rules with an iron fist. But here in Los Angeles, he's just my big brother's best friend, forbidden in every way.

This stunningly handsome billionaire may be the most eligible bachelor on the West Coast, but to him I'm still just a little girl in need of protection from men who would ravage her brutally.

Men like him.

But he'll soon realize I'm all grown up, and then it won't be long before my teenage crush finally shows me the side of him he's kept hidden from me—the savage side that will blister my bare ass for talking back and then take what has always been his with my hair gripped in his fist.

I don't know what comes after that. I just know everything he does to me will be utterly sinful...

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BOOKS OF THE CARNAL SINS SERIES

Required Surrender

My first mistake was agreeing to participate in a charity auction. My second was believing I could walk away from the commanding billionaire with a brogue accent and dazzling green eyes.

It was supposed to be one date, but a man like Lachlan McKenzie plays by his own set of rules.

As the owner of Carnal Sins, DC's exclusive kink club, his reputation is as dark and demanding as his desires, and before I knew it I ended up his to enjoy not for just one night but a full week.

I fought his control, but I knew I wouldn't win... and in my heart I don't think I even wanted to. Not after he called me his good girl, stripped me bare and spanked me with his belt, and then made me blush and beg and come so hard I forgot all about being his only for a few more days.

That didn't matter anyway. We both know he's keeping me forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Demanded Submission

When he came to my aid after a head-on collision that seemed not to have been an accident, Jameson Stark offered me a ride, help with my car, and a job at the most exclusive club in town.

He also bared me, spanked me until I knew better than to argue with him again, and then showed me what it means to be in the debt of a billionaire who isn't afraid to take everything he's owed.

But as the owner of the Miami branch of Carnal Sins, it isn't just Jameson's wealth and good looks that draw attention, and I knew a man like him must have enemies. I just didn't care.

Not when his every smoldering glance all but demanded my submission...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Compelled Obedience

Grant Wilde is as arrogant as he is rich and powerful, and if I didn't need his help so desperately I'd tell him exactly where he ought to shove his money, his exclusive club, and his cocky smirk.

But I do need his help, and it will come at a price...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

King of Wrath

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Cruelty

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Pain

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Depravity

When Brogan Callahan swept me off my feet, I didn't know he was heir to a powerful Irish mafia family. I didn't find that out until after he'd taken me in his

arms... and over his knee.

By the time I learned the truth, I was already his.

I went on the run to escape my father's plans to marry me off, but it turns out the ruthless mob boss he had in mind is the same sinfully sexy bastard who just stripped me bare and claimed me savagely.

He demands my absolute obedience, and yet with each brutal kiss and stinging lash of his belt I feel myself falling ever deeper into the dark abyss of shameful need he's created within me.

At first I wondered if there were bounds to his depravity. Now I hope there aren't...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Savagery

I knew Maxim Nikitin was a man to be reckoned with when I went undercover to help the FBI bring him down, but nothing could have prepared me for his raw power... or his icy blue eyes.

He caught me, and now he's determined not just to punish me, but to tame me completely.

Every kiss is brutal, every touch possessive, every fiery lash of his belt more intense than the last, yet with every cry of pain and every scream of climax the truth becomes more obvious.

He doesn't need to break me. I belong to him already.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Malice

When I met Phoenix Diamonds, I didn't know anything about him except that he had a body carved from stone and a voice that left me hoping he'd order me to strip just so I could obey.

By the time I learned he's the head of a Greek crime syndicate intent on making me pay for the sins of my father, he'd already mastered me with his touch alone, belted my bare ass for daring to come without permission, and ravaged me thoroughly both that night and the next morning.

All I can do is try to pretend he isn't everything I've always fantasized about...

But I think he knows already.

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BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

Beautiful Villain

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Sinner

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

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Beautiful Seduction

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Obsession

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Devil

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

Cruel Prince

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Prince

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Prince

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

King's Captive

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Hostage

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Possession

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Toy

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Demands

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Temptation

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

His as Payment

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken as Collateral

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Forced to Cooperate

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable.

The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Claimed as Revenge

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

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Made to Beg

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

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BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS
SERIES

Dark Stranger

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dark Predator

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

Indecent Invitation

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

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Illicit Proposition

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Unseemly Entanglement

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

Bent to His Will

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Broken by His Hand

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bound by His Command

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

Caught

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Prey

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Given

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous Stranger

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Indebted

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bratva's Captive

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

Buy on Amazon

Hunted

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

Buy on Amazon

Theirs as Payment

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

Buy on Amazon

Ruthless Acquisition

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Bound by Contract

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Dangerous Addiction

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

Buy on Amazon

Auction House

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

Buy on Amazon

Interrogated

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Vow of Seduction

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

Buy on Amazon

Brutal Heir

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bed of Thorns

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including our lives.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Morally Gray

Saxon Thornburg is known to the world as a reputable businessman, but I knew his true nature even before he kidnapped me, bared, bound, and punished me, and then shamefully ravaged me.

He is not just the billionaire boss of a powerful crime family. He is the Patriarch.

Women drop to their knees on command for him, but he chose me because I didn't surrender.

Until he took off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Vicious Intentions

Cain, Hunter, and Cristiano were heirs to some of the richest and most powerful families in the world, men who might as well have been kings. Ten years ago they caught me eavesdropping, and when they were done setting my bare ass on fire with a belt they claimed and ravaged me.

Or at least that's what happens in the fleeting memories I still have left after the car accident...

Though I'm a successful musician now, wealthy and famous myself, in my heart I know if one of those brutes—let alone all three—ordered me to strip and surrender to them in the most shameful of ways, I wouldn't even need the threat of another humiliating punishment to obey immediately.

I never expected to see them again, of course... or to find myself naked, wet, and blushing as a ruthless Chicago crime boss takes his time enjoying me along with two of his closest friends.

But even before the memory of their faces returned, my body remembered its masters.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

Phoenix

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Snake

I left Missoula to serve my country and came back a bitter, broken man. But when Chastity Garrington made my recovery her personal crusade, I decided I had a mission of my own.

Mastering her.

Her task won't be easy, and the fire in her eyes tells me mine won't either. Yet the spark between us is instant, and we both know she'll be wet, sore, and screaming my name soon enough.

But I want more than that.

By the time my body has healed, I plan to have claimed her heart.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Maverick

When I found her trapped in a ravine, I thought Lily Sanborn was just another lost tourist. Then she tried to steal my truck, and I realized she was on the run... and in need of a dose of my belt.

Holed up in my cabin with her bottom burning and a snowstorm raging outside, there's no denying the spark between us, and we both know she'll soon be screaming my name as I take her in the most shameful of ways.

But when her past catches up to her, the men who come after her will learn a hard lesson.

She's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

Hawk

He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Scorpion

He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Mustang

I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Nash

When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Austin

I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

Debt of Honor

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Loyalty

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Sacrifice

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

Persuasion

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bad Men

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

Unchained Beast

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Brute

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Monster

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ravenous Predator

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Merciless Savage

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

King's Mate

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beast's Claim

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Alpha's Mate

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

Claimed by the Beasts

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Millionaire Daddy

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Conquering Their Mate

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured and Kept

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taming His Brat

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Capturing Their Mate

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rogue

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Roughneck

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

Buy on Amazon

Hunting Their Mate

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

Buy on Amazon

Primitive

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

Buy on Amazon

Harvest

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

Buy on Amazon

Torched

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Fertile

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hostage

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Defiled

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Kept

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Auctioned

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Ride

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

Buy on Amazon

Carnal

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

Buy on Amazon

Bounty

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

Buy on Amazon

Beast

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Gladiator

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Big Rig

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Warriors

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Owned

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

Buy on Amazon

Seized

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

Buy on Amazon

Cruel Masters

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Men

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

Buy on Amazon

Rough Ride

As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

Buy on Amazon

Primal Instinct

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

Buy on Amazon

Captor

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

Buy on Amazon

Rough and Dirty

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

Buy on Amazon

His to Take

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

Buy on Amazon

Tyrant

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

Buy on Amazon

Filthy Rogue

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

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ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

* * *

You can find her at:

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